



# SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

Master Thesis

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## **Leading the Nerds.**

An interpretive study on expertise and leadership dynamics within a flat hierarchical management consultancy firm.

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By

Mette Groot and Malin Lindholm

May 2024

M.Sc. in Managing People, Knowledge and Change  
Lund University School of Economics and Management

Supervisor: Stefan Sveningsson

Examiner: Anna Jonsson

*24.326 words*

## Abstract

<b>Title</b>	Leading the Nerds. An interpretive study on expertise and leadership dynamics within a flat hierarchical management consultancy firm.
<b>Authors</b>	Mette Groot and Malin Lindholm
<b>Supervisor</b>	Stefan Sveningsson, Professor of Business Administration at Lund University School of Economics and Management, Lund, Sweden.
<b>Date</b>	May 20th, 2024
<b>Purpose</b>	The purpose of this study is to understand how expertise followership influences leadership dynamics within the specific context of a management consultancy with a flat hierarchy. This includes an investigation into how nerdery results in expertise, autonomy, and self-leadership within a flat hierarchical context and how this influences the leader-follower dynamic.
<b>Methodology</b>	This is a single-case study of a global management consultancy firm, focusing on one of its Swedish offices, while the two other Swedish offices serve a benchmarking role. The main data sources for this inductive qualitative study are interviews and observation, through an interpretive tradition. This allows us to analyze and make sense of the empirical data through the layers of expertise, autonomy, leadership dynamics, and organizational identity. The coded findings reveal themes and patterns that, combined with existing literature, guide readers on the journey of understanding the influence of expertise followership on the leader-follower dynamic.
<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	The theoretical framework mainly consists of existing literature on different types of leadership, covering organizational- and individual levels. We include theories on KIFs, expertise, followership, autonomy, and normative control to understand the forming and evolving of leader-follower dynamics within the specific context of management consultancy firms.
<b>Contributions</b>	This study contributes to the understudied phenomenon of expertise leader-follower dynamics within management consultancy firms. It enriches the leading author's theories by examining the dynamics between leaders and expert followers, within the context of expertise influence and flat hierarchy. By focusing on autonomy, nerdery, and normative control, we deepen the understanding of how these factors shape an organization's leadership dynamics, outlining the complexities of employee engagement within a context where expertise plays an important role.
<b>Keywords</b>	Leadership, Followership, Knowledge-Intensive Firm (KIF), Autonomy, Expertise, Nerd, Normative Control

## **Acknowledgments**

As we reflect on this master's thesis, we wish to extend our gratitude to those who have supported us along this journey.

First, our sincere appreciation goes to our supervisor, Stefan Sveningsson. Thank you for your guidance, feedback, and insights. Your wealth of knowledge has greatly contributed to shaping our study's direction. We highly appreciate your valuable expertise and encouragement.

We also want to extend our gratitude towards all respondents at AxisPeak for generously dedicating valuable time and insights to our study. Your willingness and active participation have greatly enriched our study. We are grateful for the opportunity to delve deeper into a management consultancy firm and study the nuances of leadership within a high-expertise environment.

To friends and family, we are thankful for all the words of encouragement and constant support. Last, we would like to express our gratitude to each other for consistently approaching this study with positivity, high energy, and dedication, which enabled us to seamlessly navigate this journey together. Our collaboration has served as a steady foundation and gave us both the strength we needed.

Working closely together has been enriching and rewarding. Thank you all.

Mette Groot and Malin Lindholm

Lund University, School of Economics and Management

May 20th, 2024

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# 1. Introduction

*This chapter introduces the study to the reader. First, we provide background information to reveal the context of the studied phenomenon and briefly introduce the company that serves as a foundation to the study. Second, we state our research objectives, consisting of the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research question. Last, we guide the reader through the structure of the complete thesis, giving them an idea of what to expect.*

## 1.1 Background

Leadership is a broad concept that holds various definitions and interpretations. To ensure clarity and establish a solid foundation for this study, we will define the specific interpretation of 'leadership', 'followership', and 'knowledge-intensive firms' (KIF) that serves as the fundamental basis for our thesis. Following, we will provide insights into the context of the management consultancy industry. Later, a brief introduction to the case company, AxisPeak, is presented.

In this study, the 'nerdery' phenomenon is explored. This phenomenon covers leaders and expert followers who are both considered 'nerds' due to their passion and curiosity. A flat hierarchical environment paired with high autonomy sets the stage for an untraditional leader-follower dynamic where nerdery and expertise play an influential role. Leadership is considered not to exist without a follower, deepening its practice on the respondents involved. The traditional view on leadership is that leaders serve as the main actors, while followers are typically perceived as less significant as they act according to the vision of the leader (Alvesson et al., 2017). Followership is interpreted as the individuals who are acting towards a leader (Carsten et al., 2010). This interpretation finds its roots in Carsten's (2010) definition of followership "...because the roles of leader and follower necessarily involve a status differential (with leaders having higher status), prototypical followership behaviors must involve some form of deference to the leader". We define the concept of expert followers as expert followership, emphasizing a follower with an expert role within a company. The traditional leader-follower dynamic serves as a golden thread and comparison factor throughout this thesis. This dynamic perceives a follower as one who takes instruction from a leader, placing the leader above the follower in terms of hierarchy (Alvesson et al., 2017).



This study analyzes a KIF, specifically a management consultancy firm. The number of KIFs has been rapidly growing in the last decade and relies on expert knowledge to create a competitive advantage (Alvesson, 2004). These firms place a strong emphasis on innovation, continuous learning, and utilizing intellectual capital. The people within the firm, who hold most of the knowledge, are called 'knowledge workers'. They typically possess specialized expertise, industry knowledge, and analytical skills. With their expertise, they advise organizations within the various aspects of management, strategy, operations, and more (Robertson & Swan, 2003). KIFs typically work closely with their clients, helping them to identify problems and develop suitable solutions.

The company studied is referred to as 'AxisPeak' to maintain its anonymity. Information about AxisPeak is retrieved from the company website and interviews to ensure accuracy and integrity. AxisPeak is a management consultancy firm with 12 offices globally, including three in Sweden. Its employees are referred to as nerds to emphasize their curiosity and passion, as they claim that passion is the foundation for their expertise, providing a unique basis for organizational expertise leadership. This will serve as a golden thread throughout this study. We chose to study AxisPeak due to its emphasis on nerd character and expertise in a no-management context with high autonomy. This revealed the 'nerdery' phenomenon where nerdery and expertise create an untraditional leader-follower dynamic. Although AxisPeak talks about 'leaders' and 'followers', it has a flat hierarchical structure where company-wide expertise is believed to be the root of creating lasting transformation and change. This creates the company's objective of developing its nerds into experts. Expertise is perceived as a high degree of knowledge on a niche subject, which serves as the core of the organization's vision. AxisPeak aims to deliver quality and insights through their nerds' expertise, encouraging their curiosity and co-creation with other in-house experts. The utilized expertise is considered the driving force of the organization's success.

Expertise is further underscored in the company norms as its nerds are expected to be(come) experts. AxisPeak does not have a formal hierarchical structure but instead lets resources flow freely to create the impact desired, creating a flat structure with high autonomy. The leadership structure does not rely on a traditional leader-follower dynamic but demands high levels of autonomy from the nerds due to their high expertise. The influence of such high expertise among

those in a follower role is explored to understand its influences on the leader-follower dynamic. Additional contextual information about AxisPeak will be shared at the company case in Chapter 4, the Analysis & Empirical Findings.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

KIFs are typically built on flat organizational structures that are organized around network-based dimensions, collaborative approaches, and autonomy, stepping away from the traditional dynamics between leadership and followership (Alvesson, 2004). This flat structure gives followers a more active role within leadership, which is yet understudied (Kellerman, 2007). Most research available on leading experts within KIFs targets the medical field and Research and Development (R&D). Leading experts within management consultancy firms appear to be specifically understudied and hardly covers leader-follower dynamics where expertise is involved. The rise and expansion of KIFs underscore the need for an enhanced theoretical understanding of how expertise followership, followers with an expert role, influences the leader-follower dynamic.

A considerable amount of literature on leadership has been published and much of it focuses on the essence of leadership, resulting in multifaceted perspectives on leadership. Traditional perspectives consider leaders to be heroic figures. However, more recent theories address alternative approaches like the supporting role of leadership, emphasizing popular notions such as 'coaching'. Nevertheless, traditional leadership theories dominate overall academic literature, not addressing the unique challenges in KIFs, where experts operate with high degrees of autonomy. Leadership is considered the art of guiding individuals and teams, but the aspect of fostering trust, collaboration, and development is complex and calls for further understanding.

The influence of expertise followership on the leader-follower dynamic within KIFs, in this case, management consultancy specifically is understudied. The phenomenon is yet to be understood due to the recent and rapid growth of the industry (Alvesson, 2004). The flat organizational structures contrast traditional leader-follower dynamics, moving away from powerful leaders. As for experts, it is not always obvious who serves what role in leadership and how this influences the dynamic (Kellerman, 2007). Literature on expertise and self-leadership within KIFs suggests a shift from traditional top-down leadership but does not give a clear depiction of what it looks

like. Despite the numerous theoretical insights into leadership, there is a lack of empirical studies on the specific context of expertise in management consultancy firms. This reveals a valuable research opportunity to understand how expertise followership influences the leader-follower dynamic within those firms.

This thesis performs a qualitative study, intending to contribute to the understudied 'nerdery' phenomenon. Following the research problem, this study aims to understand how the leader-follower dynamic in a management consultancy firm is influenced by expert followership. This purpose follows the belief that it is crucial to understand the dynamic between leaders and followership and provide valuable empirical insights into the field of research which has been understudied and fairly unexplored. This research provides insights from a 'reality' perspective, extensively studying the interpretations of the situations through the perspective of AxisPeak's nerds. These expert consultants represent a unique phenomenon due to their high levels of knowledge. The organization AxisPeak provides context to unveil this phenomenon, answering the research question. AxisPeak is relevant and suitable for this specific research due to its emphasis on expertise, autonomous way of working, and flat hierarchy. Their specific emphasis on expertise within niche areas sets them apart from other big consultancy firms. The 'nerdery' phenomenon of leadership provides an interesting context for studying expertise followership and its influence on the dynamic.

AxisPeak underscores its industry-specific knowledge along with deep functional expertise. Primary- (interviews and observation) and secondary research (existing literature) will contribute to the findings, through an inductive approach. Various respondents within AxisPeak, varying in expertise and role in the leadership dynamic, will shape the foundation for answering the research question. The findings are analyzed through Prasad's (2018) interpretive tradition, which serves as a golden thread in unpacking the 'nerdery' phenomenon, identifying the influence of expertise followership on the leader-follower dynamic, within a management consultancy firm.

The proposed research question to explore the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon is:

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*How does expertise followership influence the leader-follower dynamic in a management consultancy firm with a flat hierarchy?*

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The structure of this thesis is composed of six chapters to answer the research question. **Chapter One: Introduction** introduces the studied phenomenon, defining its objectives and the research question. **Chapter Two: Literature Review** unfolds recent theoretical literature and offers an in-depth exploration of the subject area’s ‘leadership’, ‘KIFs’, ‘followership’, and ‘normative control’. The literature review shapes the study’s direction and reveals what is already known. **Chapter Three: Methodology** breakdown of the methodologies employed in the data collection and analysis, including strategies in coding. It explains the research strategy and its motivation. **Chapter Four: Analysis & Empirical Findings** presents the empirical analysis through an interpretive tradition, analyzing the perspectives of AxisPeak’s nerds. **Chapter Five: Discussion** relates the findings to the literature review by interpreting and analyzing the data, providing insight to answer the research question. The discussion contextualizes the findings with existing literature and offers enhanced understanding. **Chapter Six: Conclusion** reflects on the arrived interpretation from the empirical data and discussion, creating a theoretical conceptualization. It provides a critical analysis of the findings, comparing them to existing theories, and answering the research question.

## 2. Literature Review

*This literature review aims to provide relevant theoretical frameworks to the reader of what is known so far about the studied phenomenon. Acknowledging the vast body of literature on leadership, this overview presents a selection of literature. The collection is not intended to be comprehensive but rather offers a relevant sample of key literature in the field. Literature on KIFs is increasing due to the rapid industry growth. However, there remains a scarcity of published articles in this specific area of study, giving the assumption that authors are currently writing about it. The structure of the literature review can be compared to a funnel, where various themes are presented in a thematic progression relating to KIFs, leadership, and normative control. The funnel guides the themes from broad to specific, positioning the study and aiming to contribute to the understudied phenomenon, serving as a foundation for answering the research question. The chapter ends with a summary of the theoretical foundation.*

### 2.1 Knowledge-Intensive Firms

KIFs are a prominent sector in today's business landscape (Bäcklander et al., 2021). According to Alvesson (2004), firms are expanding and are increasingly recognized, underscoring the need for enhanced theoretical understanding within an empirical context. According to Robertson and Swan (2003), various studies have contributed to understanding the dynamics within consultancies, including Alvesson (1995) and Løwendahl (2005). However, these studies are most focused on larger management consultancy firms, addressing the structure, culture, and control mechanisms. Fewer studies have focused on specialist and often smaller firms (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Moreover, unlike larger consultancy firms, specialized consultancies may be organized differently, typically featuring fewer management roles and less formalized structures and routines (Alvesson, 2004). An observation of the growing significance of KIFs is the expansion of consultancy firms across various industries. KIFs are characterized by highly qualified workers and involve specialized skills with a high degree of autonomy (Robertson & Swan, 2003). There is a specific reliance on professional expertise, which implies great amounts of knowledge which causes trust of clients in the consultants' ability to solve complex problems (Alvesson, 2004). This can be described as leading clients from problematic situations to stable and satisfactory outcomes, based on their trust in the expertise of consultants. Reich (1999) characterized 'knowledge workers' as 'symbolic analysts', individuals who possess a unique blend of technical expertise, problem-

solving skills, and strategy. Their diverse abilities encompass not only technical proficiency but also marketing and strategic insights, reflecting the requirements of contemporary roles. Roles within KIFs are typically not routine-based, but instead demand creativity, reflexivity, and adaptability alongside the utilization of intellectual and analytical capacity. The emphasis on knowledge and intellectual output sets KIFs apart from general organizations as they move away from strong routines and oiled processes (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). Some authors even argue that society has entered a new era, characterized by rapid technological change which has consequently impacted organizations to shift towards more flexible, ad-hoc structures, reducing hierarchy. This transition creates the opportunity for knowledge workers to exercise higher degrees of autonomy. Employee identity at KIFs plays a significant role in the organizational structure and culture, which is rooted in expertise. Experts typically play two roles: the role of an expert who knows a lot, and the role of a listener towards the client. The first role emphasizes the knowledge of the expert, whereas the other underscores the acknowledgment of the client's superior contextual understanding compared to the client. Consultancy work demands shifting between these two roles to apply valuable knowledge but to also maintain a critical mindset and gain a deep understanding of a project. There is limited literature available on how recruitment processes influence this ideal persona in KIFs, but authors Jorgensen, Becker & Matthews (2011) argue that selective selection criteria ensure this. They state that the main focus of KIFs is their competitive advantage, which results from their experts. Hiring those that align with the organizational culture and vision is essential. The authors conclude actions such as networking and mentoring as methods to align individuals in KIFs rather than formal training.

### **Facilitating Knowledge in Knowledge-Intensive Firms**

Millar et al. (2017) argue that leadership within KIFs revolves around enhancing knowledge management practices, involving the facilitation of knowledge creation, sharing, and the cultivation of organizational learning. They specifically emphasize the importance of creating a culture of psychological safety, allowing individuals to freely express new ideas. As knowledge is the main driver of KIFs, its main goal is to increase the knowledge within the organization, which is embedded in the employees (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). The evolution of leadership theories is influenced by the dominance of top-down and heroic leadership models (Pearce & Manz, 2005). However, these traditional and currently still dominant theories are less

applicable to KIFs as knowledge workers are typically expected to practice self-leadership (Bäcklander et al., 2021).

In the past decade, remarkable technological developments have prompted management practitioners to explore avenues for enhanced organizational innovative capabilities. Therefore, advice-seeking relationships emerge as an important part of knowledge production. These relationships facilitate knowledge sharing and professional support to generate new knowledge. Baksa & Branyiczki (2022) emphasize that leaders who seek to foster collaborative and innovative environments within KIF should witness the influence of advice-seeking interactions.

## **2.2 Leadership in Knowledge-Intensive Firms**

Leadership is crucial to creating an environment that supports the creativity and productivity of knowledge workers (Hislop, 2009). In complex KIFs, leaders tend to be unable to fully understand and control their followers through overarching performance measures (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). Instead, leaders focus on shaping organizational values, culture, and identity, emphasizing soft-leadership. Leadership in KIFs often emphasizes continuous learning and development (Løwendahl, 2005). Traditional literature focuses on leadership and followership within a top-down context, addressing how leaders influence their followers. However, due to the emergence of flatter organizations, recent literature considers followers as an active element in leadership, exploring follower-centric approaches (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). Leadership can exist in a collaborative matter, such as shared leadership or distributed leadership (Goksoy, 2016). In some leader-follower dynamics, individuals choose to work independently by becoming autonomous or self-leading (Manz & Sims, 1987). This entails responsibility for planning, executing, and monitoring their work. According to Alvesson et al. (2017), such autonomy is present in KIFs due to the expertise and specialization of the knowledge work. Knowledge workers are considered capable of working independently, with occasional support from others. Alvesson et al., (2017) argue that expertise fosters greater comfort in increased self-leadership. It is additionally argued that experts might feel reluctant to leadership, however, they can be seen as more impactful than those who actively pursue leadership roles. This results from a focus on the expertise and goals of the organization, rather than being concerned by personal recognition or power that comes paired with leadership roles.

## **Expert Power**

Another perspective on leadership and followership emphasizes that influence is presented through a framework of Five Types of Power in Leadership, including 'expert-' and 'reward power' (Tripathi & Hasan, 2022). 'Expert power' arises from someone's willingness to help and share their expertise, while 'reward power' is about their ability to give rewards and influence how others behave by offering incentives for good performance. This suggests that power in leadership can stem not only from the leader but also from individuals who possess the highest levels of knowledge, for example, an expert. The term expert is defined as “an individual who possesses the highest level of knowledge and/or skills in the organization in a competency that is crucial to the operation of that organization and whose opinions are highly sought after by others” (Foust, 2004). Traditionally, the leader-follower dynamic includes a leader and a follower, where a follower follows the vision of their leader (Alvesson et al., 2017). Nevertheless, concepts such as 'expert power' contrast this dynamic and give power to the expert.

