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# Navigating through the storm

*The managerial role and leadership during a crisis*

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## **Abstract**

<b>Title</b>	Navigating through the storm: The managerial role and leadership during a crisis
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<b>Purpose</b>	The aim with this study is to gain a deeper understanding of managerial work and its relationship to the nature of leadership in the context of a societal crisis.
<b>Research Question</b>	How do managers make sense of their own role during a crisis and what implications does that have for leadership practices?
<b>Methodology</b>	This research is based on a qualitative research method following a interpretative and abductive approach. The empirical data consists of 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with managers from our case company.
<b>Theoretical Perspectives</b>	The theoretical framework for this study is based on managerial work and a subjectivist perspective on leadership. Further, we draw on six metaphors on leadership as well as including the aspect of emotional intelligence and its relationship to leadership.
<b>Contributions</b>	This study provides a deeper understanding of how changes in managerial work has affected how leadership is talked about in crisis situations. We also contribute to the literature on leadership by our metaphor “leadership as navigation”. The metaphor provides a better understanding of how changes in managerial work have implications for the nature of leadership, as the situation hinders managers’ ability to provide meaning beyond the here and now.
<b>Keywords</b>	Managerial work, Leadership, Emotional intelligence, Metaphors on Leadership, Crisis

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We hope that you enjoy this research, happy reading!

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## Table of Contents

<b>1. Background &amp; problematization</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Purpose & research question	8
1.2 Context for this study	9
1.3 Disposition	10
<b>2. Literature review</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Managerial work	11
2.2 Leadership as a meaning-making process	14
2.2.1 Emotional leadership	15
2.2.2 Metaphors on leadership	16
2.3 Distinction between management and leadership	19
2.4 Leadership in crisis	21
2.5 Chapter summary	21
<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>23</b>
3.1 Philosophical grounding and research approach	23
3.2 Data collection	24
3.2.1 Case company	24
3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews	25
3.2.3 Sampling	25
3.3 Data analysis	26
3.4 Quality considerations	29
3.4.1 Reflexivity	31
3.5 Ethical considerations	31
3.6 Limitations and critique of the study	32
<b>4. Empirical findings and analysis</b>	<b>34</b>
4.1 Background and context	34
4.2 Managers as strategists	35
4.2.1 From strategic to operational	36
4.2.2 Being stuck	38
4.3 Preconditions for effective leadership	39
4.3.1 Setting direction	39
4.3.2 Being present	41
4.3.3 Building trust	44
4.4 Leadership dilemmas	46
4.4.1 The struggle of not knowing	46
4.4.2 The struggle of being present	50

4.4.3 The struggle of retaining trust	52
4.5 Summary of the empirical findings	56
<b>5. Discussion</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1 The interrelationship between managerial work and leadership	57
5.2 Moving towards a new leadership metaphor	60
5.2.1 Setting direction in the here and now	61
5.2.2 Reading a map	62
5.2.3 Dealing with an emotional environment	64
5.3 Leadership as navigation	66
<b>6. Conclusions</b>	<b>68</b>
6.1 Empirical findings	68
6.2 Theoretical contributions	69
6.3 Limitations	70
6.4 Practical implications	71
6.5 Future research	72
<b>Referencelist</b>	<b>73</b>

## 1. Background & problematization

*“You can’t come to work and have an agenda and expect it to last. [...]. It is a lot more, a lot more reactive instead of proactive work during these circumstances. You are down filling up shelves and then you try to have a meeting and then you have to cancel something because other stuff comes up that is more prioritized or something else that is on fire. So it is pretty hard to find a clear direction forward at the moment”*. - Jessica, manager (Interview, April 12, 2021)

A crisis can be defined as a situation or event that affects society as a whole and threatens our normal way of living. Crises can be caused by various factors, for example climate change, terrorism and viruses (MSB, 2011). In the beginning of 2020, a virus began spreading around the world and on the 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization classified it as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has since affected the way of living for both individuals and society. Throughout the year, the global COVID-19 crisis has forced organizations to adapt rapidly to guidelines, recommendations, and restrictions that have affected the everyday work of individuals within organizations. According to MSB (2011) all organizations must take their own responsibility in order to deal with crisis situations. This affects management in organizations as they are fundamental for the organization's continued existence (Watson, 1994 cited in Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis has put a lot of pressure on management in organizations to adapt accordingly and implement new working modes. Whilst at the same time having to deal with rapid changes due to guidelines, restrictions and recommendations, managers also have to focus on their ordinary working tasks that come with the managerial role which, according to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016), are complex in itself.

Further, the literature on managerial work is extensive and yet the managerial role is explained as complex, attractive and to some extent unclear (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Nevertheless, the image of a manager being a strategist that is to provide a clear vision and direction for the employees still dominates (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). However, according to Mintzberg (1973) managerial work includes maintaining the communication

relationships between the groups of superiors, the external environment and their subordinates in order to uphold the strategies. Even if the managerial role is perceived as desirable, research has shown that it is usual for managers to distance themselves from management (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016) and rather emphasize themselves as leaders. In research it is common to make a distinction between leadership and management, where the former is about creating stability while the latter concerns movement and change (Kotter, 1990). According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) the development of managerial work and leadership takes place in interpersonal interactions where processes, interpretations, relationships and situation-specific contexts are essential. In addition, many managers see leadership as an important part of their managerial role (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). However, leadership is not always necessarily based on a formal role, but partly on a formal managerial position (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017) which will be the focus in this study.

The core of leadership can be understood as influencing ideas, meanings and understandings in order to provide direction (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The ultimate aim with leadership is to manage the on-going meaning-making by understanding and providing sense to the current situation both within and outside of the organization (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018). In addition, leaders deal with the overall purpose and meaning, going beyond the here and now (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, due to the on-going pandemic the current situation both within and outside organizations have become more uncertain and ambiguous. This calls for more sense-making on an everyday basis as sensemaking occurs in situations of equivocality (Weick, 1995). Leaders have therefore needed to manage much more meaning as to why the situation of a crisis has implications on leadership. How leadership has changed due to the ongoing crisis therefore needs further attention in research. In order to understand the complex nature of leadership, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for the importance of seeing leadership through the lens of some other phenomenon. Viewing leadership through metaphors is relevant as metaphors shape the way we are thinking and how we are talking about the social world (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Earlier literature highlights the importance of researching how metaphors are being used and talked about in order to understand and uncover the language of leadership (see e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Also, how leaders see themselves and others can be understood through the language of leadership.

In times of crises leadership can make a difference (Pillai, 2013) and the role of leaders during crises has therefore been heavily discussed. For example, the on-going pandemic has shown that a leader must show confidence and commitment whilst making decisions during extreme circumstances (Maak, Pless & Wohlgezogen, 2021). On the other hand, accepting the uncertainty facilitates problem solving (Miller, 2020). Further, an effective leader in crises must have good communication skills, clarify the vision and have the ability to take care of others (Klann, 2003) and also possess a purpose, courage and trust (Boltax, 2010). In addition, when faced with uncertainty, leaders must learn from lessons from the past in order to move forward (Boltax, 2010). In the current situation with the on-going COVID-19 pandemic many leaders experience situations or problems that have never occurred before and we therefore need to enhance our knowledge on leadership in the context of crisis, as past experiences are limited in this situation.

The pandemic has an effect on both one's private life and one's working environment which creates an emotionally charged climate for everyone involved. Existing literature highlights how one's experiences of a crisis situation cannot be separated from the one undergoing it (Habermas, 1975). Thus, the importance of focusing on emotions and how it has a powerful effect on behaviour cannot be ignored (Manz, 2015). Many researchers argue for how a key leadership skill is the ability to manage the emotions of the group you lead (Humphrey, 2002; Jin, 2010; Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002) as well managing your own emotions (Humphrey, 2002). This is shown to be especially important when facing uncertain and ambiguous situations (Humphrey, 2002; Pescosolido, 2002; Dotlich, Cairo and Rhinesmith, 2009). Within prevalent literature (e.g. see Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) there are metaphors of leadership that explain appropriate leadership types in crisis situations. For example, there is much emphasis on how leaders are to take control and provide simplicity and direction in a difficult situation (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001 cited in Spicer, 2011). However, within the literature on metaphors of leadership, little attention has been given to the contextual characteristics of a crisis, such as the emotionally charged environment, as to why there is a need for a deeper understanding of the nature of leadership in crisis.