## **Autonomy**

An alternative view that counters a leadership-driven approach suggests that individuals who are autonomous, resourceful, or counter-dependent may render traditional managerial leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017). A study on an R&D department revealed a correlation between autonomy and scientific productivity in departments with moderate tightness and looseness. It was also found that non-leadership styles appeared to have a significant influence on productivity. The study indicated that 'controlled freedom' with granted autonomy, in a structured framework and not complete independence, was best, so leaders had to adopt a blend of controlling and different leadership to adhere (Alvesson et al., 2017).

In terms of leadership and autonomy, increased leadership does not automatically mean lower autonomy for followers. It has been observed that leadership can promote autonomy, especially over time (Alvesson et al., 2017). A leader can support followers in skill development, motivation enhancement, and confidence building, thereby granting responsibility and freedom. On the contrary, it is unrealistic to expect a leader to be the sole factor in creating and bolstering autonomy. Autonomy is expected in fields with high degrees of knowledge and expertise, such as



KIFs, where knowledge workers often prefer to lead themselves (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). This demand occasionally creates complex dilemmas of balancing autonomy and control for leaders (Robertson & Swan, 2003). This dilemma is rooted in creating a culture that is suited for expertise development yet serves the KIFs best, supporting its objectives. The stereotypical autonomous work style continues as recruiters select candidates based on their ability to work autonomously (Styhre et al., 2010). Knowledge workers are motivated to work individually based on their experience and expertise.

### **Self-leadership**

Self-leadership finds its roots in autonomy. Authors such as Pearce and Manz (2005) advocate for leadership styles that go beyond traditional roles to stimulate development among followers, such as self-leadership. Self-leadership empowers followers and stimulates initiative and autonomy (Inam et al., 2021). Manz and Sims (2001) argue that today's rapid and dynamic business environment and global competition require self-leadership to adapt and thrive in modern environments. Self-leadership involves individual influence and strategies that replace traditional leadership from a supervisor as the theory suggests that behavior is primarily controlled internally (Bäcklander et al., 2021). This covers tasks and responsibilities such as individual problem-solving, critical thinking, and planning. Empirical research contributes to this belief but lacks studies within management consultancy specifically. The importance of involving followers in leadership development to prepare them for exercising self-leadership is stressed. This is especially vital in team-oriented knowledge work environments, such as those found in management consultancy firms. These firms tackle challenges by tapping into diverse knowledge and skills across various domains and fields (Pearce & Manz, 2005).

Manz and Sims (2001) define 'SuperLeadership' as the act of guiding individuals to becoming self-leaders. It involves the stimulation of self-leadership among followers, thereby empowering them and fostering a sense of autonomy. The authors recommend 'SuperLeadership' to be practiced in all types of organizations and at all levels of management in today's modern society. 'SuperLeadership' contrasts the traditional perception of leadership and its association with modern organizations.

Self-leadership presents a broader approach, emphasizing purposeful self-direction toward personal standards and intrinsic rewards, expanding beyond the boundaries of self-management (Manz, 1986). A study by Malik et al. (2023) underscores the importance of empowerment as a condition for engagement among knowledge workers. Leadership in KIFs has drawn attention from researchers due to its crucial role in facilitating engaged employees to effectively utilize knowledge management processes. Nonaka and Tayama (2015) emphasize the significance of engaged employees in acquiring, storing, sharing, and applying job-related knowledge to achieve organizational goals. However, how leaders foster this engagement remains a challenge.

### **Leader-Follower Dynamic**

The traditional view of the dynamic between leaders and followers is that leaders construct followers (Alvesson et al., 2017). A leading role in literature is often described as resourceful and impacting others, while followership is perceived as less attractive (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2010). Research suggests that following someone else can sometimes evoke mixed feelings. It has been concluded that a leader can offer valuable guidance on culture, meaning, and morals, offering emotional support that contributes to followers feeling a sense of belonging. This is specifically underscored in the contents of 'in-group followers', who share a deeper and higher quality relationship with their leader. Such relationships between leader and follower often increase trust and autonomy among followers (Alvesson et al., 2017). In the dynamic between a leader and follower, a follower is not an equal in the relationship to a leader, as leaders are usually considered more experienced and in a higher position, hierarchically speaking. In the exploration of trust dynamics between leader-follower relations, Savolainen et al. (2018) underscore the important role of effective communication and knowledge sharing in fostering trust. They highlight the important factors in preventing the development of mistrust by emphasizing trustworthiness and communication practices to maintain and cultivate trust in an organizational context.

## **2.3 Leadership Theories**

Traditionally speaking, leadership primarily focuses on managers, formal superiors, and hierarchical structures closely intertwined with management practices (Alvesson et al., 2017). Much of the research on leadership aimed to differentiate leaders from non-leaders by identifying specific traits and styles. This led to the development of trait leadership and later, style leadership.

The trait approach suggests that effective leaders possess certain characteristics such as dominance, stress tolerance, diplomacy, and verbal influence among others. Other studies have challenged this by arguing for a situational perspective. The style approach often originates from concepts of control and authorization. Leaders are often perceived as strong and hardworking, positively influencing company performance. This view portrays leaders as a heroic figure whose achievements are often attributed to a leader's actions and qualities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). Critics argue that the current perspective on leadership is overly broad leading to the labeling of anything positive as leadership. There is a demand for a more precise understanding of leadership within organizational contexts (Alvesson et al., 2017).

Leadership is a broad topic and can cover various areas, purposes, and styles. Allio (2013) identified, based on leadership purposes, five possible definitions of leadership, as can be seen in Table 1. He emphasized the complex context of leadership due to the various motivations, approaches, and situations it encounters.

<b>Leadership Definition</b>	<b>Leadership Purpose</b>
The early simplistic paradigm	Leadership is good management.
The semantic description	Leadership is the process of leading.
The transactional definition	Leadership is a social exchange between leaders and followers.
The situational notion	Leadership is a phenomenon that precedes and facilitates decisions and actions.
The esthetic concept	Leadership is an art or a craft.

*Table 1. Leadership Definition and Purpose.*

Alvesson et al. (2017) argue that the structure of an organization can be categorized into various modes, underscoring vertical and horizontal modes. Vertical modes, such as leadership and management, have a structure where one stands above the other, taking on a hierarchical stance. Horizontal modes are equal and place individuals on the same level, stepping away from the hierarchy. Horizontal modes cover practices such as networking, group work, and autonomy. These three practices emphasize individual work and responsibilities, rather than a leader telling a follower what to do. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010) argue, in addition to traditional leadership

models, a rise of flexible organizational forms such as networks, shifting to horizontal leadership styles. They emphasize the concept of distributed leadership, which views leadership as a process that can emerge anywhere within an organization and can be initiated by anyone who influences other individuals.

“Power in organizations belongs to people who control access to key resources” (Empson, 2019), in this context, expertise. Starbuck (1992) highlights the importance of achieving a “delicate balance” when managing highly autonomous knowledge workers, especially in collaborative projects. This is supported by Rosier (2022) who emphasizes a balance between exercising autonomy and asserting control. However, precise strategies on how to achieve this are lacking. Another perspective, stepping away from power, is soft-leadership. Soft-leadership involves an approach to leading followers from a “softer” perspective (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). It emphasizes humanistic and empathetic aspects such as development, personal problem-solving, and personal attention.

### **Leadership and Management**

At first glance, leadership and management seem similar but the two concepts have two different definitions and practices. Leadership is defined by (Alvesson et al., 2017) as a relationship where one person holds more influence than others, whether formally or informally, over some time rather than momentarily. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010) argue that much of the literature perceives management as a goal of maintaining stability whereas others associate leadership with creating achievements. Leaders aim to shape other’s perspectives and understanding of the world of those who are being led, for example in an inspirational manner. It is also argued that leadership becomes irrelevant in cases where individuals are relatively equal in status, taking away the higher position of the leader. In addition, management is defined by actions such as performance control, setting guidelines, and active supervision (Alvesson et al., 2017). However, in the recent decade, there has been a shift within management, where managers are also assumed to exhibit leadership qualities. This means that a manager is also expected to drive change, facilitate the strategic vision, and create employee engagement (Spicer, 2011).

### **Contemporary Leadership**

Alvesson et al. (2017) suggest that the contemporary leadership literature is relationship-oriented, contributing to engaged and satisfied employees. With a specific focus on authentic, coaching, and transformational leadership approaches. Good leaders in the contemporary literature on leadership are considered good listeners, which demands time. Contemporary leaders foster friendly atmospheres and informality to provide support to individuals. A problem recognized in this type of support by targeting individuals' inner thoughts and identities within an organization could serve as a means to expand organizational control or a sense of normative control (Kunda, 1992). Encouraging relaxed environments and personal growth, it is crucial to prevent leadership practices from infringing upon individual autonomy or hindering organizational control.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders are perceived as moral models to their followers, who admire, trust, and respect back. The concept of transformational leadership was first defined by Burns (1978) who portrayed leaders as "leaders and their followers elevate each other to higher levels of morality and motivation". It is often perceived as an ideal form of leadership with a strong moral aspect to it (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership fosters moral maturity, contributing to the collective good. It is frequently portrayed as heroic, focusing on influential leaders whose actions had a significant and influential impact on organizations. Reid and Dold (2018) explore the concepts of transformational leadership as articulated by Burns, highlighting the role of leaders addressing followers' deeper motives and needs with leaders often conveying a compelling vision. The leader's vision is fundamental to transformational leadership as it aims to bring the unconscious feelings of the followers to the surface (Burns, 1978). According to Burns, transformational leaders raise consciousness on a broad scale by defining values meaningfully to people to motivate purposeful action. With time, determination, and skill, leaders can guide their followers to higher purposes (Reid & Dold, 2018). Since then, researchers have also described it as leaders who prioritize their followers with elements similar to charisma, motivation, and challenge (Alvesson et al., 2017). Further, the idealized influence of transformational leaders portrays leaders as highly respected, trustworthy, and admirable individuals who effectively pursue a shared vision while following ethical principles (Bass et al., 2003).

Birasnav et al. (2010) reflect how inspirational motivation highlights a leader's ability to inspire and motivate employees to foster individual and team spirit. The encouragement of innovation and creativity among followers by promoting problem-solving without criticizing and developing intellectual stimulation. The individual consideration element underscores an element of leaders acting as mentors to develop employees' potential by addressing their individual needs for growth and creating learning opportunities. Transformational leaders employ personalized approaches by treating each follower differently along with incorporating coaching elements to facilitate individual development. Bass et al. (2003) suggest that transformational leaders serve as examples to employees, inspiring them and encouraging their intellectual growth. Birasnav et al. (2010) further underscore that transformational leadership has gained significant attention in organizations due to its contributions to a firm's innovation, organizational learning, and enhancement of employees' creativity skills.

### **Coaching Leadership**

A leadership style that partly overlaps with transformational leadership is coaching leadership. The coaching aspect is a form of relationship-centered leadership that focuses on supporting followers by equipping them with the right tools, knowledge, and opportunities. The purpose of the leader, or in this context, the coach, is to develop their followers and make them more successful (Alvesson et al., 2017). Coaching leaders provide their followers with constructive feedback, helping them to identify areas for improvement, and supporting them in their efforts to learn and grow (Jeong et al., 2024). These types of leaders facilitate valuable connections within and outside the organization. Furthermore, leaders who embody coaching leadership offer employees constructive feedback and assist them in pointing out areas that require improvement.

In modern organizations, managers often face challenges that exceed their ability to possess comprehensive knowledge and offer definite solutions. In this regard, it is suggested to take on a role as a coach where the primary goal is to build connections, motivate, and focus on facilitating the personal and professional growth of individuals (Alvesson et al., 2017). Berg and Karlsen (2016) define coaching leadership as the facilitation of performance, learning, and development in others, emphasizing an active role in supporting individuals. Key traits of a coaching leader are an

encouraging character, active involvement, and supporting roles while avoiding imposing one's own opinions on others. Authors express that coaching leadership can foster a feeling of psychological security in the work environment, boosting employee well-being (Jeong et al., 2024). However, challenges arise when adopting coaching leadership in the complex dynamics of an organization, involving employees and senior managers. In such situations, these stakeholders may prioritize clear directives and efficient management, demanding a sense of strong leadership and control (Alvesson et al., 2017).

### **(Post-)Heroic Leadership**

Crevani et al., (2010) argue that the traditional heroic ideal portrays a single leader who is perceived as superior in knowledge. Pearce and Manz (2005) define this ideal as a romanticized projection of leaders as heroes "who single-handedly save followers, who are largely viewed as interchangeable drones, from their own incompetence". In recent years, the discussion on what is referred to as post-heroic leadership has emerged. The shift to post-heroic leadership has focused on toning down the heroic aspect of leadership. Post-heroic leadership is considered a process where the leader and follower shift to a more involved and collaborative dynamic (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). Post-heroic leadership is characterized by the participation of followers in leadership, where empathy, vulnerability, and collaboration are important for leadership, and the dominant logic of effective leadership is growing people where leaders encourage innovation and participation. Within heroic leadership, the leader is associated with heroic traits, often characterized by exceptional qualities, and assertiveness, offering decisive guidance and embodiments of visionary leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017). It places the leader on a pedestal, giving them power. The perspective of post-heroic leadership contrasts with a heroic perception, viewing a leader as adaptable and receptive to input from subordinates. This approach fosters a culture of trust, innovation, and adaptability, enabling organizations to thrive in dynamic environments (Alvesson et al., 2017). It views leadership as less dominant and reduces the sense of status, involving more everyday actions. These modern managers are depicted as modest yet dedicated heroes in achieving change and sustaining standards of excellence in generating business success.

## **2.4 Normative Control**

Studies on normative control increased in the 1980s, particularly within KIFs, with the input of consultants and practitioners (Alvesson, 2004). These individuals praised its ability to foster employee dedication, thereby lessening the necessity of control and ultimately improving productivity (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023). Kunda (1992), with a similar empirical context of a KIF with a flat hierarchy and decentralized work, defined normative control as "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions". Normative control has been understood in many different ways, ranging from building organizational loyalty and commitment to potentially trapping employees (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023). Initially, the concept was described as "a type of control that distributed symbolic rewards, recognition, and prestige symbols, while also enforcing rituals and norms to encourage positive responses" (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023). Various researchers express various ways to facilitate normative control, such as using human resources practices as a facilitation means including selective recruitment, socialization methods through meetings or 'buddy systems' to learning and development initiatives to even workplace design (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). More contemporary approaches to normative control include diversity and inclusion strategies (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). The cultivation of normative control is further facilitated by management's endorsement of the culture by exemplification of symbols or rituals. Furthermore, normative control typically also extends to members taking direct control through either self-regulation or control mechanisms (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023).

The key concept of culture, similarly to the term 'leadership', can easily be overused and lose its clarity. Usually, the term is referred to as norm systems, informal behaviors, or social patterns apart from organizational structures. Culture is perceived to exist collectively among groups where symbols and meanings are openly expressed. And generate "the shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed" (Kunda, 1992). This can occur from various channels such as storytelling, the presence of material objects, and interaction within groups (Alvesson et al., 2017).



## **2.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides an exploration of the literature on leadership, autonomy, and normative control within KIFs. The KIF-industry is a prominent and growing sector in today's business landscape. With the rise of consultancy firms across various industries, there is an enhanced demand for theoretical understanding within this empirical context of specialized consulting firms. KIFs are characterized by highly qualified workers and involve specialized skills with high degrees of autonomy. Literature suggests that traditional leadership approaches are less applicable as knowledge workers thrive on autonomy. Contemporary approaches to leadership such as transformational- and coaching leadership prioritize collaboration and move away from perceiving leaders as heroic. Normative control seeks to guide and direct individuals through shared values, rituals, and organizational control. However, the concept has been understood in various ways, ranging from building organizational loyalty and commitment to potentially trapping employees. This chapter highlights the evolving nature of leadership and KIFs. Moreover, it underscores the dynamic nature of leadership within KIF and sheds light on the challenges and complexities involved in balancing autonomy and control. The valuable insights provide a foundation for further research and exploration in this field.

### **3. Methodology**

*This chapter provides a detailed overview of the selected research methods, including qualitative research and the interpretative tradition. By delving into these approaches, readers gain insight into how the research was conducted and the guiding underpinnings. In addition, the chapter offers an examination of the empirical data through collection, sorting, and analysis processes. This ensures the readers follow how the methodologies were practically used sufficiently. Later, the chapter addresses reflexivity and ethical considerations reflecting on the researcher's potential biases and ethical implications.*

#### **3.1 Philosophical Grounding**

The purpose of this study is to unravel how expertise followership influences the leader-follower dynamic. We aim to understand how flat hierarchy and niche expertise influence autonomy and control, and thus how this influences the dynamic between an expert and its leader. This study takes an inductive research approach, seeking to identify theoretical concepts by analyzing empirical findings (Bell et al., 2018). The empirical findings of both leader's and follower's perspectives aim to unpack a nuanced understanding of the leader-follower dynamic. This approach is best suited when exploring complex phenomena and generating theories based on observed patterns in the data. In contrast to deductive research, an inductive research approach enables us to reveal new insights and create theories grounded in empirical evidence, which will serve as support in answering the research question. Expertise followership concerning leadership dynamics in management consultancy is understudied and supported by little empirical data. The majority of research on this topic focuses on the medical and R&D field, neglecting the management consultancy industry. This reveals a relevant research opportunity, especially considering the growing KIF industry.

The interpretive tradition stems from a scholarly standpoint that centers around human interpretation as the foundational element for constructing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2018). The underlying principle in the interpretive tradition is the belief that reality is constructed through interpretation and action of reality (Bell et al., 2018). We believe that this tradition will reveal a nuanced overview of how expertise influences leadership dynamics, analyzing the management consultancy context through various perspectives, with different roles

and relations to the phenomenon. By analyzing how different individuals interpret the phenomenon, it allows for better comprehension of their values, norms, and worldviews as the interpretive tradition encourages analysis of dominant narratives and power structures.

## **3.2. Research Approach**

### **Qualitative Research**

This research aims to reveal the subjective perspectives of experts and leaders on the leader-follower dynamic within a management consultancy firm. Rooted in our philosophical grounding, research of this nature is best done through qualitative methods (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on measurement and statistical analysis, qualitative research seeks to uncover deeper insights into the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups (Bell et al., 2018). This qualitative research is conducted from an interpretive tradition as this tradition suggests that reality is socially constructed through interpretation and interaction (Prasad, 2018). It emphasizes the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to the phenomenon by individuals within their socio-cultural contexts. Semi-structured interviews and structured observation support this qualitative study to gather data, with which we aim to reveal how expertise followership influences the leader-follower dynamic in a management consultancy firm. We chose this method as interviews and observation allow for obtaining in-depth information on how respondents interpret and construct their social realities. This type of research strategy normally emphasizes words and meanings, taking the ontological position of social constructionism (Bell et al., 2018).

## **3.3 Research Design and Process**

### **Case Study**

We base our study on a single case, intending to create an in-depth understanding of the influence of expertise followership on the leader-follower dynamic. A single-case study approach focuses on a single organization, allowing us to conduct an in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon within that specific organizational context (Bell et al., 2018). A total of ten semi-structured interviews at Offices A, B, and C, and one additional observation at Office A serve as the mainstream of data. Bell et al. (2018) identify interviews as the most valuable method when performing qualitative studies, therefore, forming our primary source for the analysis. To justify

the data for Office A, we also use a benchmark strategy where we collect data from Office B and C. These benchmark interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, whereas the other eight respondents were interviewed in person. The interviews typically lasted between 45-60 minutes, which we identified as sufficient as this time enabled us to gain satisfactory insight into the respondents' perceptions, without generating an excessive amount of data. We were mindful that the main challenge of qualitative research is managing the large dataset produced by interviews and field notes (Bell et al., 2018). The number of interviews may be considered scarce. However, as argued by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), when research is rather focused on the making of meaning than frequency, the number of interviews is of less relevance. The combination of interviews, observation, and field notes enriched the data and enabled the deeper interpretation of its broader significance.

### **Data Collection**

This data collection section includes all the relevant information regarding how empirical data has been collected. It covers the selection of the respondents, the strategy behind the interviews, and how they are structured. A main theme in the qualitative analytical approach is the iterative process (Bell et al., 2018), emphasizing the interplay and importance of adopting an exploratory and open-minded stance during data collection (Saunders et al., 2023). It emphasizes the need to start with broad and general questions, seek out unexpected insights that challenge existing theories, and systematically develop understanding through empirical work and theoretical exploration. Based on the overarching theme, we aimed to remain flexible and curious. We followed (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) suggestions to actively engage with the data. This allows us to discover novel insights and develop new understandings beyond preconceived notions or narrow perspectives. Data is the raw material used in the investigation (Styhre, 2013). The use of various data sources is important to conduct good qualitative research. Central to this approach is semi-structured interviews, which capture real-time accounts and retrospective perspectives of the phenomenon from respondents (Gioia et al., 2013).

### ***Sampling***

The main source of the empirical data in our study stems from interviews with leaders and followers at the single case company, AxisPeak. AxisPeak is selected due to its emphasis on

expertise, high autonomy, and flat hierarchy. This flat hierarchy is recognized in the structure without managers. AxisPeak's employees are referred to as 'nerds' and are expected to be self-managing instead of being led. This unique context of expertise and flat hierarchy creates a specific phenomenon that is understudied in management consultancy. The interview selection is an example of the snowballing technique, which is a type of non-probability sampling that is used to recruit respondents via another respondent (Prasad, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). Bel et al. 2018, suggest using snowball sampling when the focus of attention is a network of individuals. We had one contact person at AxisPeak who scheduled the interviews. The sampling involved elements of stratified sampling, which involves dividing the respondents into sub-groups, we did this by asking individuals representing different levels in the organization to get a broader view (Bell et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). In this stratified sampling, we focused on a variety of leaders and followers with neglect of gender and age. This allows us to ensure that every subgroup is properly represented in the sample and allows us to draw more precise conclusions (Saunders et al., 2023).

We aimed to create an unbiased sample to understand how the respondents perceive the reality at AxisPeak. AxisPeak has 12 offices globally with three in Sweden that will serve as the focal point of this study. One of the Swedish offices will be researched extensively (Office A), including eight interviews and one observation. This method is selected to allow a variety of perspectives on the leader-follower dynamic, but also a personal interpretation through observation. Our sample consisted of ten respondents, spread over different positions and levels within AxisPeak. We conducted interviews among leaders and followers to experience interpretation of the phenomenon from both perspectives. We selected the respondents using a non-probabilistic method, meaning that we selected our respondents based on their expertise field and hierarchical position. This means that we selected both leaders and followers as respondents. A limitation in data that could occur from non-probability sampling, where the respondents are selected carefully based on their relation to the researched phenomenon, is that demographic characteristics are neglected. This could result in an uneven distribution of characteristics such as gender, age, and origin. However, our study aims to understand the leader-follower dynamic within AxisPeak, prioritizing hierarchical positions and different types of Expertise Areas to answer the research question effectively. Additionally, to ensure validity, benchmarking interviews will be conducted at the two other Swedish offices, designated as Office B and Office C. The benchmarking method allows us

to test the answers given by Office A and identify what findings are office-based and which are phenomenon-based. Table 2 shows an overview of the respondents, their role in the leadership dynamic, and at what office they are located.

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Position in Leadership Dynamic</b>	<b>Location</b>
Agnes Andersson	Follower	Office A
Ebba Ekström	Follower	Office A
Gustav Gullberg	Follower	Office A
Hugo Holmberg	Follower	Office A
Klara Karlsson	Leader	Office A
Nils Nyberg	Leader	Office A
Owen Olsson	Leader	Office A
Viktor Vinter	Follower	Office A
Filip Frederiksson	Leader	Office B
Emil Eriksson	Leader	Office C

Table II. Respondents Overview.

### ***Semi-structured Interviews***

The main type of collection is the semi-structured interviews that we conducted with leaders and followers at AxisPeak. Semi-structured interviews are, as the name implies, somewhat structured in character, often with an interview guide and specific themes to be followed (Bell et al., 2018). However, the interviews allow improvised follow-up questions and a conversation-led interview that is guided by a set of main questions. In these types of interviews, the focus lies on how the respondents interpret and understand the questions asked (Bell et al., 2018). We chose semi-structured interviews to provide the respondents with the full possibility to elaborate on the questions asked within the key themes chosen, which aided us in gaining authentic and in-depth insight into how the nerds at AxisPeak perceived leadership.

The conducted data from one round of interviews, one-to-one, where the respondents were asked open-ended interview questions that allowed them to provide data based on their experiences. Our motivation behind the semi-structured interviews was our experience during earlier meetings with AxisPeak where we used a non-structured informal interview strategy to get to know the company. The information retrieved was of good quality, but the lack of structure resulted in an incomplete

overview of all themes discussed. To create more structure but allow follow-up conversations and a natural conversation flow, we decided to proceed with semi-structured during the official interviews. Even with a fixed set of open-ended questions, it is impossible to predict all themes that will emerge (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), guaranteeing rich data before the analysis.

The interview structured form enabled us to gain a deep contextual understanding of the respondents' perceptions and experiences, as we were able to ask follow-up questions when necessary (Bell et al., 2018). It also helped us gain data from a specific topic or area and not move too far away from the research question. However, we performed an open interview technique aimed at enabling the respondents to elaborate on key themes, we took notes throughout the interviews as well as a recording. Doing so allowed us to listen back, catch nonverbal observations, and transcribe the interviews afterward. As mentioned, we also took notes to write down observations on how they answered the questions, looking for cues in tone, and facial expressions to give more details.

### **Data Analysis**

This section covers how we analyzed the empirical data. The process of interpreting the data already started during the interviews itself, by asking the respondents follow-up questions based on their answers. The perspectives of the respondents revealed recurring themes that later came back in the analysis. There is no standard way to analyze qualitative data and this process can take on various forms (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Styhre, 2013). However, we went through the process step by step to tackle the challenge of analyzing the complete data.

All the interviews were recorded, with consent, to be able to transcribe them. The recording also allowed us to listen back to specific statements, and tone of voice, or solve any unclarity in the transcripts. The interviews were conducted in English and, therefore, also transcribed in English. The transcripts consist of the complete interview with all questions and answers, stated in the way they were formulated during the interview. However, confidential information such as the company name, names of employees, and departments were changed. This approach was taken to not change any meaning of the responses and to maintain anonymity. Based on the transcripts, we coded the data based on topics that emerged from the transcripts. We analyzed the collected data

through the grounded theory, which is an inductive approach to qualitative research (Prasad, 2018). Grounded theory is most effective in organizational research, identifying complexity through the establishment of links with practice and theory (Bell et al., 2018). This theory emerges from data directly from observations and interactions of the respondents rather than being imposed by data from existing theories or hypotheses. These codes created an overview of who said what and how on specific topics. The statements were structured per code, creating an extended overview of the different perspectives. This coding approach aligns with the interpretive tradition as it aims to understand the various interpretations of the respondents to specific topics. We coded the collected data by identifying patterns, themes, and concepts. The initial coding led to focused coding, where the identification of prevalent codes and broader themes aimed to help organize the data into recurring patterns. At the first level of coding, we identified core concepts, while at the second level, we engaged in extensive discussions to uncover further outcomes and broader concepts, ultimately generating new perspectives (Bell et al., 2018).

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasize the importance of getting to know the data and understanding it before drawing conclusions. We, therefore, took our time analyzing the results of the coding, aiming to identify themes and patterns. After getting familiar with the data, we defined first-order themes and second-order themes based on the results, defining their relation and recurrence among the respondents (Gioia et al., 2013). With this as a base, we compared codes and identified the themes of the study, that serve as the golden thread through the analysis of the findings. Nerdery and expertise are crucial to our study as they serve as the foundation for the organizational identity. The themes revealed a logical order of what themes were built on others, serving as a pathway to understanding how expertise followership influences the leader-follower dynamic.

By coding our material based on what is said specifically to a thematic theme, we simultaneously analyzed the material by interpreting the words of the respondents (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The themes and patterns created an understanding of how the respondents perceive the phenomenon and what their perspectives are on it. This is extensively analyzed under findings, where the specific phenomenon is analyzed solely within the context of AxisPeak. In the discussion, we challenged each other's perception of the empirical material to reflexively look at



the collected data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Existing academic literature and theories challenge the findings, aiming at creating a nuanced understanding of the specific phenomenon. The existing literature serves as a method to see what is already known and how this can explain the perspectives of the respondents. Thus, we continuously strived towards unbiased sorting and by looking at the material from different perspectives.

### **3.4 Credibility and Limitations**

Interpretive researchers engage in reflexivity and reflect on their own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions throughout the research process (Bell et al., 2018; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). By acknowledging the subjectivity, researchers aim to enhance the credibility and validity of their interpretations. This section serves as a critical reflection on the credibility and possible limitations of the study.

We acknowledge the limited number of interviews but acknowledge the valuable answers from the respondents. This qualitative study ensures credibility by conducting ten interviews, of which two serve as a benchmark strategy to test the validity of the findings. The different perspectives of the respondents create an overview of how the leader-follower dynamic is interpreted and how this is influenced by expertise followership. As we used semi-structured interviews, it was important to use follow-up techniques that helped maintain credibility and avoided leading questions (Bell et al., 2018). Credibility is increased by preparing a set of possible follow-up questions beforehand, that ensures a non-biased and open-ended context for the respondents. Credibility is further increased by preparing a context introduction, that was the same for all respondents, signing a consent form, and ensuring anonymity. Moreover, we enhanced the credibility of the thesis by consistently striving to maintain a neutral position towards the research object and discussing amongst ourselves, thus allowing for reflexivity to occur (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). One of us interviewed while the other one took notes and was not active in asking questions. This method decreased subjectivity as one was speaking and the other observed the non-verbal behavior of the respondents.

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research studies. This means carefully interpreting your material and then reflecting on it by reinterpreting it (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Thus, we

continuously discussed the implications of the material collected and the theory used with each other and aimed to move our mindsets between different interpretations. Possible limitations occur from our decision to select our respondents based on their role in the leadership dynamic and expertise background. Within Office A, we aimed for an equal distribution between leaders and followers, ranging from various expertise backgrounds. We chose this method as the focus of this study is the leader-follower dynamic and how this is influenced by expertise followership. We defined it crucial to have a balance between the number of leaders and followers and to have respondents with different backgrounds as this means they deal with different situations. However, we are aware that the uneven distribution of age and gender might create a biased outcome in the final data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure the safety and comfort of the respondents, we shared a consent form that was signed by them to ensure that every individual who engaged in the study did so voluntarily and allowed us to use their answers in the study (Saunders et al., 2023). Further, by assuring anonymity, we meet the confidentiality requirements. Therefore, to protect the company's privacy, we will use the pseudonym 'AxisPeak' throughout the study. Respondent names have also been changed, as well as occasional gender changes, to ensure an environment where they can share their perspective safely. These precautions ensure both privacy and anonymity, thus upholding the integrity of the research.

### **AI Statement**

AI has solely exclusively been employed for grammar checking, to guarantee the quality of the thesis.

## **3.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter explains the methods and reasoning behind the approach taken in this inductive and qualitative study. The interpretive tradition serves as a golden thread to understand how expertise followership influences the leader-follower dynamic within the single case study of AxisPeak. We selected this tradition as we believe that the personal interpretation of both leaders and followers is most successful in understanding the phenomenon. The combination of ten semi-structured

interviews, of which two serve as a benchmarking method, and observation serves as the main source of our findings. The respondents are selected based on their role in the leadership dynamic and their expertise background to provide us with a broad overview from different perspectives. A possible limitation occurs as age and gender are reflected in the sampling strategy. However, hierarchical aspects are prioritized due to the objectives of the study. The data collection and analysis are structured by preparing interview questions beforehand, transcribing the conducted interviews, coding the transcripts, and identifying themes and patterns based on the coded data. We believe that the findings are credible as we studied the phenomenon from various angles and perspectives, acknowledging both leaders and followers. We aimed to familiarize ourselves as well as possible with the findings, creating the opportunity to identify themes and patterns relevant to the study. The carefully selected overview of findings serves as the foundation of the study and guides the reader on their journey to revealing of the influence of expertise followership on the leader-follower dynamic within AxisPeak.

## 4. Analysis & Empirical Findings

*This chapter presents the empirical material from qualitative interviews and observation. The first section explains the context by introducing the case through their organizational- and leadership structure and norms. Following, the analysis of the empirical findings is presented concerning the themes and patterns that emerged during coding and interpreting the data.*

### 4.1 The Case - AxisPeak

In the competitive landscape of management consultancy, firms often adhere to traditional hierarchical structures, emphasizing a strict ‘up-or-out’ model to motivate talent progression. However, AxisPeak, a global consultancy firm, steps away from this model by fostering development throughout all organizational layers. Today, the firm has 12 offices around the globe, of which three are located in Sweden. This case study delves into AxisPeak’s roots of flat hierarchy, expertise, and autonomy through a study on the three Swedish offices, Office A, B, and C. Specifically, it examines how expertise followership within a flat hierarchical organization influences the dynamics of the leader-follower dynamic, employing a comparative approach to validate findings across the three offices.

#### Cultural Norms – The People in AxisPeak

Within AxisPeak, employees are referred to as “nerds”. The nerds have diverse characters but have one thing in common: an inner nerdery to a specific topic that fuels their interest. They are specifically characterized by curiosity, passion, and an eagerness to learn. Their nerdery can be rooted in both professional and personal levels, covering various topics, hobbies, or subjects. AxisPeak’s organizational culture embraces the embodiment of nerdery and facilitates employee identity that sets the tone for recruitment as the expectance of nerd characteristics forms cultural norms within the company. Nerdery forms the basis of the identity of those within AxisPeak and is believed to positively influence the employee’s ability to become an expert as it allows one to dive deep into a subject. This ability creates the assumption that this would mean the same in terms of diving deep into expertise. AxisPeak encourages individuals to develop expertise by valuing those who demonstrate a high interest in understanding niche areas, rather than solely associating expertise with authority. However, the exact relationship between nerdery and expertise, as well

as the influence of these cultural norms on organizational structure and leadership dynamics within AxisPeak, remain areas requiring further exploration.

**Expertise is the Core - Organizational Structure**

AxisPeak structures itself in a way that fosters development among its nerds. Figure 1 shows how AxisPeak’s organizational structure is divided into various teams called Subject Practices that each tackle a specific practice within management consultancy. All the nerds join one sub-team that is created within a Subject Practice, to dive deeper into subject expertise. These sub-teams are called Expertise Areas and this is where the nerds are formed into experts.

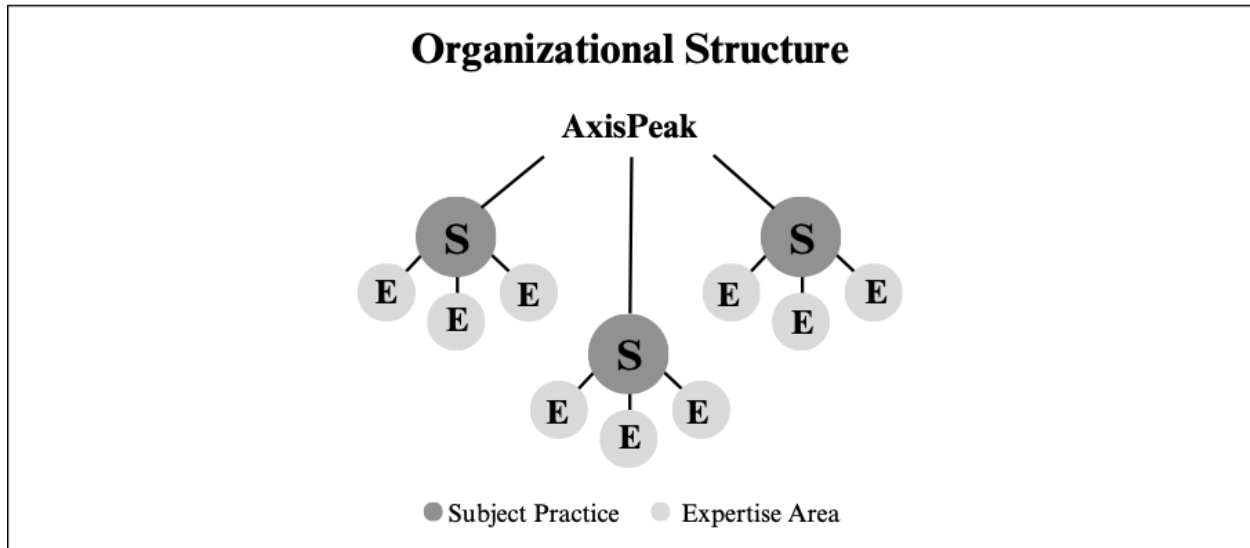


Figure 1. Organizational Structure AxisPeak.