As shown, the importance of leadership in crisis has been heavily discussed where prevalent research emphasizes how a leader is supposed to act and behave (e.g. see Klann, 2003, Boltax, 2010; Dotlich, Cairo & Rhinesmith, 2009). However, as management is fundamental for organizations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016) the role of managers cannot be ignored. As previously mentioned, the distinction between leadership and management has received much attention (e.g. see Kotter, 1990; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Further, if considering how the development of the relationship occurs in interpersonal interactions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016), one cannot ignore the implications that managerial work has on leadership and vice versa. However, within established literature it is common to focus on the role of the leader in times of crisis whilst not considering how leadership is partly based on a formal managerial role whose managerial work might have changed when faced with a crisis. We therefore argue for the need of advancing our knowledge of how changes in managerial work has affected how leadership is talked about in times of crises and its implication for practices.

### **1.1 Purpose & research question**

The distinction between management and leadership has been studied for many years (e.g. see Kotter, 1990; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), however when studying the context of a crisis it has been more common to focus on the role of the leader and not the manager (e.g. see Dotlich, Cairo and Rhinesmith, 2009; Humphrey, 2002; Klann, 2003; Boltax; 2010). Nevertheless, how the two concepts relate to one another in the context of a crisis has received little attention in research. Thus, we see the need for further theoretical development on how a context-specific event has implications on the relationship between managerial work and leadership. The purpose with this study is therefore to enhance our knowledge on the nature of leadership and its relationship to managerial work in the context of a societal crisis.

This study is drawn on a subjective approach to leadership, understanding it as a meaning-making process (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and an asymmetrical relationship between the leader and the follower (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Studying leadership through metaphors is argued to uncover the language of leadership, which is important as it will provide important insights to an already complex phenomenon (Fairhurst, 2011). Different metaphors on leadership already exist within the field (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Alvesson &

Spicer, 2011; Hatch, Kostera & Kozminski, 2005), however, the metaphors are not exhaustive, and especially not in the context of a societal crisis. In order to fulfil the purpose, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

*How do managers make sense of their own role during a crisis and what implications does that have for leadership practices?*

This study is relevant as research has shown that leadership is an important aspect when facing situations with high levels of uncertainty (Boltax, 2010; Maak, Pless & Wohlgezogen, 2021; Pillai, 2013; Klann, 2003). With this study we aim to enhance our knowledge on how leadership changes in the context of crisis, in this case during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is universal, but it is still important to acknowledge that the crisis has affected organizational contexts differently. Nevertheless, we argue that the result will be beneficial for both practitioners and scholars as we will discover various interpretations of the phenomenon.

## **1.2 Context for this study**

Based on the purpose of this study it is important to provide the reader with a contextual background. As the thesis aims to examine a phenomenon in relation to a societal crisis, the definition of a crisis must be provided. In contemporary language it is not unusual to use the term crisis to define various events in today's society (Gilbert, 2019). How crises are defined today has its roots in historical events such as wars, diseases or financial crises (Milstein, 2015). However, there is still ambiguity about what a crisis really means but there is consensus regarding it involving some kind of struggle, contest, judgment, or decision (Milstein, 2015). Gilbert (2019) argues how a crisis can be diagnosed as historical events that contain challenges, where involved actors must take action, make decisions or come to some sort of understanding. A crisis is therefore in need of a well thought out application of human normativity, creativity, and planning (Gilbert, 2019). However, Pearson and Clair (1998) argue that crises are highly uncertain, complex and emotional events where people have limited time for processing information and taking informed decisions. The literature on crises facilitates an understanding for the organizational setting in our case study, where the organization has been forced to adapt to an ongoing societal crisis that has affected the work within the organization.

### **1.3 Disposition**

This thesis is divided into six chapters: *Background and Problematization*, *Literature Review*, *Methodology*, *Empirical Findings and Analysis*, *Discussion and Conclusion*. In the first chapter the background and problematization for the study will be presented. The second chapter is a literature review around the central concepts for this study, which is managerial work, leadership, metaphors on leadership, emotional intelligence and its relation to leadership and crises. The third chapter includes chosen methodology for this study, including research tradition influenced by, data collection, data analysis, quality considerations and a discussion around ethics. In chapter four the empirical findings and analysis are presented, followed by a discussion in chapter five. Lastly, conclusions and recommendations for future studies are put forward in chapter six.

## **2. Literature review**

This chapter will introduce the relevant literature that is used for this research. The chapter starts with introducing the literature on managerial work in order to deepen our understanding of what it entails. We then move on to define leadership and draw on 6 different metaphors with the aim to capture the complex phenomena. The section on leadership also contains a discussion of emotional leadership. Lastly, the concept of crisis is discussed by linking it to management and leadership.

### **2.1 Managerial work**

Earlier studies highlight the managerial role as desirable despite its complex nature and unclarity regarding what the role entails (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Within classical theories, a manager is supposed to handle issues such as planning, organizing, coordination, commanding, and controlling (Fayol, 1916 cited in Mintzberg, 1973). The work of Henri Fayol was further adapted by Luther Gulick who established seven elements as the major duties of a manager which he gave the acronym POSDCORB (Gulick & Urwick, 1937). The acronym stands for the following activities:

- Planning, that is the creation of an outline for what needs to be done and methods for how to accomplish the organization's purpose
- Organizing, is the establishment of a formal structure of authority through which work subdivisions are created, defined and coordinated for the organizational purpose.
- Staffing, that is the process of recruiting, retaining and developing staff to maintain the favorable conditions of work.
- Directing, the managers continuous task of being a leader of the organization while making decisions and embodying them in specific and general instructions
- Co-ordinating, that is the crucial aspect of interrelating various parts of the work
- Reporting, the manager's obligation to inform the ones responsible. It also involves the managers to be informed themselves as well as informing their subordinates through records, research, and inspections.
- Budgeting, that is the responsibility of financial planning, accounting, and control.

(Gulick & Urwick, 1937).

Classical theorists aimed to create universal management principles that are characterized by rationalism and a top-down approach where the senior management has a strong influence on organizational activities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Even if managerial tasks differ when comparing top management to middle or lower-level management, most managers are to some extent responsible for the issues highlighted within the POSDCORB acronym (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In line with this, Kotter (1990) highlights how management is to create consistency and stability to key dimensions of the organization such as profitability and quality. Critiques of the classical school often highlight the limited information regarding what managers actually do (Mintzberg, 1973).

Within more practical traditions, Lindblom (1959) argues that the fixed view of managers as rational decision makers must change as it does not consider the manager's inability to handle complex problems. Instead, managers are more likely to be remedial incrementalists or satisfiers than heroic figures (Lindblom, 1959). In addition, Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue that managers must deal with issues concerning concrete operational planning and handle practical problems when necessary. In order for organizations to function effectively, areas such as resource allocation, division of labor, budgeting, appropriate working schedules and financial reports must be dealt with. These are not to be marginalized and prioritized as insignificant administration (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In accordance, Mintzberg (1973) suggests that managerial work is characterized by brevity, variety and fragmentation. As a consequence of managerial work taking place under severe time pressure, managers are more likely to be action oriented rather than analytical and reflexive (Mintzberg, 1973).

Despite the proven oversimplification of managerial work within classical theories, the image of managerial work as organized, clear, and rational still dominates (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) further argue that the majority of management literature still places a great emphasis on how managers are to be strategists, planners, and analysts. The authors (2016) highlight how it is not uncommon for academics and practitioners to view the manager as “the Great, decisive Strategist, who makes his or her impact on the business” (p. 29). In contrast, Mintzberg (1973) highlights how strategies most often are

developed through the interplay between the individual organization's environment and the involved actors. Here, managers are to maintain the communication relationships between the groups of superiors, outsiders and subordinates (Mintzberg, 1973).

The image of the manager being the link between complex networks of relationships can be extended by Carlson's (1951) study of how executives are the puppets in a puppet show with hundreds of people pulling the strings and forcing the managers to act in various ways. Moreover, managers are often argued to be trapped in a middle position that is structured by expectations from both superiors and subordinates (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Mintzberg, 1973). Most often there are various and contradictory interests which the manager needs to deal with (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Thus, managerial work often involves the creation of alliances, dealing with negotiations and conflicts and further, to be able to manage moral dilemmas (Mintzberg, 1973).

Mintzberg (1973) argues that the manager is an input-output system where authority and status enable interpersonal relationships that lead to input in terms of information. Later on, the information leads to outputs such as information and decisions. Mintzberg (1973) further argues how managers' output only is measurable in terms of verbally transmitted information. The view of managers as transmitters of information make their communicative ability essential. Research has shown that managers spend much time communicating with their subordinates through various channels, such as mails, telephone calls, scheduled meetings, and unscheduled meetings (Mintzberg, 1973). The various channels of communication involve dealing with negotiations, strategy-making, and ceremonial and social events that are time-consuming, further hindering the manager's ability to engage in routine tasks (Mintzberg, 1973).