All the nerds belong to one Subject Practice team and one Expertise Area within that. The various Subject Practices and Expertise Areas are not location-bound and create various networks between the twelve AxisPeak offices. Members of an Expertise Area can be located within different offices, creating a close connection and network between the different offices. An example of how such a network could look like is given in Figure 2. These networks reveal collaboration opportunities between the various Subject Practices and Expertise Areas, at the different offices.

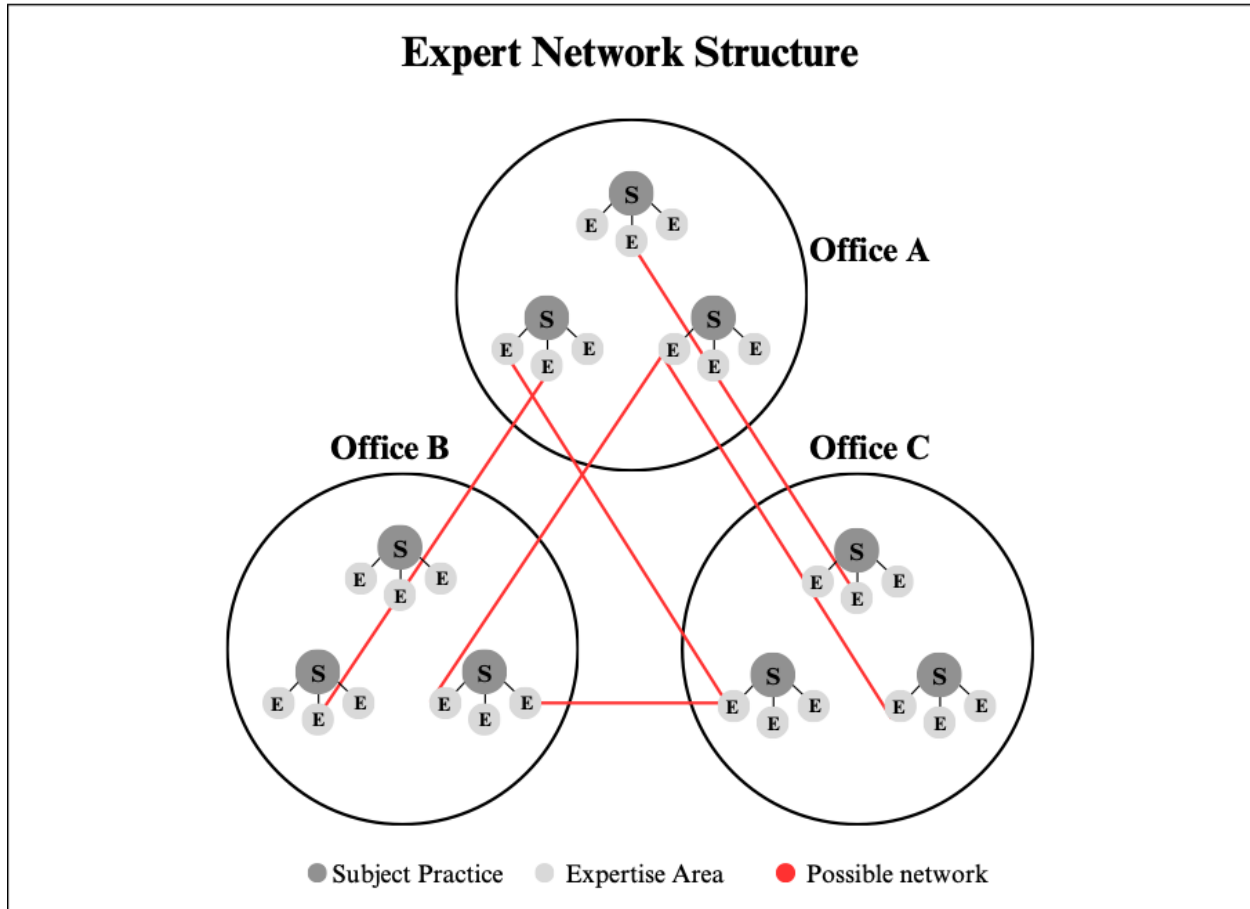


Figure 2. Expert Network Structure AxisPeak.

### An Organization Without Traditional Managers - Leadership Structure

AxisPeak does not have managers in the sense of traditional management where one individual oversees a team or group of people. Instead, the nerds are expected to take on the role of self-manager, overseeing their work and carrying the responsibility to achieve their objectives. This concept underscores the organization's flat hierarchy where a traditional leader-follower dynamic, where a follower follows its leader, is hardly recognized within the structure of AxisPeak. The roots of this flat hierarchy are recognized in the concept that leaders cannot decide to be leaders but are instead chosen by their followers. Every year, all the nerds within AxisPeak, both leaders and followers, set personal development goals. These personal development goals are the main driver of fostering constant development among all individuals in the company. The goals are personal targets, either on a professional- or personal level, that one aims to achieve within the year. All nerds choose their yearly leader based on their personal goals, selecting a leader that can

help achieve them. Also, leaders, those who have followers, choose a leader themselves to help them achieve their personal goals, further underscoring the flat hierarchy. The leadership structure and how leaders also have leaders is visualized in Figure 3. This figure highlights the contrast between those in a leadership position, who have people following them but also have a leader, and follower position, who do not lead others.

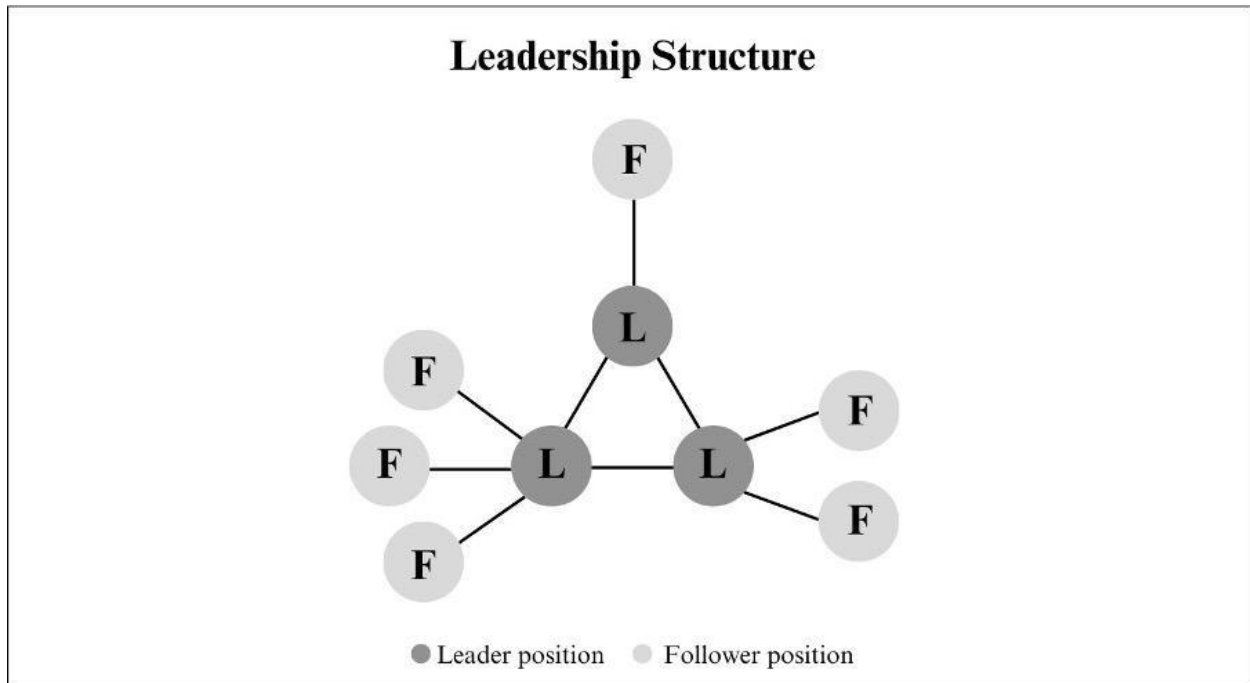


Figure 3. Leadership Structure AxisPeak.

The personal development goals are the center of the yearly leadership contracts and define the leader's purpose as to help their followers achieve them. It is the leader's purpose to help their followers achieve their goals, rather than serving as a manager. The development goals serve as the main motivation behind selecting a leader, which indirectly creates the situation where followers belong to different Subject Practices or Expertise Areas than their leaders. This possible gap in knowledge is the reason for the structure of self-management. As a leader does not automatically hold the same type of expertise, they lose their ability to manage their followers. As a result, all the nerds in AxisPeak hold responsibility for their work, performance, and objective achievement, eliminating the traditional management structure and emphasizing a flat hierarchy.

## 4.2 Revealing the ‘Nerdery’ Phenomenon

### Autonomy - Self-Management at AxisPeak

To understand AxisPeak’s work structure, the concept of autonomy needs to be understood within an empirical context. The empirical findings show this to be a significant factor in the organizational structure and connected to the cultural norms of being a nerd. The perspectives of the respondents provide a picture of how autonomy is incorporated and what it means to them.

*“We are executing self-leadership here. We're not telling you when to sleep or when to go home because you seem stressed, or whatever. We expect you to fix that or manage that yourself.”*

- Owen Olsson, leader.

Olsson’s statement defines AxisPeak’s work structure as “self-leadership”. No one will tell you how to schedule your day as the nerds are expected to do that themselves. Olsson is confident, leaving no room for alternative ways of working.

*"AxisPeak is taking it to another level. More on the individual level, AxisPeak requires a shitload of self-leadership to survive. You are not surviving at AxisPeak without practicing self-leadership.”*

- Klara Karlsson, leader.

Karlsson takes a similar stance to Olsson’s statement and identifies self-leadership to be essential “to survive at Axis Peak”. Her somewhat aggressive tone underlines the high level of autonomy expected and that this cannot be handled by just any individual. She somewhat compares AxisPeaks’ stance towards other organizations by stating that they are taking it to another level, suggesting that the degree of autonomy is higher.

*"I mean, we have this DNA that chooses your leader and you find your way.”*

- Gustav Gullberg, follower.

Gullberg seems to accept the earlier voiced expectancy of autonomy and self-leader by comparing it to be part of his DNA, indicating that it comes naturally to him. His word choice of finding your



own way indicates a 'sink or swim' attitude, where there is no other option than, in this case, to lead yourself.

*“I don't need a lot of leader support from my leader. We meet every, every second week, but I'm pretty adept with what I want to do. I know how to reach what I want. I have a big network at AxisPeak, so I don't need this one person to teach me and to help you achieve the knowledge and expertise I want.”*

- Nils Nyberg, leader.

Nyberg emphasizes that leaders such as himself also serve a follower role themselves. He links autonomy to the opportunity to decide his approach in his journey, where following a leader would not benefit him. He specifically mentions his network, indicating that this serves as a bridging role in leading himself. He emphasizes his ability to navigate his expertise journey himself through his existing network and vision.

*“There are check-ins in the project to make sure we're going in the right direction.”*

- Viktor Vinter, follower.

Vinter somewhat contrasts the clear expectation of autonomy by mentioning the "check-ins". He reveals that there are certain moments where one can release autonomy and ask for help from their leader. Nevertheless, "check-ins" suggest that this is situational and supports the earlier statement that a leader is not actively present.

*“I would say there is a lot of autonomy in the sense that people trust you.”*

- Agnes Andersson, follower.

Andersson identifies trust to be one of the main drivers for the autonomous way of working. This trust is aimed at the follower's ability to navigate their work individually and successfully, giving it a positive meaning. Considering AxisPeak's organizational structure, it can be assumed that this trust of ability comes from their level of knowledge, experience, and expertise.

The findings present two clear camps of leader and follower, but also an overlapping zone as leaders also have a leader themselves. The respondents with a leadership position formulate a firm stance and high expectancy of the ability to work autonomously, considering it a non-negotiable aspect of AxisPeak. They formulate this as self-leadership. From the follower's perspective, trust and freedom are linked to autonomy, resulting from their ability to reflect and organize their work individually. Despite the high levels of autonomy and self-leadership, leaders are available for check-ins when needed.

### **Expertise - The Foundation of AxisPeak**

Expertise is the foundation of AxisPeak's organizational structure and sets the firm apart from its competitors. Expertise and autonomy go hand in hand in the case of AxisPeak, asserting high levels of autonomy among the nerds. Trust is identified as one of the main drivers for autonomy. The assumption is that this trust stems from the knowledge and expertise cultivated within the Expertise Areas. To understand the cultural norm of expertise better, and how this translates into trust, the empirical findings on expertise are analyzed.

*“I would say that the experts get their expertise from experience.”*

- Ebba Ekström, follower.

Ekström indicates that expertise is cultivated over time, and one cannot be an expert fast.

*“You need to do something multiple times. You need to succeed. You need to fail. You need to try different approaches. I think an expert, you can only be with time.”*

- Nils Nyberg, leader.

Nyberg further supports Ekström's argument by highlighting the significance of time in the process of becoming an expert. He specifically emphasizes the concept of trying, failing, and learning from those mistakes to be able to get further.

*“Makes me want to become one, I guess. Who doesn’t want to be referred to as an expert? All positive.”*

- Viktor Vinter, follower.

Vinter's tone and curiosity about why someone might resist being an expert suggests a strong conviction. He appears to highly value expertise and expresses a desire to attain it, revealing an association of power and respect with expertise.

*"Experts are people. To me, the difference between nerds and experts is that nerds are sort of a level deeper than experts for me. An expert is somebody who has a lot of experience."*

- Owen Olsson, leader.

Olsson says that experts are people, which could imply that there are human qualities besides knowledge related to expertise. He compares experts to nerds and defines nerdery as going deeper than expertise. What makes it go deeper is yet unclear. Olsson associates experience with expertise, just like Ekström and Nyberg, further confirming the importance of time and practice in becoming an expert.

*“I think you can be a nerd in something, but you don't have to be an expert. So if you're a nerd, something that you're really interested in, you're intrigued by it. But if you're an expert, you have a really big knowledge about it and experience in that subject.”*

- Gustav Gullberg, follower.

Gullberg also compares experts to nerds, indicating a similarity between the two terms. He associates nerdery with interest and expertise with knowledge and experience. This could explain Olsson's statement on why nerdiness delves deeper than expertise.

*“Typically, you are perceived as an expert as a consultant, and I have the experience, but I might not be very curious about it. I might not be very passionate about it, but I could do it and compared to a client, I might be an expert.”*

- Klara Karlsson, leader.

Karlsson's statement seems to align with the aspect of interest to nerdery, formulating it as curiosity and passion. She says that consultants are considered experts from the client's perspective, but that passion does not have to be involved. Karlsson says that the degree of passion and curiosity does not influence the degree of expertise.

Experience stands out as the key factor driving expertise. According to the respondents, expertise is formed through hours of investment and lessons learned from failures and successes over time. Expertise carries a positive connotation, tied to status and knowledge. While experts and nerds are similar, differences emerge in their levels of passion, interests, and curiosity.

### **Nerds - The Employee Identity**

Experts and nerds are similar terms and seem to have overlapping features. Expertise is driven by experience and nerdery seems to be driven by passion. Interpreting the perspectives on nerdery gives the possibility to compare experts and nerds. Expertise serves as an organizational foundation due to the Expertise Areas and to understand how nerdery is taking part in this further reveals the cultural norms within AxisPeak.

*“It's celebrated in different ways, and it's also something that we're encouraged to have from the hiring process. You're encouraged to have your, big topic, your nerdery and that's something that's part of our DNA.”*

- Gustav Gullberg, follower.

Gullberg says that nerdery is encouraged from the point of hiring on. It is a big aspect of AxisPeak and Gullberg formulated it as part of the DNA of the employees. He compares nerdery to a “big topic”, indicating that nerdery is not a small thing within a person but plays a big role within the organization. Gullberg says that nerdery is celebrated and encouraged, giving it a positive annotation. Formulating it as part of the overall company DNA relates it to a sense of common identity, suggesting cultural norms and what is expected of those in AxisPeak.

*“We're all very different people who work here, with a lot of different interests and backgrounds, etcetera. But I think that what we all have in common is a curiosity; we all want to continue to learn.”*

- Hugo Holmberg, follower.

Holmberg has a similar view on the sense of a shared identity centered on nerdery, saying that it is the one thing all employees have in common, implying it is a norm within the organization. He characterizes nerdery as an eagerness to learn and a curiosity-driven mindset.

*“It's the possibility to dive deep into a specific subject and let it sort of overwhelm you. And then you end up thinking about it a bit too much after work time, etcetera. Something that you're passionate about.”*

- Viktor Vinter, follower.

Vinter describes nerdery as the ability to immerse oneself deeply in a subject. He emphasizes a sense of independence connected to passion, as it can also take place after work hours. His interpretation and emphasis on passion suggest that nerdery is not solely associated with one's professional life but also extends to personal interests.

*“That's a nerd. Who never stops digging in sort of they found the rabbit hole. And they just dig deeper and deeper in that rabbit hole.”*

- Owen Olsson, leader.

Olsson's perspective overlaps with that of Vinter, emphasizing the ability of a nerd to go deep into a subject. He compares nerdery to someone "who never stops digging", using a rabbit hole as a metaphor. The rabbit embodies a nerd who keeps on digging into the ground, to go deeper. Olsson creates an image of “digging deeper and deeper” into a hole as delving deeper into a subject of interest and learning more about it. This showcases how an initial discovery of a subject can be translated into a determined and ongoing pursuit of exploration.

*“Nerds, in general, I would say, are people who are perhaps perceived as extra passionate about certain topics. It could have a negative connotation, but I don’t believe that it should, and in reality, it does not anymore. It weighs more on the positive side these days, but it’s really something that you’re passionate about and that you like learning more about.”*

- Ebba Ekström, follower.

Ekström also identifies passion for a topic as a main driver of nerdery. She says that the term could have a negative connotation but does not perceive it that way herself. She instead portrays a more positive light of the term nerd, emphasizing enthusiasm and it being fueled by passion.

*“You grow up and it is sort of a negative term used for describing people similarly to those portrayed in cartoons and stuff when you were little. It was like people with books and big bottleneck glasses. But to me, what I view it as is more of a person who has a really big understanding and knowledge of something.”*

- Agnes Andersson, follower.

Andersson explains what the negative connotation, just as Ekström mentioned, could mean. She talks about the negative depiction of nerds in media such as cartoons and distances herself from the stereotype of individuals with large glasses and books. Instead, she introduces a shift in perspective by redefining the term to describe someone with extensive knowledge, making it positive.

*“But why am I a nerd? I love to learn new things.”*

- Klara Karlsson, leader.

Karlsson highlights the lack of a clear definition of nerdery and its criteria. She raises doubts about whether she qualifies as a nerd and follows this by saying, "I love to learn new things". This suggests that she links nerdery to a passion for learning but is uncertain about the extent of passion that defines this label.

The respondent’s perspectives on nerdery demonstrate a collective shift towards a more positive perception, driven by passion and curiosity. This recent interpretation steps away from the stereotype of being overly studious. Nerdery plays a significant role in the employee identity at AxisPeak, where it is associated with the capacity to delve deeply into a subject. This supports the assumption that this ability positively influences the journey towards expertise, which is closely linked with knowledge and experience. Nerdery appears to lay the groundwork and is expected among employees as these strive to develop expertise in their Expertise Areas, ultimately becoming experts themselves. It is important to note that ambiguity surrounding the term results in no clear definition, with interpretations varying depending on the respondent's perspectives. Nerdery and expertise overlap slightly but have different definitions. The interpretation of the social construction to nerdery and expertise from the respondent’s perspectives is shown in Table 3.

	<b>Nerd</b>	<b>Expert</b>
<i>Main driver</i>	Passion, interest, curiosity	Experience, time
<i>Connotation</i>	Positive within AxisPeak, but a possible negative connotation in other contexts.	Positive
<i>Association</i>	Knowledge, interest, stereotypical negative image of glasses and books.	Status, knowledge, power

Table III. Comparison Nerd vs Expert.

### **Leading to Develop - Leadership at AxisPeak**

Understanding the individuals at AxisPeak is key to understanding how leadership is practiced. The high levels of autonomy, also formulated as self-leadership, are built on trust and heavily influence the leadership. Levels of expertise and experience create a gap between leader and follower, demanding alternative leadership approaches to navigate the dynamic world of consultancy.

*“Leadership is more focused on helping others develop than micromanaging, where it's just about instructing someone to do this, then stopping them from doing that, and telling them to do this... The main part but not the main driver, but the main vehicle for development.”*

- Owen Olsson, leader.

Olsson explains how leadership at AxisPeak is focused on fostering development rather than micromanagement, illustrating it using a metaphor of a vehicle and its driver. While Olsson views himself as the primary vehicle for his followers' development, he emphasizes that it's the followers who steer the vehicle. This metaphor implies that the leader's role is to facilitate development, but it also underscores the importance of mutual accountability, where followers take responsibility for their growth.

*“I apply a little bit of the same autonomy leadership even though I know that not all of the people in my team would think it is the best approach for them. Some of them actually need to be more hand-holding and through the years now we have modified that. So, it's a little bit more individually adopted, but I'm very much leaving my leadership up to the people I lead and their needs. So, if somebody needs a meeting every week, we have a meeting every week.”*

- Nils Nyberg, leader.

Nyberg further explains the expectance of autonomy that has been briefly touched upon by Olsson. He says that he expects autonomy from all his followers but that degrees differ as some require more guidance. Nyberg acknowledges individual needs and adapts his leadership style accordingly while maintaining a certain basis.

*“I think to succeed leading someone or to lead someone successfully, you need to understand who that person is.”*

- Klara Karlsson, leader.

Karlsson takes a similar stance as Nyberg, saying that she needs to know her followers to lead them successfully. She acknowledges that leadership goes two ways and that understanding followers is crucial to leading individuals in the best way possible.

*“I know he's there and if I have an issue, I can just call him and I know that he is always there to support me, no matter what. I think that is the most important.”*

- Gustav Gullberg, follower.



Gullberg speaks of a sense of psychological availability from his leader, suggesting an emotional dimension to the leadership. This dimension creates safety assurance among followers and overlaps with the personal approaches of Nyberg and Karlsson.

*"With regards to my level of experience, she knows that my ambition level is high, and she'll keep pushing me to improve from my current position."*

- Ebba Ekström, follower.

This emotional dimension is also emphasized by Ekström, who says that she feels understood by her leader in terms of ambition. Her statement aligns with Olsson, who identified his leadership purpose as fostering development.

*"To develop them is to help them on their personal and professional careers, is to make them experts, is to help them on that level shift like both getting more senior but also getting more expertise in their careers."*

- Nils Nyberg, leader.

Nyberg further emphasizes fostering development by underscoring "personal and professional careers", referring to personal development goals. He explains that the goal is to make them more senior and develop their expertise.

Leadership at AxisPeak consists of several components, fostering development, autonomy, and individual attention. Fostering the development of the followers seems to be the priority of the leaders, but this comes paired with an expectancy of autonomy and responsibility from the followers. In return, leaders seem to have a personalized leadership approach to the followers, resulting in an emotional dimension that creates a sense of safety assurance. This personalized leadership style and expected self-leadership create a balance between guidance and freedom, with development as the priority.

### **Expert Authority - Control at AxisPeak**

Autonomy and trust serve as the foundation of leadership at AxisPeak and leaders emphasize high expectancy of, what they call, self-leadership from their followers. However, leaders typically have a sense of direct control such as active monitoring, creating guidelines, or deadlines-setting to ensure positive output. How do they balance asserting autonomy and maintaining control?

*“We don't want people that need control. This is the fundamental thing. We don't want people that we need to control because that's not how we work, it's too much energy and too much time spent on overwatching and looking over people's shoulders.”*

- Owen Olsson, leader.

Olsson says that he does not want followers who require direct control and that this shapes AxisPeak. He seems to associate a leader's direct control with something negative as he relates it to "overwatching and looking over people's shoulders". His statement defines these actions as too time and energy-wasting, creating the assumption that his energy could be spent better elsewhere. Olsson's statement raises the question that through a sense of no direct control, leaders still have a sense of control as they define the ideal situation and demand a specific individual who can cope with it.

*“As a leader, you have to sort of see what level of leadership does this person need. Can they handle a lot of connection making, while still delivering on the project, while still participating in other internal activities? Should we do some sort of prioritization based on the development goal that you have?”*

- Agnes Andersson, follower.

Andersson says that the level of direct control varies based on the individual's needs and abilities. She contrasts Olsson's rigid view on control, who does not want any control over his followers.

*“I don't control my followers, but okay, if a person clearly is not taking the responsibility that comes with autonomy, I might need to start controlling. I have never experienced that.”*

- Klara Karlsson, leader.

Karlsson echoes Andersson's statement, stating that she controls those who need it. While she shares Olsson's dislike for direct control, she takes a more flexible stance, expressing her willingness to control if a follower needs her to. However, she associates this with followers not taking responsibility and emphasizes that this has never happened before, supporting her earlier statement of not controlling her followers. Karlsson's perspective prompts the question of whether one can speak of a leader when there is no control. Does this challenge the leader-follower dynamic, or does it suggest an alternative form of relationship?

*"I don't have control of the situation. I am in control over myself and what I can influence."*

- Nils Nyberg, leader.

Nyberg offers a different take on control, saying that he can only control himself. He seems to define control as an influence, suggesting that since he cannot control individuals, he cannot control their work either, as he cannot actively influence their actions. While Olsson appears uninterested in maintaining control, Nyberg believes he cannot do so.

AxisPeak seems to exhibit an unequal balance between autonomy and control, with leaders avoiding direct control over their followers. This leadership approach seems motivated by various factors, either due to a deliberate choice or a perceived inability to maintain direct control. AxisPeak recruits its nerds, based on their capacity to thrive within this environment of high autonomy, which is closely tied to a sense of responsibility. This raises questions, such as whether creating a 'no-control' environment results in control. Leaders at AxisPeak appear to regulate both themselves and the situation to maintain weak control. A deeper understanding of the leader-follower dynamic within AxisPeak may offer further insights into this.

### **Leading the Nerds - Leader-Follower Dynamic at AxisPeak**

The 'nerdery' phenomenon of expertise followership introduces a gap in expertise levels between leaders and followers as the nerds choose their own leader, based on their personal development goals. These findings aim to understand how this landscape influences the leader-follower dynamic at AxisPeak. The unequal balance between autonomy and control in leadership raises questions

about its broader impact. The dynamic is revealed through the combination of factors such as high autonomy, trust, expertise-driver nerdery, and minimal control.

*“Now you're a leader and you're going to lead these people and often they are experts and sometimes even better than the person who they're leading in their field. It becomes a very weird dynamic. If that person is then going to manage them by putting them into a box and saying now you're going to do exactly this and this person you're going to report to that person that would kill creativity. That would kill the culture immediately and people would leave.”*

- Nils Nyberg, leader.

Nyberg recognizes a “weird dynamic” due to the differences in expertise. He says that actively managing and controlling them would result in killing their creativity and the company culture. His statement aligns with the earlier discussed trust and weak control as he emphasizes the freedom of the followers to practice their expertise.

*“Who is the leader? Who's the follower? Generally speaking, I would say it's very equal and it's more of a teamwork.”*

- Klara Karlsson, leader.

Karlsson shares a similar perspective to Nyberg by questioning who plays what role in the dynamic. She says that the dynamic is very equal, underscoring AxisPeak's flat hierarchy and low power distance. The statement aligns with the earlier raised question on whether this can be considered a leader-follower dynamic, or does it imply an alternative form of relationship?

*“Our dynamic has been a lot about trust. Like trusting that I have a lot of knowledge in certain areas. I have been able to show that I am really good at those things, then I don't have a head over my shoulder. Still, I'll usually get the check-ins from my leader which is comforting in a sense, because then I'll know I'm not going completely off the rails and spending too much time doing something unnecessary or even worse and wrong, harmful to the project.”*

- Ebba Ekström, follower.

Ekström says that trust is a fundamental aspect of the leader-follower dynamic between her and her leader. The trust is built on her performance and autonomy, resulting in freedom. She emphasizes that check-ins from her leader guide her in the right direction, avoiding derailing.

*“I think it's a good dynamic, very coaching and mentoring dynamic, which is what I think I need at this point in my career.”*

- Ebba Ekström, follower.

Ekström adds to this that her leader takes on a “coaching and mentoring” role towards her. This aligns with the earlier emphasis on fostering development, underscoring the personalized and emotional element of it.

*“I would describe it as at least when I talk to her, I always feel like there's no hierarchy in the sense that sort of we can speak very openly. I can criticize, maybe another colleague of ours without you knowing her going and telling that person that if they're higher up in the hierarchy to say the openness and then also the possibility to talk about difficult stuff and then also really mundane and or fun social stuff. You can talk about everything you want and sort of have a good personal and professional relationship.”*

- Agnes Andersson, follower.

Andersson supports the personal element of the dynamic by emphasizing the psychological safety that is created. "No hierarchy" and "openly" suggest the low power distance and weak control in the dynamic.

*“It's more of a way to make you feel the best and make you be the best.”*

- Viktor Vinter, follower.

Vinter says that his leader makes him feel the best but also fosters his development to become the best. His statement aligns with the earlier emphasis on personal development goals, where the leaders' role is to foster the achievement of this.

The leader-follower dynamic between the nerds and their leader seems to be built on trust through expertise, fostering development, and weak control. These factors influence an equal dynamic, where a leader and follower are hierarchically on similar levels, rather than placing the leader hierarchically above the follower.

### 4.3 Observation

An observation of the weekly Monday morning office-wide meeting serves as an additional perspective to understand the leader-follower dynamic within AxisPeak. This online meeting is structured in such a way that followers on a volunteer base lead the meeting. This structure seems to motivate low power distance, providing a sense of responsibility throughout the layers of the company.

*"Thank you for sharing", "Good work", "Do you need any help?", "Talk to...", "Reach out to us and we will help you out".*

These phrases are observed to be reoccurring and set the stage for this meeting's purpose, to share updates and possibly involve others. This creates a sense of formality and desired communication among the nerds. The overall relaxed and lounging body language is shown by sitting back in the chairs and paying attention. However, those speaking stepped forward, which showed engagement and ownership of their message. Not having an active attitude, and informal structure gives the impression that this meeting aims to start the week in a calm matter, through aligning individuals. The dynamic between leader and follower is sensed as informal and low power distance. Some individuals are participating from their home office, others are on the road, and various individuals are gathered in conference rooms. The informal setting is recognized through the flexibility in attendance location. The individuals gathered show a laid-back attitude at a big table, not having complete focus but still respectful to the person leading the meeting. Those with a leadership position are not actively involved in the meeting but rather jump in when asked. Another aspect that confirms this assumption is the "spotlight moment" at the end of the meeting where individuals can put someone in the spotlight, acknowledging and appreciating their performance and work. The individual in the spotlight was acknowledged because of his 10-year-long employment at AxisPeak and given the chance to share his biggest lesson with his fellow nerds, indicating a

developing-focused environment. His advice was to focus on a personal-related nerdery to unwind and regain energy, emphasizing the influence of this phenomenon on AxisPeak and its relevance in their day-to-day work.

The informal set-up and voluntary aspect of the meeting gives the assumption of a leader-follower dynamic with low power distance and individual responsibility. The "spotlight moment" underlines individual responsibility and acknowledgment of this.

#### **4.4 Benchmark**

To increase the validity of the findings on the leader-follower dynamic, identifying whether it is office-bound or companywide, the other two Swedish offices serve a benchmarking role. The equal dynamic at Office A has a coaching and mentoring foundation, rooted in trust. The respondents from Office B and C provide a complete picture of the leader-follower dynamic within an expert-focused management consultancy firm.

*“I lead like I want to be led. It's not that difficult. Sometimes it even seems like autonomy is very much emphasized by leaders, but it all is very natural by the experts... Autonomy comes paired with a bit of lower control and the leaders tend to be mostly focusing on more soft leadership skills, so supporting role inspiring role and not so much a leading role.”*

- Emil Eriksson, leader.

Eriksson says that autonomy is emphasized by leaders but that the act of self-leaders comes naturally to experts. He explains that weak control is part of autonomy, resulting in a practice of soft leadership skills rather than micromanagement. He defines his role as being a supporter and inspirer rather than an actual leader.

*"So, your job is also to help people to stay on track while also finding things where they can develop and become an expert and find an opportunity to grow. But it's really up to them. It's not like you're in charge of that as a leader here. You're more of a sparring partner or coach... We want smart self-going people that take ownership. Not people that need telling what to do."*

- Filip Frederiksson, leader.

Frederiksson shows his expectancy of autonomy from the followers by pointing out their responsibility in their development. He says that he serves the role of a sparring partner or coach, aligning with Eriksson's vision on this. His stance is similar to that of the other leaders as he aims to foster development but holds the followers accountable.

*“Make them swim in the deep end of the pool. Push them in that direction, they're not fully comfortable. If they are in their comfort zone, they don't grow.”*

- Emil Eriksson, leader.

Eriksson compares the high levels of autonomy to taking followers out of their comfort zone to make them grow. His statement emphasizes his stance on constant development, pushing his followers to grow, aligning with the other leader's statements.

*“I think the control at AxisPeak is more about culture. Do you fit in here? Do you feel that you can deliver within this framework?”*

- Filip Frederiksson, leader.

Frederiksson says that the control within AxisPeak is translated into the organizational culture. One needs to fit the strong autonomic culture to be able to thrive at AxisPeak. Control is recognized in the high levels of autonomy, development vision, and nerdery celebration in the recruitment process.

The benchmark shows overlapping influences on the leader-follower dynamic and leadership within the offices. The emphasis on autonomy is once more recognized and considered to be natural to the followers, syncing earlier findings. The constant focus on development overlaps with the overall purpose of the leaders to support their followers in achieving their development goals without taking charge and controlling them. An overlapping theme is that responsibility lies with the followers and leaders have no control over them. However, it seems like the 'no control' approach is the control leaders have as it creates an autonomic organizational culture and sets norms for those within AxisPeak.



## 4.5 Chapter Summary

The analysis of the empirical material is summarized in Table 4. This overview states the most relevant themes that lead up to understanding the leader-follower dynamic. This table does not serve as a conclusion but rather as a compact and objective summary of the findings. These will be further discussed through a theoretical lens in the next chapter.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Leader perspective</b>	<b>Follower perspective</b>
<i>Autonomy</i>	Self-leadership is highly expected from the nerds and finds its roots in trust.	Self-leadership comes naturally to the nerds at AxisPeak. The preferences from the follower's perspective define the degree of autonomy through check-ins, but a certain basis is always present.
<i>Expertise</i>	Experience is the main driver of expertise and time will turn individuals into an expert.	Expertise has a connected status, creating a sense of desire to become an expert.
<i>Nerds</i>	Nerdery defines the ability to go deep into a subject, due to passion. The requirements to be a nerd are unclear, surrounding the term with ambiguity.	Nerdery is celebrated at AxisPeak and is believed to influence the ability to become an expert. Curiosity and passion are drivers of nerdery. It has a positive meaning within AxisPeak but can be considered negative within other contexts.
<i>Leadership</i>	Leadership at AxisPeak fosters development rather than micromanagement. It consists of high autonomy, and raising responsibilities for the follower. To practice it in the best way possible, leaders require an understanding of their followers.	The personalized approach in leadership is emphasized, creating psychological safety for the followers. The emotional availability yet high degrees of autonomy foster development, aiming to turn the followers into experts.
<i>Control</i>	Leaders do not want to have direct control over their followers or cannot control others. Control is considered negative, standing in the way of the expected autonomy.	The degree of required control depends on the person, underscoring the personalized leadership approach.