However, Carlson (1951) argues that managers have the ability to delegate much of their work in order to avoid interruptions. However in his study, Mintzberg (1973) illustrates how managers have a prominent need for current information which makes gossip, speculations, and hearsay a beneficial part for transmitting pressing information. Much of a manager's power derives from the access to many sources of information where the manager is to make more effective decisions than his/her employees (Mintzberg, 1973). The difficulties with disseminating

information to others have consequences for the managers ability to delegate the responsibility for decision making. Resultantly, the managers are fully responsible for the strategy-making system which induces the managers to take on a heavy workload (Mintzberg, 1973).

## **2.2 Leadership as a meaning-making process**

The study of leadership is one of the most fragmented topics in research and according to Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018) there is still no clear definition of what leadership actually means. The early literature on leadership relates back to the early 1900s where most of the research was based on quantitative research and the effectiveness of leaders. Classical theories on leadership that evolved from these studies focused on traits, personality, skills, style and intelligence. Overall, this mainstream approach focused on what makes an effective leader, ignoring the role of followers and only looking at leadership as a top-down influence process (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018).

Several researchers have been criticizing this psychological perspective on leadership claiming that the socially constructed and dynamic nature is being ignored (Grint, 1997 cited in Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018). Two of the critics are Smircich and Morgan (1982) who take a social constructivist approach to leadership, arguing how leadership can be understood as a meaning-making process. The authors (1982) argue that leadership is not only about acting and behaving, rather it should be understood as a process of power-based reality construction. Pye (2005) goes further, arguing that understanding leadership as a sensemaking process can enhance our understanding of what happens in the daily doing of leading.

The ultimate aim with leadership is therefore to manage the active and on-going sensemaking as well as meaning-making (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018). This can be explained as one's ability to understand and give sense to what is going on both within and outside of the organization to the group the leader leads. One way of doing this is by using metaphors, storytelling and mythology as a meaning-making tool in organizations (Hatch, Kostera & Kozminski, 2005). Drawing on this Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue that leadership can be defined as influencing ideas, meanings and understandings in order to provide direction. It is further explained as an asymmetrical relationship and often based on someone in

formal managerial positions with greater experience and knowledge. Also, leadership depends on followership as it needs people who are willing to be led in order for leadership to be carried out (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011).

### **2.2.1 Emotional leadership**

Leaders' social ability has been thoroughly researched within the past half century, with Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2013) arguing that the part of our brain responsible for handling emotions also handles our ability to act effectively and behave in a socially acceptable manner. This is further supported by both Druskat and Wolff (2001) and Goleman (1998) who express how the individual's emotional intelligence is at least as important as one's cognitive abilities to be successful. In research, emotional intelligence is either treated as a trait or an ability (Ali, Buzdar, Perveen & Ramzan, 2016) and how it is conceptualized therefore varies. For example, some researchers treat emotional intelligence as an ability with individual differences (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 1999), whereas others have included factors such as personality and motivation (Bastian, Burns & Nettelbeck, 2005). However, both views are built on the same core, where emotional intelligence is defined as "one's abilities to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and in others" (Goleman, 2001, p.2)

Humphrey (2002) argues that empathy is essential for both emotional intelligence and the emergence of leadership. Empathy is defined as "the desire to understand others' feelings and the ability to do so would naturally contribute to both pattern recognition and problem solving" (Humphrey, 2002, p. 496). Jin (2010) also states that one of the most crucial leadership skills is the one of emotion. According to Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) leadership is an emotional process where leaders are to display emotions with the attempt to evoke emotions among the people within the group they lead. Managing people's emotions is to be considered as one of the main ways leaders are to influence performance (Humphrey, 2002). Pescosolido (2002) also proposes how leaders are to be viewed as managers of their group's emotion and how there are two ways to accomplish that. Firstly, during times of ambiguity, leaders need to interpret the emotional state of the group and then develop an appropriate emotional response that matches the group's needs. Secondly, by creating shared emotional experiences, leaders will increase group solidarity and morale (Pescosolido, 2002). Based on this discussion, it is important to



consider the aspect of emotional intelligence when studying leadership in crisis.

Within many leadership models there are often two different types of leaders that are central, namely the task and the relationship leaders (Humphrey, 2002). Firstly, Humphrey (2002) describes task leaders to be more focused on assignments that are cognitive in nature, such as organizing and planning. When facing confusing times, the leader must have a strong task leadership to successfully scan the environment, grasp the key elements and develop a plan or a vision that is to be transmitted to the followers (Humphrey, 2002). This is also in accordance with McWhinney (1997), who argues that leaders must set challenging goals as an imperative during an upheaval or a turmoil in order to convince the employees that the goals are achievable. Secondly, Kellet, Humphrey and Sleeth (2002) provide the assumption that empathy would be central for the relationship-oriented leader. In contrast, the authors (2002) illustrated how empathy did not correlate with the complex task performance. This is in line with how most researchers follow the premise of how empathy only works through relationship-oriented leadership (Humphrey, 2002).

It has become more common for leadership scholars to take a more balanced approach that highlights the importance of both cognitive and emotional processes. This is considered especially important during times of crisis when people are anxious and uncertain about what to do (Humphrey, 2002). In those situations, the leader must have a strong emotional self-management to persevere under severe circumstances (Humphrey, 2002). This is of significant importance when facing difficult goals or encountering problems where one needs to maintain confidence to overcome one's frustration. This paper aims to increase the understanding of how leadership is talked about in times of crisis. Thus, it is important to consider the emotions of those that are involved in the crisis.

### **2.2.2 Metaphors on leadership**

Due to the complex nature of leadership, how people understand leadership differs, and one way of understanding leadership is through metaphors, meaning seeing leadership through the lens of some other phenomenon (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) further explain how metaphors are important as they shape our thinking and how we talk about the social world.

The authors (2011) present six metaphors emphasizing “leadership as setting moral example, developing people, nurturing wellbeing, making firm decisions and providing directions, emphasizing efficiency and delivery, and kicking ass when needed” (p.10). These are captured under the names the saint, the gardener, the buddy, the commander, the cyborg and the bully.

First of all, the leader as a saint provides moral guidelines (Alvesson, 2011b). Furthermore, within this metaphor there is a strong assumption that leaders with high integrity and honesty are effective leaders. Some moral leaders have extraordinary strength, whilst others sacrifice themselves for the goal of the business, which can help build trust. A third version of a moral leader is someone that is not driven by selfish motives but rather a greater cause for the development of the business. Another aspect is the moral leader as someone who is open, honest and helps increase employee’s motivation (Alvesson, 2011b).

The second metaphor is leaders as gardeners which is someone who helps people improve and develop (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011). The role of the leader to facilitate growth is popular within the leadership literature where you can read about, for example, coaching leadership, authentic leadership and self-leadership. Huzzard and Spoelstra (2011) explain how leaders who see themselves as coaches often present themselves as someone who helps others rather than emphasizing their own leadership abilities. Another aspect within this metaphor is self-leadership, where the aim is to inspire others into self-leadership which leads to superleadership. Self-leadership is explained as to “lead or manage one’s inner life as the basis for leading others” (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011, p.79). To lead yourself also involves motivating yourself as well as managing work tasks that are normally not motivating to undertake (Manz, 1986). Manz (2015) further suggests that self-leadership strategies are applicable during self-influence of emotions as emotions have a powerful effect on behaviour. Emotional self-leadership proved to be beneficial for facilitating an open and honest atmosphere for others at work. Further, emotional self-leadership relates to the theory of emotional intelligence, however, the field is still limited and deserves more attention in research (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

The third aspect within the gardener metaphor is the view of authenticity (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011). In contrast to this, Ibarra (2015) argues for the paradox of authenticity. The author claims that in a complex and changing world leaders are expected to take on different roles. Trying to stick to one coherent self can therefore hinder your growth. Ibarra (2015) argues that there are three problems with authenticity, the first one being the difficulty to stay true to yourself as we have many versions of oneself. The second problem is being transparent with everything you feel and do as it might result in lower credibility among followers and the last one relates to only making value-based decisions when moving roles or gaining more responsibility. However, leaders as gardeners, or as Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue, as therapists put a lot of emphasis on listening as this is assumed to improve well-being and emotional status.

The third metaphor, leaders as buddies, is someone who creates a workplace where people enjoy themselves and others. Svenningsson and Blom (2011) explain how activities such as cheering, including, safeguarding and being there for people are activities that the buddy takes part in. This could for example include greeting people on their birthdays, including employees in meetings, acting as a shield between organizational levels and being observant to employee's well-being. Leading as a buddy might increase productivity and facilitate organizational change as these activities create strong bonds between the leader and the follower. However, some leaders neglect this view of being a buddy, arguing that leadership is about making harsh decisions and putting high demands on followers. This relates to the metaphor of leaders as commanders (Spicer, 2011). Leading by commanding includes creating a powerful example for others to be inspired by and can be accomplished in various ways. For example, leading through action and creating fear to motivate people to get things done. Even though this view of leadership does not really correlate with organizations today that emphasize care and engagement, research shows that many leaders today have this view of themselves. This type of leadership can however be argued to sometimes be appropriate. Weick & Sufcliffe (2001, cited in Spicer, 2011) argue that especially in crisis situations people tend to seek simplicity and direction, which a commanding leader can provide by being harsh and taking action. This view of leadership is problematic as organizational situations are humbler and the view of leading as a commander therefore becomes unrealistic. It is also very authoritarian and relates more to management than leadership and is characterized by masculinity (Spicer, 2011).