<i>Dynamic</i>	The expertise followership creates an untraditional dynamic, demanding freedom. It is unclear who plays what role, in creating an equal dynamic.	Leaders are compared to coaches and mentors, underscoring the fostering of development and achieving personal development goals. The dynamic consists of an equal basis and flat hierarchy, creating an equal dynamic based on trust.
<i>Benchmark</i>	High expectations of autonomy are an overlapping theme, highly influencing the organizational culture. A common emphasis on follower development steers the leadership practiced, providing the leaders with a coaching role rather than an active leader role.	-

Table IV. Chapter Summary Findings.

## 5. Discussion

*This chapter interprets what has been discovered from the findings in Chapter 4 (Analysis & Empirical Findings) and establishes a connection to theoretical concepts. The chapter starts by exploring the connection between expertise and autonomy at AxisPeak, which is crucial before linking it to theoretical literature. Following this, the practice of leadership and control is analyzed, before delving into the insights and progressing towards normative control. Finally, the leader-follower dynamic at AxisPeak is defined, based on the influence of expertise followership. This sequential approach allows for a comprehensive understanding to unravel the 'nerdery' phenomenon.*

### 5.1 The Connection Between Expertise and Autonomy

AxisPeak's organizational structure places the nerds within Expertise Areas, intending to develop them into experts. The emphasis on expertise and knowledge development corresponds with general perspectives on KIFs, claiming that these organizations hold significant degrees of knowledge (Alvesson, 2004). The term 'knowledge-intensive firm' already gives away that knowledge is the main driver of these organizations, drawn from its employees who are typically referred to as specialized individuals with high-quality output (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Even though expertise is a typical driver for KIFs, it seems as if AxisPeak takes this to a higher level by actively promoting expertise development and autonomous work structures.

Typically, KIFs maintain an up-or-out structure, meaning that the consultants' purpose is to climb the hierarchical career ladder, or they are out. This hierarchical structure has a wide bottom and narrow top as a result. On the contrary, AxisPeak aims to develop its nerds into experts, stepping away from the harsh up-or-out structure. They have created a unique organizational structure that they formulate as an "apple". It thanks its name to the big middle part, where most of the consultants are located. Whereas big consultancy firms hire many juniors, of which some work themselves up the hierarchy, AxisPeak hires less junior but the once they recruit are nurtured into experts. Nevertheless, less pressure is applied in the need to get to the top of the hierarchy, resulting in bigger middle layers. It seems as if AxisPeak selects a low number of nerds but selects those whom they see show characteristics that hold the ability to become an expert. This results in a higher number of organizational layers, providing the nerds with the appropriate environment to

develop expertise. Figure 4 shows how AxisPeak’s structure differs from the traditional up-or-out structure, emphasizing the shape and layers.

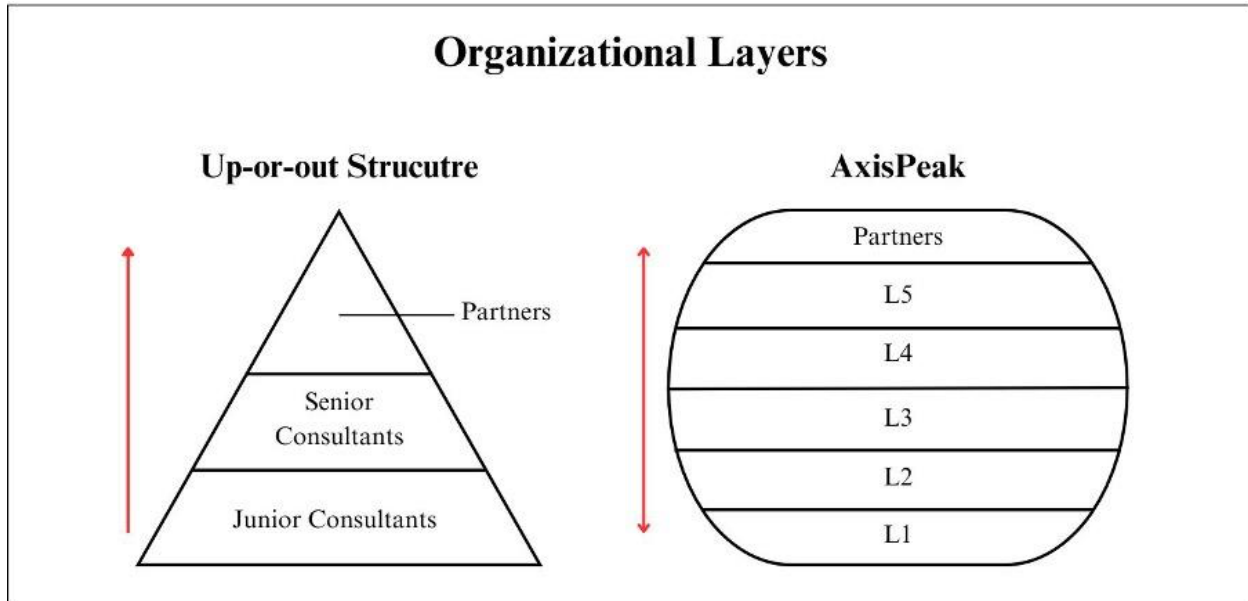


Figure 4. Organizational Layers.

Jorgensen et al. (2011) argue the limited research on how recruitment processes influence the ideal persona in KIFs but believe organizations have selective selection criteria to ensure a seamless fit. They underscore expertise as the main competitive advantage for KIFs. Therefore, hiring those who align with the organizational culture and vision is essential. In AxisPeak’s case, this is the aspiration of becoming an expert. This is recognized in the findings as the respondents showed positive associations to expertise, communicating a desire to become one, and relating it to a sense of status and power. Besides aligning with the organization’s vision, this is supported by Tripathi and Hasan's (2022) 'expert power', where an individual's power is defined by the degree of knowledge they hold. The higher the knowledge, the higher the power they hold due to their worth to the company's output. The main driver to expertise is defined by the respondents as experience. "I think an expert, you can only be with time" (Nyberg, 2024). Long periods of trying, failing, and trying again are defined as the journey to becoming an expert.

Alvesson (2004) underscores specific reliance of KIFs on professional expertise, that is paired with autonomy. Authors have referred to knowledge workers as "gold collar workers", emphasizing the

power that comes with knowledge (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). This once more underscores expert power (Tripathi & Hasan, 2022). This sense of power is recognized at AxisPeak where the experts create the output of the organization, deciding the quality of deliverables. Reich (1999) addresses knowledge workers 'symbolic analysts', implying that nerds possess a unique blend of technical expertise, problem-solving and strategic thinking. While the firm values multifaceted abilities, including proficiency in technical areas, marketing, and strategy, it primarily prioritizes expertise. As a result, those with a diverse skill set may advance to partner roles at AxisPeak, while those without that ambition are allowed to maintain a focus in another organizational layer. This accommodation reflects the demands of a workforce characterized by specialization, offering increased autonomy and aligning with the evolving needs of contemporary roles within AxisPeak's approach. This opportunity to follow individual ambitions and preferences leads to an autonomous workstyle, that is typically practiced in KIFs. At AxisPeak specifically, it mainly stems from the concept where the nerds choose their own leader, resulting in an occasional mismatch in knowledge background. The nerds select their leader based on their personal development goals, so this leader does not necessarily have the same expertise. This creates an environment where one's leader cannot actively check their work as they do not hold the same knowledge, increasing the individual way of working. This is recognized in AxisPeak's case as leaders said that they find themselves in a situation where they do not share the same Expertise Area and knowledge as their followers, making them unable to check their work and manage them.

While some nerds may prefer leaders within the same Expertise Area, others might not prefer this. This dynamic fosters an expectation of self-leadership among team members, specifically among those with specialized knowledge, who seek to manage themselves. Another aspect of autonomy is that experts hold a knowledge and understanding of a subject so thorough that they can lead themselves through it. This specific aspect is underscored by Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley (2000), arguing that leaders stepping in the way of autonomy will most likely be asked to leave the company as they do not have the knowledge capacity to lead these highly intellectual individuals. This is recognized in AxisPeak's case where leaders facilitate autonomy to foster expertise development and show a high expectancy of it, suggesting no alternative.

Another perspective on autonomy suggests that it is interwoven with the organizational identity and culture of KIFs. This assumption is emphasized in the findings through the high expectancy of autonomous individuals at AxisPeak. The non-negotiable aspect of the work structure demands a specific autonomous skill set from the nerds. This demand mostly comes from respondents with a leadership position at AxisPeak. Nerdery is associated with a constant urge to learn, curiosity, and passion, aligning with the motivation behind the autonomous work style. This association suggests that nerdery is an identity that is deliberately selected to match the organizational culture and work structure. Those with a follower role emphasize occasional check-ins and individual guidance when required.

The high expectancy of self-leadership ability seems to skip the step of 'SuperLeadership', as is argued by Manz and Sims (2001). The authors define this as the act of stimulating self-leadership among followers, thereby empowering them, and fostering a sense of autonomy. The stimulation part seems to be left out, diving straight into self-leadership at AxisPeak. The main driver of this direct approach to autonomy is trust. "I would say there is a lot of autonomy in the sense that people trust you" (Andersson, 2024). It is assumed that this trust stems from extensive knowledge levels, resulting in increased responsibilities for followers.

The findings and established theories concerning expertise and autonomy demonstrate a closely intertwined relationship, characterized by a cause-and-effect dynamic. KIFs derive their value from the high levels of knowledge of their employees, utilizing this intellectual capital to attain success. Generally, KIFs are associated with autonomy due to the gap between a leader's and follower's knowledge, which is typically higher for the follower, demanding a more individualized approach. Trust appears to play an additional role in AxisPeak's emphasis on autonomy, which seems to find its foundation in the expertise of its nerds. This results in a highly autonomous work environment, driven by trust and celebration of expertise.

## **5.2 Leadership Without Control?**

AxisPeak's leadership model centers on individuals, facilitated by a leader who is chosen by the nerds to help achieve their personal development goals. At AxisPeak, individuals are positioned at the core, with their expertise and growth nurtured across all organizational levels. This emphasis

fosters impactful outcomes and cultivates skilled experts within the company. This contrasts traditional views, typically emphasizing a leader's authority and hierarchical order (Alvesson et al., 2017). AxisPeaks' organizational knowledge is embedded in its nerds and the main goal is to increase their amount of knowledge (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). This is reflected in leadership by shifting away from micromanagement and instead fostering employee development and as earlier concluded, autonomy. Olsson further explains that leadership is "the main part but not the main driver, but the vehicle for development". This metaphor highlights the leader's role of facilitating growth while emphasizing that followers are the ones steering the vehicle. It underscores the importance of mutual accountability, where followers take responsibility for their growth. This aligns with coaching leadership as the leader facilitates the right tools, knowledge, and opportunities to create development (Alvesson et al., 2017; Peterson & Hicks, 1996). However, they hold the nerds accountable for showing initiative.

As discussed before, AxisPeak's leadership structure, where the nerds choose their leader, does not necessarily entail holding a higher hierarchical position. Leadership, as defined by Alvesson et al. (2017), is a relational concept wherein one individual exerts more influence than others, whether formally or informally, over an extended period, rather than just momentarily. It is noted that in a context where individuals have relatively equal status, traditional notions of leadership can become less relevant. AxisPeak's unique leadership represents a departure from traditional leadership, moving to more contemporary styles that emphasize relationship-building (Alvesson et al., 2017). Within this arena of contemporary leadership, elements of coaching and transformational leadership approaches are most vital at AxisPeak. Leaders at AxisPeak are shown to be good listeners and dedicate their time to helping the nerds. This is expressed by Nyberg (2024) "So, if somebody needs a meeting every week, we have a meeting every week". He emphasizes the adjustments of leadership depending on the needs of the nerds. Another element of contemporary leadership is forming a friendly atmosphere and informality where leaders provide support (Alvesson et al., 2017). This is underscored by Gullberg (2024) who expresses that he can call for support at any moment. "I know he's there and if I have an issue, I can just call him and I know that he is always there to support me, no matter what. I think that is the most important." This in addition highlights the importance of accessible support, contributing to a sense of psychological safety among followers. Furthermore, this aspect of support aligns with the concept of coaching

leadership (Jeong et al., 2024)., which prioritizes psychological security. Creating an environment where individuals feel empowered to seek help and guidance without fear, in turn, promotes collaboration, innovation, and enhancement of knowledge management (Millar et al., 2017).

AxisPeak's leaders are being perceived as moral models who are admired, trusted, and respected by the nerds. This aligns with transformational leaders, where the role of a leader is to address followers' deeper motives and morals (Reid & Dold, 2018). The vision is fundamental in transformational leadership, where leaders raise consciousness on a broad scale to guide their followers to higher purpose with time. At AxisPeak, the leaders prioritize the nerds by motivating them and taking them to the next level. "With regards to my level of experience, she knows that my ambition level is high, and she'll keep pushing me to improve from my current position" (Ekström, 2024). The specific motivational aspect and personal leadership adjustments are believed to foster innovation and creativity by allowing and encouraging new perspectives (Alvesson et al., 2017). Overlapping with transformational leadership, the coaching elements seem vital at AxisPeak. Leaders consider their purpose to be to develop their followers and guide them through their professional careers. "To develop them is to help them on their personal and professional careers, is to make them experts, is to help them on that level shift like both getting more senior but also getting more expertise in their careers" (Nyberg, 2024). It shows a shift from directly solving complex problems to fostering connections and facilitating the personal and professional growth of the nerds (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011). This is evident at AxisPeak where traditional managerial roles are absent and leaders instead take on the role of coaches, fostering valuable connections and networks within and outside the organization. This approach allows them to be perceived as credible leaders within AxisPeak.

Due to the absence of managerial roles, tasks such as planning, active supervision, and performance control are not practiced by the leaders (Alvesson et al., 2017). Instead, the practice of transformational and coaching leadership equips the followers with the right tools to perform self-leadership, emphasizing purposeful self-direction toward personal standards and autonomy (Manz, 1986). This results in an individual responsibility for planning, executing, and monitoring one's work, with coaching support from leaders. This means that control of work lies mostly with the nerds themselves as they are expected to practice self-leadership. The leaders only take control



when absolutely necessary. Karlsson (2024) acknowledges this situational approach, noting that while she avoids excessive direct control over her followers, she may intervene if someone fails to take responsibility. Starbuck (1992) emphasizes the importance of this balance between direct control and allowance for autonomy, further echoed by Rosier (2022). In the practice of no direct control, AxisPeak shows high expectance of self-leadership from the side of the leaders, creating a sense of individual control among the nerds (Bäcklander et al., 2021). This sense of individual control is recognized by how the nerds set their own goals, apply critical thinking, and take responsibility for planning their work. The supportive stance of their leader is considered crucial to prepare the nerds for exercising self-leadership (Pearce & Manz, 2005). The weak direct control and flat hierarchical position of the leader align with post-heroic leadership, empowering the nerds (Alvesson et al., 2017). It gives the leader a less dominant position and embraces a collective work dynamic. This approach is believed to focus on a culture of trust, innovation, and adaptability to thrive in dynamic environments, closely interlinked with serving the mission and needs of being a KIF.

AxisPeak's leadership is characterized by weak direct control over followers, reserved as a last resort and employed only when necessary. Instead, transformational and coaching leadership practices are emphasized, fostering empowerment and trust through a personal-oriented approach aligned with a contemporary approach. This trust neglects the need for constant direct control, as leaders focus on cultivating engagement and autonomy by facilitating a deep understanding of the individuals within the organizations. In line with Savolainen et al. (2018) exploration of trust dynamics, effective communication and knowledge sharing are highlighted as pivotal in cultivating and maintaining trust within organizational contexts, emphasizing trustworthiness and transparent communication to mitigate the risk of mistrust. This enables leaders to effectively guide while empowering and engaging the nerds. With leaders refraining from exerting direct control, the next chapter delves into the nuanced interpretation of how a sense of control is still maintained within this context.

### **5.3 Normative Control**

All respondents expressed that AxisPeak does not practice control. Based on the respondent's position, we could observe differences in the emphasis of nerdery. The leaders associated nerdery

with a topic that one cannot stop digging into, metaphorically as a rabbit hole. This indicates that the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon is active across the organization. The followers seem to refer to nerdery mainly in terms of that the people at AxisPeak are different but common in the sense they have a nerd character. There is a common curiosity and desire to learn continuously. We observe that the higher the position of partner or L4, L3 leaders, the more common it is to relate the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon with a driver to learn more. Nerdery is described positively and with a sense of enlightenment, curiosity, and surprise, while expertise holds a more serious and formal approach.

During the observation at AxisPeak, an employee with a decade of experience shared his biggest lesson learned with his fellow nerds. His advice, conveyed through storytelling, is to focus on the personal-related 'nerdery' to unwind and regain energy. This highlights how the phenomenon of 'nerdery' contributes to normative control, both within the workplace and in private life through unwinding. Such control can manifest through diverse channels, including storytelling seen in this example but also the presence of other material objects and interactions within social groups (Alvesson et al., 2017).

During the observation at AxisPeak, an employee with a decade of experience shared his most significant lesson learned with his colleagues. His advice conveyed through storytelling, emphasized the importance of focusing on personal-related "nerdery" to unwind and recharge. This anecdote highlights how the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon contributes to normative control, both within the workplace and in individuals' personal lives as they seek relaxation. Such control manifests through diverse channels, including storytelling, the presence of material objects, and interaction within social groups (Alvesson et al., 2017).

The high emphasis on nerdery creates an organizational culture and shared vision that allows for deep engagement with a subject. It creates a workforce of nerds with organizational loyalty, passion, and an ongoing commitment to learning and developing oneself, closely linked with the identity of knowledge workers (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023).