The last two metaphors take on a less person-centred approach. Firstly, leadership as a cyborg is about underscoring rationality and standing for efficiency to deliver results (Muhr, 2011). The cyborg appears to be part man and part machine and sets new standards but is not as military-like as the commander. (Muhr, 2011). Characteristics associated with the cyborg is self-confidence whilst struggling accepting followers who have different opinions than themselves, they are also seductive in nature and do not show their real emotions (Muhr, 2011). The last metaphor includes intimidating people and providing sanctions and is referred to as leaders as bullies (Karreman, 2011). By being a bully, you undermine, exclude and silence others by for example humiliating and intimidating subordinates. Lastly, what is important to keep in mind is that the metaphors are not stable, and some leaders may move between being a commander, a saint and a gardener, whilst others have a leadership style that makes it harder to adjust (Fairhurst, 2011).

Researching how metaphors are being used and talked about is needed as it will uncover the language of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). The language of leadership tells us about how leaders see themselves and others. However, one should not take for granted that how leaders talk about how they lead is actually how they lead and vice versa. Further, metaphor analysis provides an interesting perspective on how leadership is contextualized (Oberlechner & Mayer-Schönberger, 2002). It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the metaphor approach. The literature on metaphor is not exhaustive, however according to Carpenter (2008) one needs to consider the aspect of the metaphors being misleading or inappropriate. The misuse of metaphors might lead to misrepresentation of the data or simplification of a complex phenomenon and one therefore need to use metaphors with careful considerations (Carpenter, 2008).

### **2.3 Distinction between management and leadership**

It is common to describe people in leadership positions as managers, suggesting leadership and management are interchangeable, which according to Kotter (1990) is completely misleading. When making a distinction between management and leadership, management is most often denounced in comparison to leadership (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). As mentioned earlier, management is argued to bring order and consistency to essential organizational

dimensions such as quality and profitability (Kotter, 1990) and managers undertake activities such as planning, staffing, coordinating and controlling results (Gulick & Urwick, 1937; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In contrast, leadership is set up in a more positive light and often talked about in terms of developing future-oriented visions and coaching people towards that future by influencing meanings, ideas and understandings. More explicitly, Kotter (1990) argues that management is about stability while leadership is about movement.

Both leadership and management include an asymmetrical relationship between the leader and the follower or the manager and the subordinate (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, within leadership the inequality is most often based on a voluntary submission. Another similarity is that both roles involve deciding what is next and creating networks and relationships that can accomplish the set agenda (Kotter, 1990). However, despite these similarities there are distinct differences. For example, the part of direction setting within leadership tends to focus on longer time frames, such as the big picture, while tasks of the management have a time frame ranging from a few months to a couple of years (Kotter, 1990). If management and leadership are practiced effectively, the combination can accomplish a successful result (Kotter, 1990).

Even if management is fundamental for the majority of organizations, it is common for managers to want to be recognized as leaders due to the glorified portrayal of leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). However, leadership is not as often practiced as it is preached (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Instead, the authors (2017) argue that people most often focus on decisions, behaviour and outcomes, all tasks related to managerial work, rather than tasks that are more strongly associated with leadership. However, even if the distinction between management and leadership has received much attention (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Kotter, 1990, Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016), there is still insufficient information concerning what implications a context specific event has on the relationship between managerial work and leadership. Especially, in the context of a crisis research has focused on the importance of leadership which will be further discussed in the next section.

## **2.4 Leadership in crisis**

In volatile and unpredictable situations, Dotlich, Cairo and Rhinesmith (2009) argue how leaders must be able to anticipate, understand, analyze and respond to new strategic directions. The authors (2009) further highlight the importance of using the heart to see the world from various perspectives and being courageous while making tough decisions that are based on clear values. In sum, these qualities are referred to as navigation tools which are necessary while facing uncertain situations (Dotlich, Cairo & Rhinesmith, 2009). Moreover, Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) argue that managers' cognitive structures, which means their systems of beliefs and values direct their actions thereby strongly influence the actions of the organizations.

Klann (2003) emphasizes three critical skills for a leader to have in order to have a positive impact on the emotionally charged climate that a crisis is categorized by: communication, clarity of vision and values and the ability to care for others. Klann's (2003) argument increases relevance when comparing it to Habermas' (1975) statement about how an individual's interpretation of a crisis cannot be separated from the crisis itself. Drawing upon Klann's (2003) argument, the role of the manager is highly important when facing an uncertain situation. In times of uncertainty, leaders must possess a purpose, courage, and trust in order to provide clear direction (Boltax, 2010). Research has shown that leaders must reflect on and learn from lessons of the past in order to move forward in crisis (Boltax, 2010). However, there is no information regarding how a leader is to act when there are no lessons from the past. Additionally, Miller (2020) states that should leaders accept the uncertainty, doing so would facilitate an improved ability to focus on the present, thereby enhancing problem solving.

## **2.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter began with a review around the managerial role and work literature as we are interested in the formal managerial position. Our discussion highlights how the focus in literature on the managerial role has been on managers as strategists and planners. We then move on to the concept of leadership as many managers emphasize leadership as a central part of their role (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). In our section on leadership, we discuss how leadership can be understood as a meaning-making process (Smircich and Morgan, 1982).

Additionally, we draw on the concept of emotional intelligence as researchers within the subject argue that managing peoples' emotions should be considered as an essential leadership ability (Jin, 2010), and especially during times characterized by uncertainty (Humphrey, 2002; Pescosolido, 2002). In order to grasp the fragmented literature on leadership we draw on 6 metaphors of leadership that have been presented by (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Further, we examined the distinction between management and leadership and linked it to crises. Within the field, existing research is limited in terms of how managerial work changes in the context of a societal crisis and its relationship to how leadership is talked about. Also, little attention has been given to its implications for practice, thus creating a gap in the research.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter starts with a description of our philosophical grounding and research approach. Further, the chapter continues by outlining our data collection including both collection method and sampling method. A description of the analysis process follows, and the chapter finishes by discussing the quality of the study as well as ethical considerations taken into account.

#### **3.1 Philosophical grounding and research approach**

In regards to the purpose of exploring and understanding the manager's perception of their own role during crises, this thesis is built on a qualitative approach. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) a qualitative method is appropriate when trying to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed by the research participants. As we are interested in managers' experiences and interpretations rather than measurable data, a qualitative approach is more preferable than a quantitative one as the latter is more concerned with numbers in order to generalize results to wider populations (Bryman and Bell, 2017; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Further, the starting point of this study is human interpretation as to why we have a clear motive for engaging in qualitative research since the phenomenon cannot be addressed without using qualitative material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Considering the starting point of human interpretation, the study is influenced by an interpretative tradition for developing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2018). To understand managers' perceptions of their own role in the ongoing pandemic, we have interpreted their socially constructed reality as expressed in interviews and therefore taken an interpretative approach. Further, this research is influenced by symbolic interactionism as we are interested in the development of the role of self (Prasad, 2018). One's self-image is central in symbolic interactionism and affects how meaning is assigned to objects and events. Prasad (2018) further explains how these self-images relate to different roles we take on in society which relates to certain expectations of behaviour in social positions and becomes our source for constructing reality. One's identity will therefore influence one's sensemaking of actions, events or situations and, resultantly, is relevant for this study to enable a better understanding of the phenomenon. However, we still maintained an awareness of how our pre-understanding of



the context has affected our interpretation (Prasad, 2018) which will be more closely examined in the section of trustworthiness.

As the thesis investigates the managers' subjective interpretations of their reality, one must be open to being directed by the narratives of the interviewees. However, before collecting the empirical data we conducted a draft of a literature review on the topic we wanted to study. Considering the ongoing pandemic and our personal interest in leadership and management we found it interesting to further investigate how managers make sense of their own role during the crisis. Drawing upon this, we started to search for potential theories that could be used for analyzing the material. By doing this, the study became characterized by an abductive approach. Abduction starts with the application of theory, then observing a surprising fact and lastly articulating a new theory that resolves the surprise (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This approach has allowed us to move back and forth between the empirical material and the theory. Drawing upon the abductive approach, we have modified our research problem so that it better fits the literature review and the collected empirical data along the way. This is in line with how Styhre (2013) advocates for "research problems as moving targets" (p.33), which, while challenging, have been beneficial for the final result as research in itself should be seen as a circular process. Moreover, this has enabled us to work in a more unprejudiced manner and let the interviewees' answers direct the study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

### **3.2 Data collection**

This section outlines the data collection for the study. The data collection was carried out via in depth semi-structured interviews and the sampling method goes in line with a purposive method, both of which will be presented clearly below.

#### **3.2.1 Case company**

The company for this study originates from Europe and operates within the retail industry. The company has for the last couple of years up until now been in a huge transformation going from a more traditional retail company to a more of an omni-channel business. A transformation that has been catalyzed by the ongoing pandemic. During the last year, the company has been forced to adapt to governmental restrictions and demands from society in a much higher phase than

before due to the pandemic which made the company suitable to study based on our purpose. The specific organization is not of interest per se and has therefore been anonymized.

### **3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews**

Kvale (1996) argues how semi-structured interviews enable examination and interpretation of the interviewees' subjective life worlds. Semi-structured interviews were therefore considered the most appropriate method in order to collect data for this study. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility which is described by Alvesson (2011a) as important since interview studies are about being open to new, interesting findings as the study unfolds. The questions asked were therefore open-ended which enabled the interviewees to expand on subjects they considered important (Bryman & Bell, 2013). The semi-structured interviews also provided richer and more detailed answers than a quantitative or structured interview would have done (Bryman, 2011).

Before conducting the interviews, an interview guide was created consisting of a few themes regarding the managerial role, leadership, work practices and the pandemic. The questions were not always asked in the same order and the follow-up questions differed between the interviews as well, as we tried to stay open and follow the interviewee. To minimize the risk of missing out on important aspects and follow-up questions, both researchers participated in all interviews. The tasks in the interviews were split between us. One focused on taking notes and observing as well as adding some follow-up questions, whilst the other took on the role as interviewer and led the interview. The interviews started with giving a short introduction to the study and informing the interviewee of their anonymity. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees permission which enabled us to focus on the interviewee rather than having to write everything down and possibly miss something important (Bryman, 2011), as well as to be able to transcribe the interview and sort the material (Rennstan & Wästerfors, 2018).

### **3.2.3 Sampling**

Participants for the study were contacted either in person or by email. The sampling therefore goes in line with a purposive sampling method where participants were contacted strategically as they were considered relevant for this research (Bryman, 2011). Participants were contacted

based on two criteria: they currently hold a managerial position within the organization, and they held a managerial position prior to the pandemic as well, although not always in the same team. We also made sure that the sample of interviewees covered different departments and functions in the organization in order to get as rich empirical material as possible. Furthermore, the interviewees varied in age and gender but that was not taken into consideration in our analysis as we were not interested in making any comparison between gender or age. The study consisted of eleven interviews with managers from different departments and levels. The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and were all conducted in Swedish. The citations from the interviews were then translated into English where the aim was to translate as accurately as possible without altering the meaning of the quotes.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The analytical process can be argued to have been an ongoing process as the discussion of interesting aspects of the thesis started already after conducting the first interview. Some of the questions in the interviews were adjusted accordingly after the first interviews. As mentioned above, all interviews were being transcribed in order to capture all important information and details. Further, our analysis process goes in line with the method provided by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) called sorting, reducing and arguing. As the interviews provided us with a large amount of empirical material and the fact that “qualitative material never arrives at the analyst’s desk already sorted” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 69) we had to start by bringing order to the material. When sorting the material codes and categories that recurred throughout the material were identified. Our coding process involved different stages as we were inspired by the method provided by Corbin and Strauss (2008). The first stage is explained as an open and brainstorming approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) which allowed us to consider various possibilities in the material. The first-order coding was mainly done whilst transcribing the material which we then afterwards discussed with one another. Here, we identified some key concepts, terms and metaphors that were being used by the interviewees, for example the feeling of being stuck in a round-about.

Also, in order to find unexpected angles during the dialogue with the material the process included searching for breakdowns, which can be explained as the process of finding clashes

between theoretical assumptions and interpretations of the empirical material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This helped to bring order in the material and identify recurring themes early on in the data analysis process. The next step in our analysis process relates to the problem of representation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) as we knew that all material could not be used in the study. We therefore reduced the material to the most recurring themes that we identified in the material and that were considered most valuable for the study. This is also in line with Corbin and Strauss' (2008) second stage called axial coding, where codes from the open coding were grouped and linked to broader themes. This stage also involved acknowledging theories and concepts that might help explain the phenomenon (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). This was followed by a third stage of coding, which was more selective and “a process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 cited in Styhre, 2013, p. 59). Inspired by Corbin and Strauss (2008), our coding process helped build the data structure for this thesis (see figure 3.1) which facilitates a better understanding of how we moved from raw data to terms and themes in the analysis (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

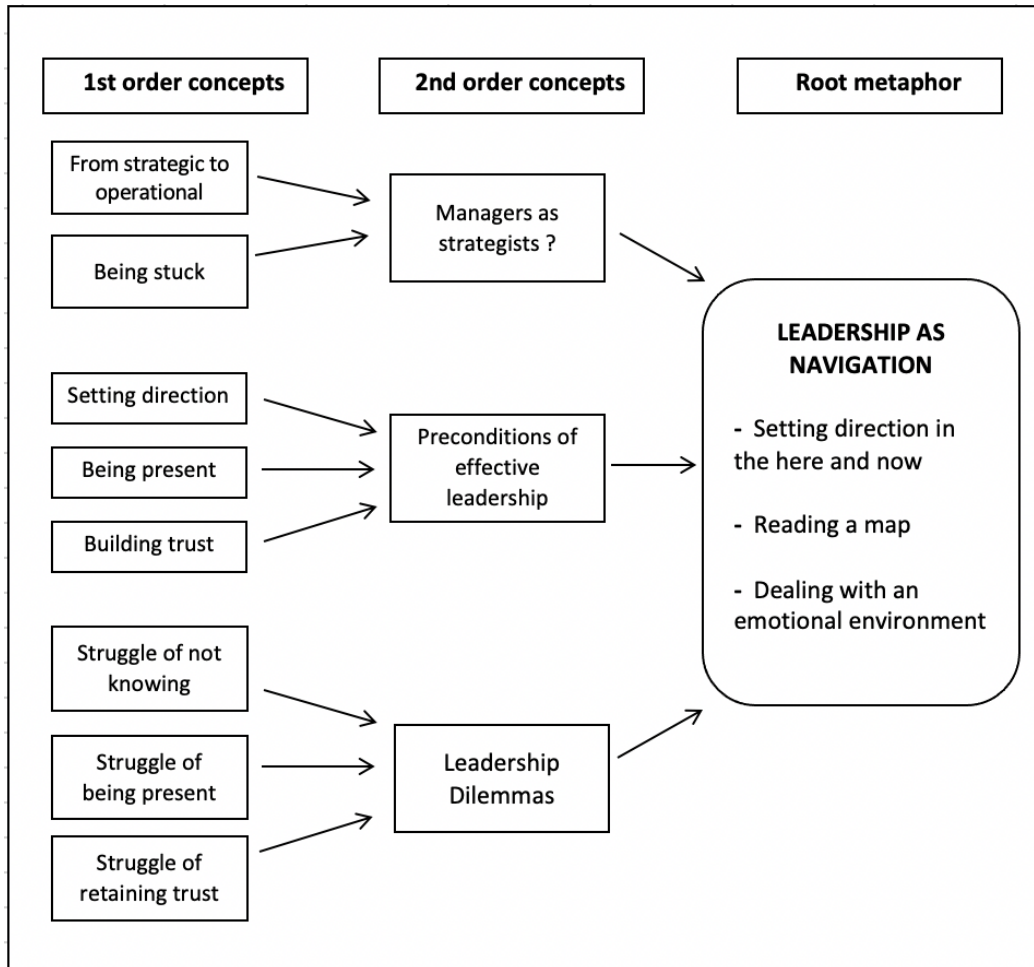


Figure 3.1: Data structure

As already mentioned in the literature chapter, seeing leadership through the lens of another phenomenon can facilitate a better understanding of an already complex phenomenon (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Further, using metaphors in qualitative research can be beneficial as metaphors can not only be used as a powerful strategy to shed light on complex realities but also to provide structure to the data and evoke emotions (Carpenter, 2008). To capture the nature of leadership and its characteristics we created a new root metaphor based on the findings from the analysis, which worked as an overarching theme throughout the discussion. How the respondents talked about their role as managers and how they practice leadership within that role and experienced struggles became the basis for our root metaphor, as we identified that earlier metaphors in the leadership literature did not capture the nature of leadership in this particular context. The expressions from our data, for example “it feels like

we have got stuck in a round-about and can't find our indicators to get out", "there are no rear-view mirrors in this car" and "yesterday, we said that we should go right, why are we going left today" is all captured by the navigator metaphor and provides a better understanding of the experienced realities.