The absence of managerial roles, combined with the practice of transformational- and coaching leadership, creates an environment without direct control. However, challenges associated with

transformational- and coaching leadership are recognized through the support by targeting individuals' inner thoughts and identities within an organization could serve as a means to expand organizational control (Alvesson et al., 2017). However, it seems as if AxisPeak maintains a sense of control through normative control. All respondents noted that despite their diversity, individuals at AxisPeak share a collective thirst for learning and high curiosity for various subjects. This implies that a culture of 'nerdery' acts as a reinforcing ritual and norm, promoting positive responses among employees. This aligns with Colling & Ceulemans' (2023) concept of normative control, as "a type of control that distributed symbolic rewards, recognition, and prestige symbols, while also enforcing rituals and norms to encourage positive responses". Furthermore, Kunda (1992) defined normative control as "the attempt to bring out and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions." This indicates that there must be something else beyond leadership and management that is controlling. This is recognized in AxisPeak's case through the 'nerdery' phenomenon. Another respondent noted that despite their diversity, individuals at AxisPeak share a collective thirst for learning and high curiosity for various subjects. This personal alignment in identity acts as a reinforcing ritual and norm, promoting positive responses among employees. Culture is perceived to exist collectively among groups where symbols and meanings are openly expressed. "The shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed" (Kunda, 1992). It seems that the nerdery character of the people in AxisPeak, creates a sense of control over the people in the organization, giving them a similar background. By hiring new employees according to this norm, a sense of control is maintained, creating a workforce that aligns with the organization's culture and vision (Alvesson et al., 2017).

Although 'no control' is considered the aim in leadership at AxisPeak, nerdery influences normative control, holding control over the organizational culture and its employees. "It's celebrated in different ways, and it's also something that we're encouraged to have from the hiring process. You're encouraged to have your big topic, your nerdery and that's something that's part of our DNA" (Gullberg, 2024). It seems that there is no control from leadership but there is in creating a specific environment of nerdery, setting the stage to becoming experts. The 'nerdery' phenomenon includes a diverse workforce with aligned elements of being able to practice self-

leadership. At AxisPeak, there's been a notable shift in this phenomenon, moving away from its negative association with social awkwardness and outdated stereotypes. Instead, it is now seen as a positive definition, aligning with the idea of knowledge workers and emphasizing the empowerment gained through knowledge accumulation (Robertson & O'Malley Hammerley, 2000). This positive association is created because of the framing of knowledge workers portraying them with a fusion of technical proficiency and social skills (Reich, 1999), thereby shifting away from the outdated stereotype of the "big glasses type of nerd". Moreover, the respondents interpret nerdery as a manifestation of passion and curiosity whereas the perception of nerdery within the culture at AxisPeak shows a collective embrace.

Due to the high expertise level across the organizations regardless of levels, all individuals can be perceived as experts defined as “an individual who possesses the highest level of knowledge and/or skills in the organization in a competency that is crucial to the operation of that organization and whose opinions are highly sought after by others” (Foust, 2004). This suggests that power in leadership can stem not only from the leader but also from individuals who possess the highest levels of knowledge, for example, an expert. This high knowledge power overlaps with knowledge workers, who are characterized by highly qualified workers and involve specialized skills with a high degree of autonomy (Robertson & Swan, 2003). There is a specific reliance on professional expertise, which implies the trust of clients in the consultants' knowledge and ability to solve complex problems (Alvesson, 2004). As AxisPeak values autonomy, networking among Expertise Areas, and weak control, recruitment criteria are crucial. This is recognized in the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon that holds normative control over the organization. Figure 5 shows how nerdery is the core of the organization and how trust, expertise, autonomy, and weak control are a result of the nerd character of the workforce. These factors are also intertwined, where trust is the basis of expertise, causing autonomy, and weak control, which is again, all based on the trust in expertise. The nerdery core creates a foundation where individuals fit this organizational culture, creating a web of standards and expectations. This overall web is normative control, starting with the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon.

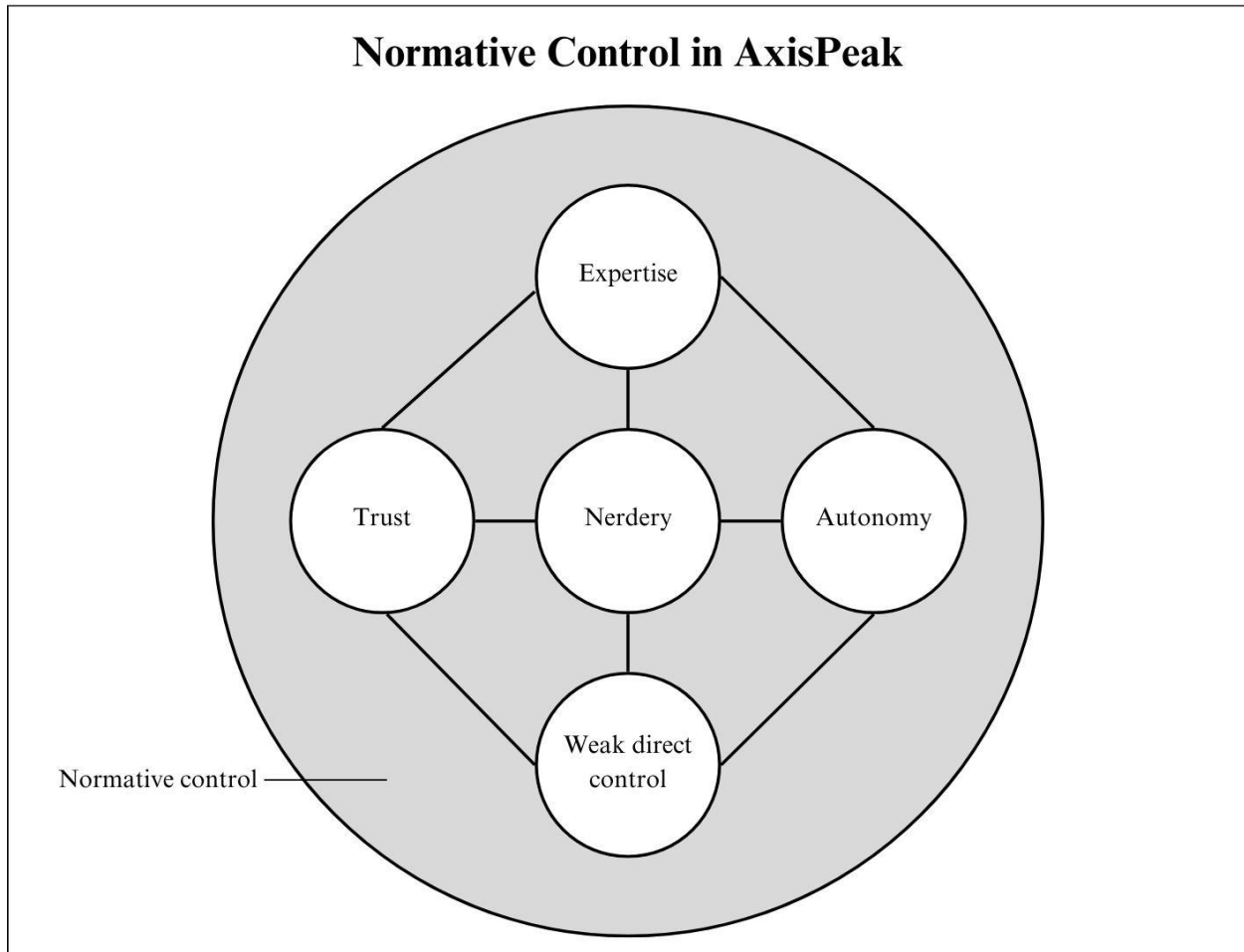


Figure 5. Normative Control in AxisPeak.

Where leadership does not maintain direct control, the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon is what is controlling AxisPeak. Mutual identification with the nerd character controls both leaders and followers, without them realizing it. The common nerdery creates a sense of control, where employees are hired on this character trait with the motivation of developing them into self-leaders and continuous learners. The celebration of nerdery elevates individuals with a high degree of expertise to a heroic status. Praising those who embody this trait inspires others to emulate them and adopt similar habits.

#### 5.4 The Dynamic Between Experts and Leaders

The leader-follower dynamic fosters a sense of psychological safety, allowing individuals to freely express new ideas and feel supported by their leader. "I know he's there and if I have an issue, I

can just call him and I know that he is always there to support me, no matter what." Karlsson (2024) underscores the concept of freely flowing resources. It also resonates with Miller et al. (2017) who stresses the importance of fostering a culture of psychological safety. This environment allows individuals to express ideas without fear. The leadership at AxisPeak can be described as 'ad-hoc' or 'absent leadership'. The active emotional presence of leaders underscores the deep roots of psychological presence within AxisPeak, connecting leaders and followers.

The leadership structure where the nerds choose their own leaders fosters a sense of trust that they hold the ability to select an appropriate leader. The leader's role of helping their followers achieve their personal development goals aligns with transformational leadership. This leadership style emphasizes the inspirational motivation of leaders, fostering the follower's development (Birasnav et al., 2010). This unique foundation to leadership finds its roots in the expertise development of the nerds, aiming for their professional development. The dynamic between leaders and followers is a byproduct of the leadership approaches of transformational leadership, coaching leadership, and organizational normative control through the 'nerdery' phenomenon. The implications of implementing coaching leadership in complex organizations may face challenges where stakeholders prefer clear directives. Instead, AxisPeak practices normative control in their recruitment process, solely hiring those who fit their ideal persona, a nerd. As a result, the workforce thrives in AxisPeak's environment where trust, autonomy, expertise, and weak control form the foundation of leadership, serving as the main driver in AxisPeak's equal leader-follower dynamic.

Multiple factors influence the dynamic between that of a follower and its leader. Since the followers are choosing their leader, it creates an informal personalized setting for leadership. Traditionally speaking, leaders are the ones who hold power and followers obey them, following their instructions (Alvesson et al., 2017). This traditional structure is contrasted as the power starts at the following, handing them the opportunity to decide who is going to lead them. "Who is the leader? Who's the follower? Generally speaking, I would say it's very equal and it's more of a teamwork" (Karlsson, 2024). Karlsson emphasized the complex context that results from followers choosing their leader, as it steps away from the traditional power dynamic. Based on her statement, wondering who is serving what role in the leader-follower dynamic and defining it as equal, aligns

with Allio's (2019) perspective on various purposes of leadership. Leadership within AxisPeak is based on the personal development goals of the followers, with the leader's aim to help followers achieve them. Looking at this purpose aligns with transformational leadership with a purpose of seeing leadership as a social exchange between leaders and followers. As leaders do not manage their followers and serve a supporting role in fostering development, a social factor is present.

Another factor that influences AxisPeak's leader-follower dynamic, contrasting it to a traditional dynamic, is expertise. Followers choose their leaders based on their personal development goals, instead of leaders being appointed based on knowledge levels. "Now you're a leader and you're going to lead these people and often they are experts and sometimes even better than the person who they're leading in their field. It becomes a very weird dynamic. If that person is then going to manage them by putting them into a box and saying now you're going to do exactly this and this person you're going to report to that person that would kill creativity. That would kill the culture immediately and people would leave" (Nyberg, 2024). Nyberg emphasizes the "weird dynamic" that can occur due to differences in knowledge, occasionally placing the follower above the leader in terms of expertise. High levels of expertise are connected to 'expert power' as experts hold knowledge that is valuable to the quality and output of the company (Tripathi & Hasan, 2022). This concept stems from the idea that power in an organization goes to those that hold key resources, in the case of KIFs that cover knowledge (Empson, 2019). This is further recognized through Nyberg's (2024) statement on not being able to lead followers with another expertise background. According to him, this would kill creativity and the autonomous culture at AxisPeak.

The trust in expertise, resulting in high autonomy, creates an environment of self-leadership where leaders serve a coaching role rather than an active leader role. In some cases, leaders serve an inspirational role, giving the nerds instructions on how to achieve their personal development goals. However, in other instances, leaders do not match the knowledge level of their followers, serving a supporting role where soft-leadership skills are emphasized (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). This varying dynamic differs from the traditional leader-follower dynamic where a leader is typically placed above the follower in terms of hierarchy. Figure 6 shows how AxisPeak's leader-follower dynamic differs from the traditional view. It shows how the follower is placed within the circle of the leader, underscoring the different angles the dynamic holds. The placement

within the circle serves as an illustration of the equal dynamic, but also situational context where a leader is hierarchically placed above or below the follower, in terms of knowledge.

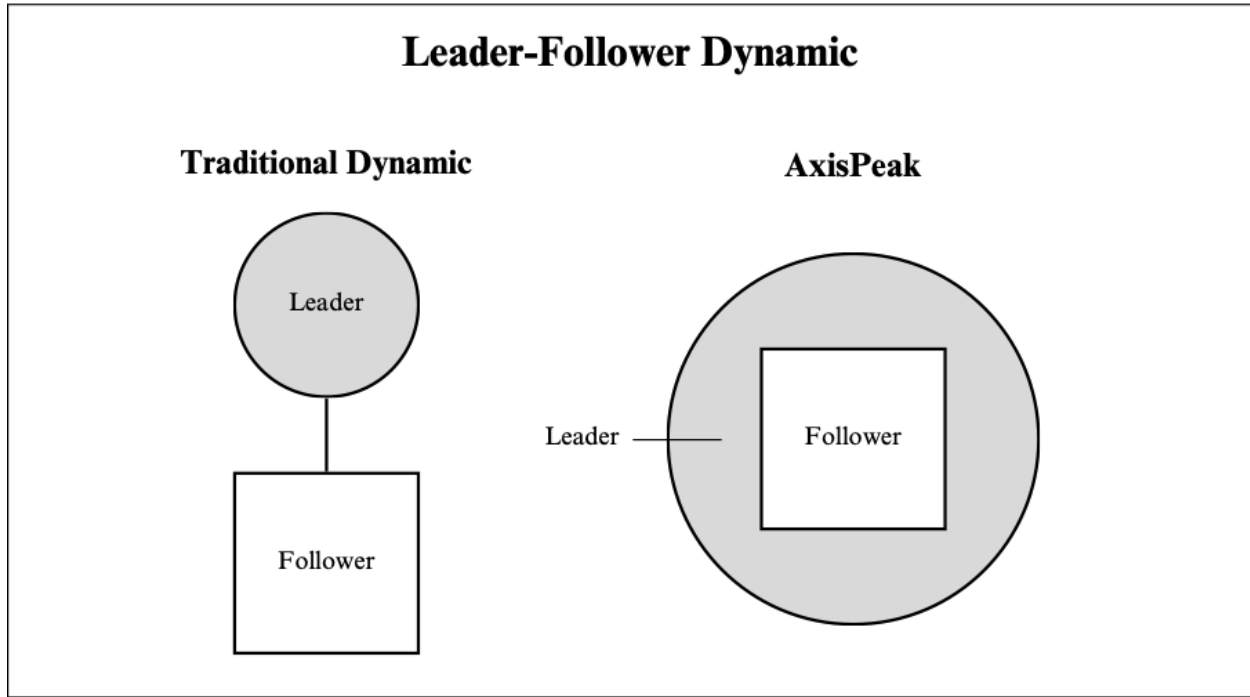


Figure 6. Leader-Follower dynamic.

It can be concluded that nerdery is the main driver of the organization's persona, defining a type of knowledge worker that holds the ability to become an expert. The development-focused culture creates an environment of continuous learning. As a result, the nerds set yearly personal development goals, which serve as their motivation to choose their own leader. Occasional differences in knowledge levels and expertise backgrounds between leaders and followers create a unique leader-follower dynamic where soft-leadership skills are emphasized (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). This results in a transformational- and coaching leadership style, showing signs of post-heroic leadership. The development of the nerds is the leader's priority but holding the nerds accountable for their progress. Instead of micro-management, leaders aim for development, and personal attention, and adjust their leadership style according to follower's needs. They serve as an example rather than a manager or active leader. The informal leader-follower dynamic is also recognized through observation and benchmarking with Offices B and C. Both show a horizontal mode of organizing where leadership serves rather as a supporting factor (Alvesson et al., 2017).



Considering the coaching and mentoring aspect of leadership, the horizontal approach aligns with 'networking'. The low leadership influences, lack of management, and high autonomy combined with a supporting influence of leaders rather than exercising power, reveal a networking dynamic between leaders and followers at AxisPeak.

## **5.5 Suggestion for Solving the 'Nerdery' Phenomenon**

The 'nerdery' phenomenon is uncovered in Chapter 4. Following the analysis and subsequent discussion, we now focus on a suggested solution to the phenomenon. The analysis showed that all individuals at AxisPeak associated the nerd aspect as an element for creating ongoing learning and curiosity. Although no practice of direct control is visible among leaders and followers at AxisPeak, the implementation of the 'nerdery' phenomenon is vital as a control mechanism through the organizational culture. Respondents explain that nerdery as follows. "It's celebrated in different ways, and it's also something that we're encouraged to have from the hiring process. You're encouraged to have your big topic, your nerdery and that's something that's part of our DNA." (Gullberg, 2024). The respondents claim that nerdery is an encouraged character trait and something that is part of the workforce's DNA. It aims to create synergies between leaders and followers, increasing trust and less need for control, indirectly setting the stage for autonomy.

Within the development of the 'nerdery phenomenon', organizational identity is an essential process, however, not feeling trapped by it is another. The recruitment criteria of nerdy encourages a common DNA. The absence of active realization of this phenomenon by the respondents reveals a controlling mechanism. Interestingly, AxisPeak's nerds exhibit no indicators of feeling trapped by the 'nerdery' phenomenon, rather they discuss it in terms of passion and continuous learning, suggesting that it serves as a means to enhance engagement in this context.

Leadership is believed to hold no control and instead fosters individual development, shaped as transformational- and coaching leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017). This leadership approach fosters innovation and creativity by treating the nerds according to their needs, incorporating coaching elements to facilitate individual development. Paired with coaching leadership of equipping people with the right tools, knowledge, and opportunities for them to develop and become more successful (Alvesson et al., 2017; Peterson & Hicks, 1996). The practiced leadership style neglects

managerial roles but instead promotes self-leadership among the followers. Leaders serve a supporting role, facilitating knowledge creation, sharing, and the cultivation of organizational learning (Millar et al., 2017).