Lastly, after sorting and reducing the material, the material also had to communicate something (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), which brings us to the activity of arguing. This was done by creating excerpts commentary units, which is a method first proposed by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (2011). Most of our analysis followed the more traditional stages of a commentary unit which involves an analytical point, followed by an orientation, then the excerpts from the empirical material and a longer analytical comment (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Presenting our material with excerpts commentary units enabled us to present our analysis in a structured way and filling our arguments with meaning. However, the units do not always follow the same structure and stages but the method of creating excerpts commentary units were used as a guideline through the analysis process.

### **3.4 Quality considerations**

The following section illustrates critical aspects that could have affected the quality of our study, and also how we have worked to reduce their influence. When evaluating the quality of this study we have referred to Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bryman & Bell 2017) critical criterion of trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness can further be divided into four subcategories which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Seale, 1999).

Firstly, when evaluating the credibility of a study, emphasis is placed on ensuring that the representations of the participants' socially constructed realities are aligned with the interviewees' intentions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). A common technique for increasing credibility is respondent validation (Bryman & Bell, 2017). We have therefore sent the final paper to the participants to ensure that we have interpreted the realities of the interviewees in a transparent manner. Another common technique for ensuring credibility is through the development of a thorough analysis in order to produce the best possible conclusion

of the studied phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). We have therefore consistently produced our analysis and result with the aim of being a transparent reproduction of the entire material and not omitting central parts.

Secondly, the criterion of transferability refers to researchers' ability to provide a detailed and rich description of the studied setting (Seale, 1999). Throughout the thesis, we have provided a detailed description of research question, design, context, findings, and interpretations which according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) provides the reader with the opportunity to determine the transferability of the study. However, this is not to say that the empirical findings are applicable in any other context, but rather how a detailed description of the methodology and the interviewed managers' circumstances can facilitate the judgment process of which contexts the study may be transferable to.

Thirdly, to increase the dependability of the study we have worked in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985, cited in Seale, 1999) suggestion of how researchers are to document data, methods, and decisions made during the process. This procedure of dependability is also called "auditing" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Seale, 1999) which is beneficial for the fourth criterion of confirmability which refers to the evaluation of how the researchers' personal values may have affected the result of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2017). As a qualitative method is chosen for this study, the findings rely on interpretations which makes it impossible for us to claim complete objectivity. However, we claim that the detailed description of the research process increases the confirmability of the study. Moreover, both of us have taken part in each stage of the research process which decreases the risk of the findings being influenced and affected by personal values. The material has also been discussed continuously to ensure that the result and empirical analysis are aligned with the conducted empirical material.

Another critical aspect of qualitative studies is authenticity which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Seale, 1999) can be ensured by representing different realities. Research accounts only represent a temporary consensus of views about what is to be considered as true (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Seale, 1999). Acknowledging the multiple constructed realities is therefore of importance for the authenticity of the study. We argue that we have fulfilled this criterion by

interviewing a diverse group of managers and integrated everyone in the analysis. The criterion of authenticity is also designed to promote fairness by representing all views in the research, to raise awareness and to generate learning (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). We have therefore sent the final result to the studied organisation with hope that it will provide the respondents with a better understanding of the phenomenon and a deeper understanding of the viewpoint of others.

### **3.4.1 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is also important to consider in qualitative research to reduce the level of subjectivity. Reflexivity is defined as “interpretation of interpretations” and can be explained as being critical to one's own interpretations as well as staying open to various interpretations of the empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 11). As researchers we tried to keep a reflexive approach both during the data collection and the analysis in order to avoid biases and move away from our presumptions that might otherwise have affected this study. In relation to our data collection both of us participated in all interviews allowing us to discuss similarities and differences between interpretations of the interviews. Also, during the process of collecting empirical data some questions asked in the interviews were adjusted or added as the research developed. The data collection process was therefore characterized by reflexivity. In our analysis process we also acknowledge what Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) refers to as “distortion of information” (p.70), where the relationship between reality-source-researchers is tripartite and much can happen on the way between the reality and the researcher. It is therefore important for the researcher to acknowledge the existence of an underlying reality that the interviewee might not express in a complete way. This leads to a need for increased reflexivity where we as researchers had to be self-critical when interpreting the collected material. As we have interviewed managers about their experienced reality, it is relevant to acknowledge the distortion of information. For example, what a manager claimed to do may not always reflect reality.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

Before conducting the interviews, permission was given from the organization's HR department to interview managers within the company. In the dialogue with HR, the organization and the



managers who wanted to partake were guaranteed anonymity. After receiving the company's approval, the researchers contacted several managers to see if they wanted to participate in the study.

Gathering qualitative data raises various ethical questions that we have reflected upon and dealt with by considering some critical questions provided by Mason (2002): "what you ask, how you ask it and whether and how you can guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of your interviewees" (p.80). In regard to the first question, the researchers have carefully discussed what is appropriate to ask and what is not. Moreover, in the beginning of each interview all participants were guaranteed anonymity and informed that they can, if they want, stop the interview as well as avoid answering questions that they might feel uncomfortable answering. Secondly, we have been transparent about the purpose of the study and our interest in the participants' perception and therefore asked relevant questions such as "How do you experience?". When considering the third critical question, the participants have, at each interview, been asked for the permission to record the interview. Furthermore, each participant has been given a fictitious name to secure their anonymity.

### **3.6 Limitations and critique of the study**

This study also has its limitations, which is important to have in mind and reflect upon. One of the main critiques against qualitative research is that it is built on subjective assumptions and that it is hard to generalize any findings (Bryman, 2011). However, as we tried to get a deeper understanding of the managerial role during crises, we had no intention of trying to generalize our empirical findings. We are however aware of the critique highlighted by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) that "it is naive to think that interview statements in fact reflect what things are really like, outside the interview" (p. 41). As recommended by the authors (2018), we aimed to adopt an open attitude by keeping an open mind to the empirical material as well as juggling alternative interpretations throughout the process. Also, that case studies are non-generalizable is actually one of the most common misunderstandings about case-study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Flyvbjerg (2006) explains that this relies on the idea that quantitative methods are more suitable in the contribution of new knowledge. However, examples from case studies, even though it is context-dependent, can also contribute to new

knowledge and a better understanding of a complex phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Another limitation to the study relates to how the interviews were conducted. Our initial plan was to hold the interviews on site in order to get a better connection with the interviewees and be able to observe answers as well as body language. However, due to restrictions regarding physical meetings in the company during the pandemic all interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. While we did not get the opportunity to meet the managers, and thus observe their body language during the meetings, conducting the interviews via Teams was considered the best solution as we nevertheless were able to see the interviewee and have fruitful discussions regarding the subject. We therefore do not believe that conducting the interviews via Teams impacted the results of our findings.

## **4. Empirical findings and analysis**

In the following chapter the empirical findings and analysis will be presented in themes from our data structure (see figure 3.1). The first theme is on how there has been a shift from working strategically to being more operational. The second theme refers to the managers' experienced preconditions of effective leadership and the third theme highlights the struggles experienced during the last year. Firstly, a short background to the company and the context will be provided.

### **4.1 Background and context**

As briefly mentioned in the method chapter, the case-company operates in the retail industry and sells products both in physical stores and through online-shopping. It is a relatively large company with stores world-wide. The store where the interviews have been conducted has around 300 employees, including approximately 50 leaders on various levels and departments. The highest management team consists of managers from the organization's different functions such as sales, logistics and customer experience which all have lower-level managers that report directly to them, which in turn have team leaders reporting to them. The size of the teams within the company varies and therefore also the number of employees each manager is responsible for.

The store has been able to stay open throughout the pandemic, with only a few changes in terms of opening-hours. However, the company has been forced to adapt to new regulations from the government as well as implementing actions in order to secure both their employees and customers' safety and in order to reduce the risk of infection. The crisis in society has resulted in changes in their customers' purchasing habits, leading to a higher percentage of sales being done via online orders, therefore resulting in a need to reallocate resources in the store. The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in higher sickness absence among employees. Lastly, both employees and managers have been on site for the whole year where the managers have had the overall responsibility to make sure regulations and recommendations are followed and changes are implemented on time. The interviewees in this study refers to leaders in the organization, all of whom hold formal managerial positions.

## 4.2 Managers as strategists

The first theme relates to the view of what the managerial role entails. It became evident that a central aspect of being a manager was the ability to work long-term and have a strategic mindset. This is exemplified by Mark in the following quote:

My role is more that you work a little bit more proactively than I do today [during the pandemic]. Make plans for the future and not only look at ‘what is happening now’ and what we have to solve and what fires need to be put out. My gaze is further ahead and looking at ‘what is happening next business year’ and ‘what is happening next month’ [...]So, in a normal situation, more of that stuff of looking up and looking forward and long-term and being proactive. (Mark)

The quote by Mark indicates that it is important as a manager to work proactively, which has been affected by the ongoing situation with the pandemic. He explains how a central aspect of his role is to be able to plan for the future and make strategic decisions rather than focusing solely on daily operations. The requirement of having a long-term perspective was also expressed by Julia. When asked about her role as department manager, she responded: “Department manager means that you are supposed to keep track of the big picture and look to the future and see what is happening and keep track of the big things”. This also indicates that having a strategic mindset as a manager is considered important and needed in order to get an overall picture of the business.

The importance of having a long-term perspective was also shared among a number of our other interviewees. As well as having a strategic mindset, it became evident that it was also important to be present and most importantly was the balance between the two. This is explained by Jennifer in the following quote, “the most important thing to be a good manager in terms of how to lead your work, is the balance between being here and now but also having a long-term perspective”. This quote confirms the importance of having a strategic mindset as a manager, but it also implies that the combination between long-term and the present is what will make you a good manager. In her opinion it is the ability to find a balance between the two that result in her being a good manager.

#### **4.2.1 From strategic to operational**

Overall, when asking if the pandemic has affected their role as managers, all interviewees expressed that the crisis in society has had an impact on their job. A central theme that became evident from the interviews was an increase in operational work for the managers, as expressed in the following quote:

It is a lot more operational questions for me, [...] it is a lot more like that, we have had to redo things, re-prioritize and change plans. You expect that you have 10 individuals to do a task and then you only have 5 and what does that mean? We have changed to only focusing on refilling shelves, selling and taking payments and everything else has to be removed. (Jennifer)

The quote illustrates how the strategic agenda has been more difficult to prioritize for the managers as the situation has forced them to rapidly redo, re-prioritize and alter their course. She continues by saying: “the pandemic has affected the organization and thus it has affected me because this balance [the balance between being present and working strategically] that I am talking about has been disturbed”. Another manager, Steve, also highlights this shift in the work-balance, resulting in less of the strategic work. He expresses the situation as a new balance in the following quote, “In normal circumstances, my role entails working more long-term but the pandemic has forced me to step down so now I would say that it [working long-term and short-term] is 50/50”.

Further, in relation to this another central theme that emerged from the interviews was the struggle to plan. This is exemplified in the following quote:

Before the pandemic, we had reconciliations once a day where we sort of said 'what does the situation look like in all departments', now we [the managers] meet 3 times a day. [...] it is always difficult to plan a store, but it feels like it is completely impossible right now. (Jennifer)

Jennifer explains how the managers nowadays meet three times a day because the plan they have set needs to be adjusted more often due to the pandemic. She also expresses frustration about the inability to plan ahead and a feeling of it being impossible. This implies that being strategic during the pandemic has been harder for the managers. The inability to plan the business is shared by Charlie:

What is affected the most is the fact that we need to adjust [...]. We need to adjust the business and there has not really been any time to do a real plan on how to change things. It has just been from one day to another. (Charlie)

Charlie expresses a willingness to be able to plan the business but due to the changes from day to day, there has not been time to create any plans. Constantly needing to adapt is also expressed by David in the following quote: “there are things that come up from right and left and new routines you have to understand and adjust to”. Jessica also talked about the inability to plan her work. When asked how a workday looked like she answered like this:

Is it a day without or in the pandemic it varies quite a lot. You can't come to work and have an agenda and expect it to last. [...]. It is a lot more, a lot more reactive instead of proactive work during these circumstances. You are down filling up shelves and then you try to have a meeting and then you have to cancel something because other stuff comes up that is more prioritized or something else that is on fire. So, it is pretty hard to find a clear direction forward at the moment. (Jessica)

This quote implies that there is an acceptance that plans need to be adjusted but also a frustration about always having to change your plans or putting out fires. The interviewee expresses that this way of working makes it difficult to find a direction, emphasizing the importance of having a direction to follow as a manager. She expands on this later in the interview by saying “We have lost the long-term perspective, we are losing the strategic work, we are down at the dancefloor and not on the balcony.”. Once again, the operational tasks and being here and now seem to have taken over and are forcing the managers to let go of their strategic agenda, which is referred to as being on the dancefloor doing more operational tasks.

#### **4.2.2 Being stuck**

The inability to focus on the strategic agenda and have a long-term perspective is shared among many of the managers. Apart from the aforementioned inability to plan and follow the plan through, Stacey expresses the situation as a feeling of being stuck, where the long-term goal is still there but harder to achieve. This is expressed in the following quote:

The goal is still there, we have a business plan that we are following and things we want to achieve this year. That goal is still there but it sometimes unfortunately ends up in the shadow because there is always other stuff that comes up. You have to put up these stanchions, you have to stand by the entrance to let a maximum of 500 people enter or whatever it might be. So, the road towards these goals that we have is normally a bit crooked but now sometimes it feels like we have got stuck in a round-about and can't find our indicators to get out. In the end you find your road towards what we focus on or are supposed to have as a focus area, but that road has been a lot more difficult to drive.  
(Stacey)

Stacey uses the metaphor of a round-about to explain how the pandemic has affected their ability to focus on their business goals, instead having to focus on actions due to restrictions from the government or because of safety precautions. The quote can also be interpreted as the work towards the business goals has been harder during the year, as the actions that need to be taken do not really relate to their long-term goals but are seen more as interruptions that have forced them to stay in the round-about. It also implies that the managerial role at the moment entails a lot more hands-on work than earlier. This is also supported by Tom, who expresses the following:

It has been a lot more hands-on work, from hanging up a sign to putting a sticker on the floor that says, 'keep distance'. We [the managers] have been out a lot more and done a lot of these things here and now because it is supposed to be done very quickly and things change very quickly as well. And we learn new things all the time and then we also need to act straight away and there are also new directives both from the

government but also from our national crisis group. So we get new guidelines consistently and we need to act on them. (Tom)

Tom expresses that he and other managers have spent more time out on the shopfloor during the past year due to changes that need to be implemented quickly. The quick implementation that has been needed has forced them to take actions immediately, meaning they are required to be on the shopfloor themselves in order to ensure said changes are instantly implemented. It is partly explained as due to new regulations from the government but also as a learning experience where they have learned from their own actions and therefore initiated new actions as a result. When asking Tom how he has been able to spend more time on the shopfloor he answered, “we have had to pause much of our long-term plans”. This goes in line with the other interviewees regarding the inability to work strategically and resultantly focusing more on the everyday practices.

### **4.3 Preconditions for effective leadership**

The second theme, which is divided into three subthemes, revolves around the interviewees’ preconditions for exercising effective leadership, both in a non-crisis situation as well as in a crisis situation. The first subtheme ‘Setting direction’, examines how the managers talk about how providing direction and being able to give meaning to various actions are essential attributes when exercising leadership. The second subtheme ‘Being present’ highlights how the societal crisis has contributed to the interviewees experiencing a greater need for being present, close and sensitive towards their employees. Further, how it has become more important for the interviewees to be both visually and mentally present as the situation is repeatedly referred to as “these difficult times”. The third and last subtheme ‘Building trust’ emphasizes the importance of building trust and how that is a prerequisite for effective leadership.