The aspect of no direct control of the nerds creates an organizational culture of psychological safety, allowing individuals to express themselves and develop their expertise. At the same time, the ability to become an expert is paired with a high expectancy of autonomy. It seems that expertise followership is automatically connected to responsibility, further underscored by the knowledge gap between leaders and followers. The autonomous work style has weak leadership control but check-ins where needed, creating emotional availability of the leaders. "I would describe it as at least when I talk to her, I always feel like there's no hierarchy in the sense that sort of we can speak very openly. I can criticize, maybe another colleague of ours without you knowing her going and telling that person that if they're higher up in the hierarchy to say the openness and then also the possibility to talk about difficult stuff and then also really mundane and or fun social stuff. You can talk about everything you want and sort of have a good personal and professional relationship."

The 'nerdery' phenomenon creates an ideal persona that has a nerd character, driven by passion, curiosity, and an eagerness to learn. The phenomenon serves as a control mechanism for aligning individuals to work autonomously and practicing self-leadership. It also serves as an agility mechanism for the unified aspect of ongoing development, both on individual- and organizational levels. The 'nerdery' phenomenon creates a shift in the leader-follower dynamic, motivating an equal balance. As the desired persona portrays a hunger for learning, it creates a highly autonomous work environment. This context comes paired with leaders who do not want to spend their time managing people, and instead focus on innovation and development. The 'nerdery' phenomenon can be viewed as a normative control that is understood to build organizational loyalty and commitment, without potentially trapping employees (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023).

In some cases, normative control traps employees in a desired organizational culture (Colling & Ceulemans, 2023). The 'nerdery' phenomenon has a lower tendency to do so due to the carefully selected workforce that meets the organizational vision. The selection requirements are similar to

that of the typical knowledge worker, involving specialized skills with a high degree of autonomy (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Nevertheless, the nerdery character is emphasized, formulated as passion and curiosity. Knowledge and intellectual output set KIFs apart from general organizations as they move away from routines and oiled processes (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). As knowledge is the main driver of KIFs, its main goal is to increase the knowledge within the organization, which is embedded in the employees (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). As a result, autonomy and nerdery related to expertise seem to be the main drivers of the equal leader-follower dynamic in AxisPeak. This pinpoints that within companies with a high expertise workforce, exemplified by AxisPeak's case, the 'nerdery' phenomenon plays a crucial role in leadership.

## **5.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlines how AxisPeak shows transformational-, coaching-, and post-heroic leadership, moving away from traditional leadership towards contemporary approaches. The absence of direct control creates a highly autonomous environment, where expertise development is the priority. Nevertheless, a sense of control is maintained through the 'nerdery' phenomenon, where recruitment criteria create control over the organizational culture by carefully selecting the workforce based on nerdery characteristics, such as passion and curiosity. This employee DNA creates a culture of continuous learning and development, aligning with the practiced leadership. The 'nerdery' phenomenon seems to be controlled under the radar as respondents do show awareness of the phenomenon, however claiming there is no control in AxisPeak. This results in a dynamic shift between leaders and followers, taking on a horizontal mode of organizing. Such modes align with networking, which is detected between the various Expertise Areas. It cultivates a hierarchy shift from viewing the leader as powerful to acknowledging the expertise of the follower, resulting in expert power. Figure 7 shows how normative control is the core of the 'nerdery' phenomenon, shaping the leader-follower dynamic, and organizational culture.

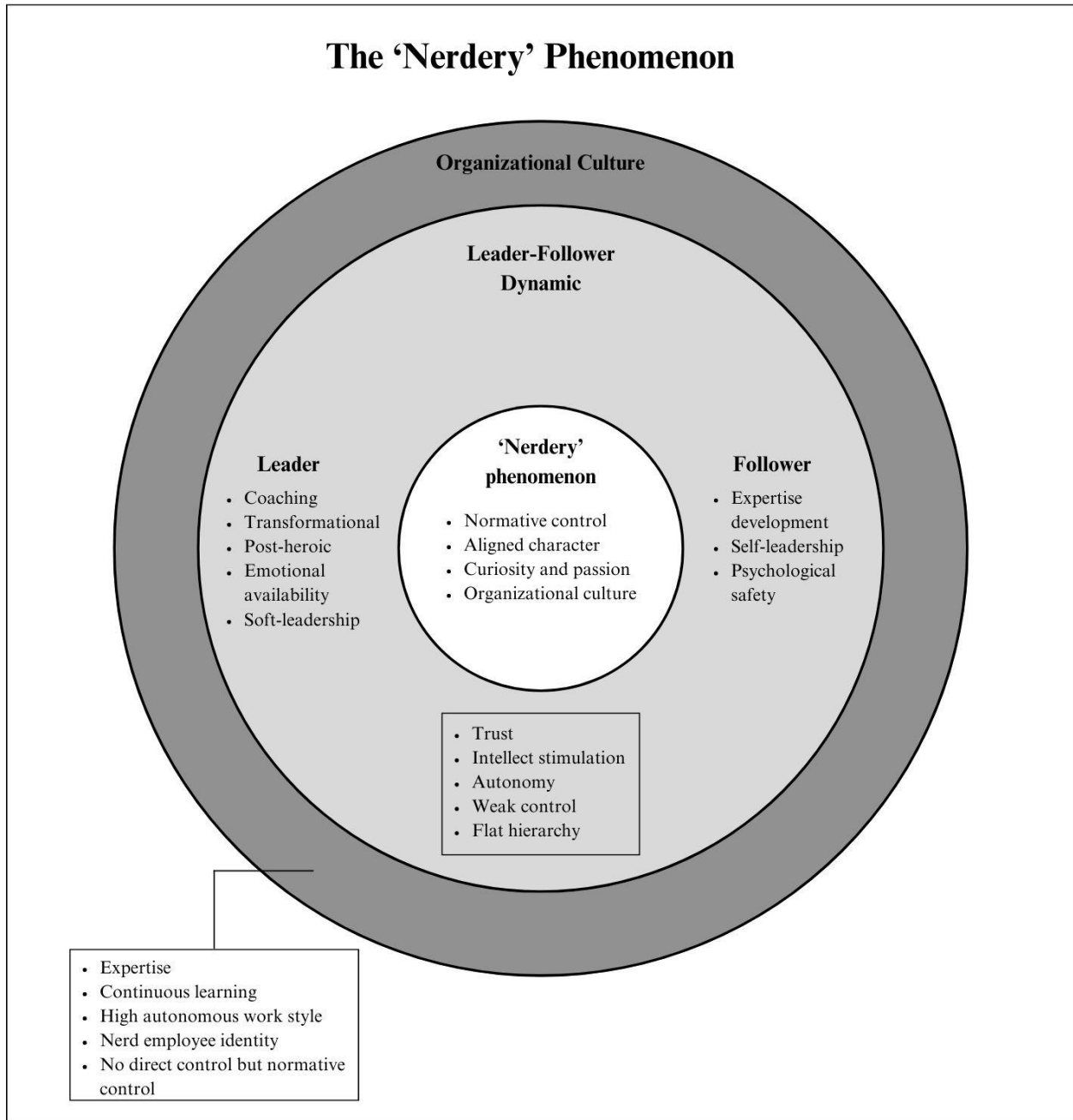


Figure 7. The 'Nerdery' Phenomenon.

## 6. Conclusion

*This chapter provides a comprehensive conclusion, summarizing the empirical findings along with highlighting the theoretical contributions of the research. In addition, it explores the practical implications drawn from the conducted study. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the primary limitations of the research and suggests avenues for future research within this field of research.*

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the research problem, emphasizing the need for a deeper exploration of leader-follower dynamics in the context of management consultancy firms with a flat hierarchy. We have addressed how leader-follower dynamics paired with expertise followership is understudied in literature, within management consultancy specifically. Another unique element to the ‘nerdery’ phenomenon is the flat hierarchy and weak direct control, forming a specific and understudied topic. By conducting our study in a management consultancy context with a flat hierarchy, high expectations of self-leadership, and trust, we aim to enrich empirical data to contribute to the understudied ‘nerdery’ phenomenon. The following research question guided this study:

*How does expertise followership influence the leader-follower dynamic in a management consultancy firm with a flat hierarchy?*

### 6.1 Empirical Findings

First, the empirical findings shed light on several key aspects of leadership and dynamics within AxisPeak. A notable aspect of the empirical findings is the absence of traditional management practices and the flat hierarchy of AxisPeak. The departure from traditional management, where leaders instead expect the nerds to take this duty upon themselves, underscores a commitment to empowerment and individual responsibility. It cherishes a leadership that is centered around autonomy, expertise, and personalized approaches, stepping away from traditional control mechanisms. The exploration of autonomy and self-management at AxisPeak revealed a clear emphasis on self-leaders, among both leaders and followers. The autonomous workstyle is considered non-negotiable and closely tied to freedom and trust of expertise. It allows the nerds to reflect and organize their work independently while having access to support and guidance whenever needed. The combination of this individualistic approach and occasional guidance creates an environment of psychological- and emotional safety.

Second, expertise emerged from the findings as a foundational element to AxisPeak, supporting the organization's structure and vision of company-wide expertise development. Expertise is driven by experience and characterized by a positive association with status and knowledge. The cultivation of expertise is considered essential by both leaders and followers, setting it as an objective for the nerds. The nerd character of AxisPeak's workforce is considered a stimulation of one's ability to become an expert. Nerdery is associated with passion, curiosity, and eagerness to learn, providing characteristics that are beneficial in expertise development. As everyone at AxisPeak is considered a nerd, either on a professional- or a personal level, this creates a workforce where everyone is on their way to becoming an expert within the chosen Expertise Area.

Third, even though high autonomy and individual responsibility are present at AxisPeak, the leadership practices are marked by a personalized approach. It is targeted at fostering development, high levels of autonomy, and individual attention, through adjusting the approach per follower. This once more underscores the psychological safety and a sense of emotional availability through acknowledging the personal needs of each of the nerds and adjusting a leadership approach accordingly. This aims to strike a balance between guidance and autonomy, prioritizing the nerd's development while expecting a high degree of self-leadership and accountability in return. It steps away from the traditional leadership styles and instead aligns with transformational- and coaching leadership, prioritizing the nerd's development of followers while expecting a high degree of self-leadership and responsibility in return.

Last, the exploration of control at AxisPeak reveals a nuanced approach where leaders avoid direct control over the nerds, instead focusing on trust through expertise paired with autonomy, expressing weak control. This results in a leader-follower dynamic that is built around equality, where both the leaders and followers are positioned on similar levels in terms of hierarchy. This steps away from a traditional hierarchical structure, underscoring the unique leadership practices and organizational culture of nerdery. The importance of autonomy, expertise, personalized leadership, and trust emerge as key factors that shape the dynamic of contemporary leadership within the company. The emphasis on weak control creates an environment where self-leadership is expected, claiming that there is no such thing as control. Nevertheless, the findings show that control is maintained through other forms, in this case, normative control. By hiring those who match the nerd character, AxisPeak creates a workforce that aligns with the company's vision of expertise development. All respondents seemed unaware of this sense of control, as there was a

clear emphasis on weak control and an inability to control the nerds due to their high degrees of knowledge. As the nerd character tends to thrive in highly autonomous environments, AxisPeak maintains control over its workforce, creating an organizational culture of continuous learning and development. This normative control results in nerds who practice expertise followership. The influence of this expertise followership on the leader-follower dynamic is an equal relationship where psychological safety and expertise development are the core.

As technology continues to shape the landscape of KIFs, future research could explore the role of digital leadership and virtual collaboration in such organizations. This creates an understanding of how leaders navigate autonomy and emotional availability in digital platforming, fostering innovation and offering practical guidance. The influence of the 'nerdery' phenomenon on leader-follower dynamics, paired with a flat hierarchy, shows how normative control plays a role in KIFs. This study addresses the 'nerdery' phenomenon by enhancing theoretical understanding within flat hierarchical nice areas, differing from traditional management consultancy firms. Additionally, by exploring a firm without management, this study contributes to the underexplored area of literature on flat hierarchy and expertise within this specific context. Furthermore, we provide insights into the role of control that emerged as a co-constructor to leadership, organizational culture, and identity, pinpointing how control is not always an obvious factor and can be embodied in the recruitment of, in this case, nerds. Finally, our study contributes rich empirical insights into the dynamics between leaders and expert followers within a flat hierarchy, where expertise is the primary source of power, diverging from traditional leadership patterns.

## **6.2 Theoretical Contributions**

The influence of the 'nerdery' phenomenon on leader-follower dynamics and flat hierarchy sheds light on how normative control plays a role in organizations. However, the concept of expertise followership in KIFs with a flat hierarchy setting, specifically management consultancy, remains relatively underexplored. While general leadership theories have been extensively studied, there has been a lack of empirical data to connect these theories to practices within management consultancy firms. The relevance of contributing to this understudied phenomenon is increasing due to the rapid growth of demand and competition in the KIF-industry in the last decade. Understanding how leadership is evolving in these industries, therefore, increases relevance. Conducting an empirical study in a KIF, specifically in a management consultancy, contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the 'nerdery' phenomenon. The findings of

this study are relevant for management consultancies, especially those in niche areas with specialized expertise, and contribute to the theories of leading expert followers.

This study addresses its research problem and purpose by enhancing theoretical understanding with niche areas or differentiation compared to traditional consultancies. Additionally, by exploring a firm with 'no management', our study contributes to the underexplored area of literature on flat hierarchy and expertise within this specific context. Furthermore, we provide insights into the role of control that emerged as a co-constructor to leadership, organizational culture, and identity, pinpointing how control is not always an obvious factor and can be embodied in the recruitment of, in this case, nerds. Finally, our study contributes rich empirical insights into the dynamics between leaders and expert followers within a flat hierarchy, where expertise is the primary source of power, diverging from traditional leadership patterns. To sum up:

- AxisPeak is an organization without managers, building upon autonomy which is based on a trust in expertise. The nerds at Axis are perceived as capable of managing themselves, creating an environment where self-leadership is considered the norm.
- Expertise is the foundation of AxisPeak as the nerds are expected to be(come) experts. The nerd character is considered suitable due to their eagerness to learn, creating an identity that is likely to thrive in an expertise-focused work environment.
- Axispeak's highly autonomous work environment without direct control is paired with occasional check-ins from the leaders. This creates psychological safety and emotional availability, striking a balance between guidance and autonomy. This leadership approach emphasizes the nerd's development while holding them accountable for their work, supported by weak control.
- Leaders adjust their leadership approach per nerd, creating a personalized style to create the best output.
- Expertise followership influences the leader-follower dynamic by creating an equal relationship with high autonomy. Stepping away from traditional leadership styles, leaders instead take on a guiding role, aligning with transformational- and coaching leadership.
- AxisPeak maintains control through normative control by hiring those with a nerd character, marked by passion and curiosity. The selective recruitment process creates a



workforce that aligns with the autonomous organizational culture and expertise-driven vision.

### **6.3 Implications for Practice**

Our study has shown the importance of autonomy in managing expert followers, specifically in management consultancy firms. It shows how trust serves as a main driver, creating an equal dynamic where leaders serve a coaching role rather than a managerial one. Leaders in this context should consider the impact of expertise on their leadership practices, acknowledging how organizational culture contributes to the employee identity. This can influence the work style and how control is maintained. We have discussed the lack of direct control exercised by leaders to expert followers, emphasizing the expectancy of self-leadership. Leaders instead commit to the empowerment of their followers through transformational- and coaching leadership. The absence of direct control shows a sense of control through normative control. Our study shows how the 'nerdery' phenomenon creates normative control by setting recruitment standards and creating an aligned learning mindset among the workforce. As a result, the nerds do not need direct control, and thrive through coaching support in their journey to becoming experts. This finding shows how normative control can positively influence an organizational culture, creating alignment, instead of solely trapping employees. The 'nerdery' phenomenon shows here a positive influence on the leadership dynamics, personal development, and shared vision.

### **6.4 Limitations**

Upon reflection on this study, we acknowledge certain limitations. The main limitation to consider is the rather small sample size, consisting of ten interviews within an organization of thousands of employees. Therefore, our findings are based on a limited number of perspectives, which may not fully capture the depth of experiences within the organization. However, we decided to mainly focus on Office A, creating already a more complete representing set of data. Also, the total number of respondents had an equal distribution between leaders and followers, creating a balanced representation of perspectives within the study.

Furthermore, as the study is grounded in the interpretivism tradition, we recognize the potential for the researcher's personal biases and subjectivity that influence our interpretations of the data.

While we have been cautious to control these biases and remain an objective focus, it is important to acknowledge that alternative interpretations of the data may exist. Our study provides rich empirical data and insights into the social reality of leadership within a niche expertise management consultancy firm, the depth of our investigation may have been limited by time constraints. As a consequence, some variables may not be explored as in much depth as others.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our study offers valuable and concrete insights into leadership dynamics within management consultancy with a unique context. By shedding light on the unique ‘nerdery’ phenomenon, flat hierarchy, and expertise differentiation, we contribute to a better understanding of leadership in a field where such concepts have been challenging to grasp.

## **6.5 Suggestions for Future Research**

This empirical study has provided valuable insights into leadership practice within the unique concept of flat hierarchical expertise in management consultancy firms. However, while the subject of leadership in KIFs has been explored in the theoretical literature, empirical research on leadership within this context remains largely understudied. Therefore, we advocate for further empirical studies to expand on our findings, particularly focusing how leadership dynamics within the specific context of management consultancy firms.

Additionally, while our study briefly touched upon the influence of organizational culture on leadership, further research is needed to understand the interplay between employee identity and normative control. It is yet to be understood how the nuances of such leadership impact follower behavior, and the other way around.

Furthermore, given the evolving nature of leadership theories and practices, future research could delve into the various leadership styles within KIFs and pinpoint their motivations. Investigating how transformational-, coaching-, and other contemporary leadership approaches manifest and interact within the unique environment of management consultancies would provide valuable insights for practitioners and scholars.

Last, as technology continues to shape the landscape of KIFs, future research could explore the role of digital leadership and virtual collaboration in such organizations. Especially the contribution to networking, autonomy, and support are aspects that further reveal leadership dynamics, within a digital age specifically. It creates an understanding of how leaders navigate the digital era, facilitating teamwork in a remote landscape, and fostering innovation in virtual environments could offer realities of the digital era.

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