#### **4.3.1 Setting direction**

During the interviews, it was clear that the managers considered leadership as a crucial part of their organization as well as an essential part of their role as managers. When asked what leadership is for Ella, she responded: “it is that you as a group, big or small, find solutions to move forward and to make people grow”. It was common among the majority of the interviews to talk about leadership in terms of teamwork and as something that is created together where the



managers were supposed to be the ones that provide direction, an argument that is strengthened by the following quote:

For me leadership is to be able to engage the group, to make them understand why we are here and have a mutual goal. Yes, but to lead and direct the group towards the right direction and you can do that in various ways, it depends on the person who is leading, but to get the group to go in the same direction. (Julia)

The statement shows the importance of getting the group to work together towards a mutual goal. Moreover, Julia's expression portrays that she has an image of the leader being the one that knows which direction the group is heading and the one that makes others buy into that vision. The quote also implies that it is the leader's personal preferences that determines the way that leader is to approach the group but for Julia it appears as the most important aspect of leadership is to be able to get the group to work together towards a mutual goal. It is possible to interpret that Julia portrays the leader as a navigator who is to map out how to reach the destination. The image of leaders as the ones that are supposed to provide direction and to give meaning to various actions were recurrent during the interviews. When asked about what leadership is, Jennifer responded:

Within our organisation we talk much about what kind of leadership that we want to have and it is about inspiring and clarifying. For me, it is very important that we are explaining 'the why'. I like the old parable, that if you walk past a person that knocks stone and you ask 'what are you doing' and then people are saying 'I knock stone' or they are answering 'I am building a cathedral'. (Jennifer)

Similar to Julia, Jennifer expresses the importance of explaining why a certain decision was taken and inspiring people to follow the manager's lead. In contrast, from Jennifer's statement it is possible to interpret that she has the image of leaders being somewhat of an architect who provides the bigger picture and the one that is to explain how every small action is part of a greater final result. Jennifer further explains the importance of "finding a "why" to the things we do" at the same time as she acknowledges how "the why" might be harder to find depending on

which role you have within the organization. According to Mark, the question of why has become more evident due to how the pandemic has caused working modes to change on a more regular basis. Moreover, Mark addresses the importance of directing his team forward and views his role in that process as important which is expressed in the following quote:

But where I, as manager, am also clear that there are no rear-view mirrors in this car, we must move forward now and get through this together. Because it is a natural reaction to say ‘why we should do this’ and stick to this old thing that you may need to let go of now when we need to focus on other things in the future. And I fully understand that you seek that security, but there it is important to be present as a manager and point out that it is not back we are going but it is forward we need to go and find that path together. (Mark)

The quote shows an awareness of the difficulty of letting go of old working modes and how it creates questions among employees as to why it is needed. Mark’s answer indicates that he views his role of providing direction in this situation as important. Moreover, his expression of “there are no rear-view mirrors in this car” illustrates a metaphor of an unlearning process and how they must learn how to do things differently as there is no previous experience of a situation similar to the one they are in now. Despite being unsure of what the future holds, Mark is stating that he is responsible for providing direction and ensuring his subordinates let go of their presumptions of what their own roles entail and the tasks within that role.

#### **4.3.2 Being present**

One of the most recurring themes throughout the interviews was the importance of emotional intelligence and being a present manager while leading in an emotionally charged working environment. For example, Julia expressed how “The most important thing is to be a present manager, to be out in the department and show yourself. I know that is really important, especially now, to show that I am also engaged in what is happening out there” indicating that the changed working climate has made the managers, at least according to Julia, acknowledge the importance of being visually present and to show that they are committed to their employee’s working situation. In line with Julia, Mark also highlights the importance of being out in the departments:

It has been important to be out in the departments, to be more operational and to be seen in order to capture more of the daily talk, where I as a manager have an important role when it comes to knowing what it is that people are buzzing about and ‘how do we experience these situations’. (Mark)

The quote indicates that there has been a greater need for the managers to be present in order to grasp how people are experiencing the working situation. In line with Mark's expression, Kim adds to the argument by stating how sensitivity towards the group is necessary in order to help the employees.

I have to be sensitive to ‘how is everyone, how is the group dynamic now, how was it before or who is starting to connect now’. To intercept the things that you feel are bubbling and that we need to deal with. You need to analyze how the group is to be able to influence and help each other and really be present. (Kim)

The expression made by Kim is mirroring the general perception of how the managers perceive their role as being a caring and present manager. The quote also indicates that the ability of analyzing and interpreting what is happening beneath the surface are two key characteristics that a manager must have if they are to influence others. The quotes provided by Mark and Kim indicate that the group dynamic has been affected by the pandemic and that they experience a need for finding out how they as managers can help and support the employees as well as deal with issues that people are informally talking about. In addition, Jessica also highlights the need for being a present manager but also addresses how it sometimes is difficult to grasp everything:

Everyone has their own experience of this [the pandemic]. It is important to be close and recognize the signals and sometimes you miss them, I do too, but it is incredibly important to be close to your employees to catch the small signals that indicate if someone is feeling bad or whatever it may be in order to lift them up. (Jessica)

From Jessica's quote it is evident that she, just like Mark and Kim, also experience the need for being close to her employees. Jessica also expresses that she has an important role when it comes to supporting and providing help. This is strengthened by how she expresses "in order to lift them up". Jessica's expression of how small signals can easily be missed implies a struggle of catching signals that are sometimes not clear if one does not spend time integrating with your employees. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as meaning that there are so many different experiences of the situation which the manager must recognize, resulting in a struggle for the managers to catch them all. The emphasis of being close, sensitive and present are therefore highly evident among the majority of the managers. The three previous quotes, all highlight the importance of being visually present for the employees and how it is a key factor when dealing with the problems that might not have reached the surface if the managers were not out in the department. However, according to David, the need for being present is not just a question of being physically out in the department:

I want everyone to feel that I am present when I am at work and that you can just call me whenever, even if I am not physically present every day. Because some days you cannot just run out to the department of course, but that the employees still have the feeling of me being there when needed. (David)

In the statement it is clear that the image of being a present manager is not just associated with the physical presence but how you as a manager want to be accessible even if you are not visually there. Steve adds to the argument by bringing up how the pandemic is associated with difficult times that require a different kind of leadership:

You need a different kind of leadership during these difficult times, you need to be much more present, not just physically doing the same thing but you need to listen and find out where the group is and try to capture the individual employees and so on. (Steve)

The quote implies that the consequences of the pandemic has caused Steve to think differently with regards to what kind of leadership is required. He is referring to the situation as "these difficult times" while expressing the need for being more present and how that is a question of

being mentally present for the employees in order to understand their emotional status. In line with Steve's statement about the difficult times, Mark indicates that there might be other factors that matter by stating how he has "seen a great need for being very close to my group, to be an available and present manager for them as to why I am happy that I lead four employees and not 18" indicating that the number of employees that the manager is responsible matters when trying to be an available and present manager.

### **4.3.3 Building trust**

The third identified precondition of the empirical findings and analysis will more closely examine the importance of trust and how being a trustworthy manager is an important characteristic for many of the managers regardless of being in a pandemic or not. For example, David acknowledges the importance of getting to know the persons that you are working with and how that is an important part to consider before you enter the role as a manager or a leader. This is expressed in the following quote:

I believe that trust is super important for a manager in general, or a leader in general. It takes a different amount of time to find trust, with some you get an instant connection and directly you are feeling that I can trust you and you can trust me. While others have a greater need of proving certain things before you reach a certain degree of trust, in order for me to gain trust I usually, when I am new at a department or have a new role, put a lot of effort into getting to know the person. I think that it is important to have personal chemistry before you enter the role as a manager or a leader. (David)

David's statement indicates that he believes that trust is a crucial part of the relationship between himself and his employees. Moreover, the quote also implies that David has patience and recognizes that it takes a different amount of time for people to trust him. Also, it is possible to interpret that David finds it important to get to know his employees and how it is important to do so on a more neutral ground by not considering the asymmetrical formal relationship. Tom adds to the argument by providing another perspective of how trust is essential for the ability to move forward:

I think that trust is extremely important. That I trust the ones around me and they trust me, or else it is really difficult to move forwards. [...], the ability to build trust among people is really important. That you want to work through people but also that you have the ability to build trust. (Tom)

As understood from Tom's expression, trust is to be considered as a large part of the foundation of the relationship you have with your colleagues. Not only that they trust him, but that he is able to trust them as well. He further explains that being able to build trust is an important part of being a leader and that a leader must feel passionate about working "through" people. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret that if the employees do not consider the manager to be trustworthy it will be difficult to move forward in the daily operations. In line with Tom, Jessica expresses the importance of trust as well as the importance of having a manager or a leader that supports you:

I think that the key is to have a good manager or a leader that supports and believes in you. If you do not have a manager that believes in you, then it is better to just blow it off. In that case, I can be as honest as that, I have had those kinds of managers, and then it is better to let go of the moorings and look for something else because it will not end well. As I said earlier, it is much about trust, if we do not trust each other and believe in each other then it will never end well. (Jessica)

It is evident that being a trustworthy manager is important for many of the interviewed managers, but from Jessica's expression it appears equally important to have a supportive manager. If not, the situation is portrayed as unbearable which is strengthened by Jessica's explanation of how it then "is better to just blow it off". The quote also implies that the relationship to your manager must be categorized by support, belief, and trust otherwise it is a dead end. This indicates that both having and being a supportive and trustworthy manager are essential for the ability to work effectively and not being stuck in a vicious cycle. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret that Jessica's earlier experiences of having managers that are not supportive has resulted in her putting a lot of emphasis on the importance of trust and how that has affected her image of which characteristics make a good manager or a good leader.

#### **4.4 Leadership dilemmas**

The third and last theme refers to the managers' experienced struggles that they have encountered while having to work and adapt to a crisis context. The theme is divided into three subthemes, all examining different leadership dilemmas that contradicts or challenges the interviewees' image of how to exercise effective leadership that was described in the chapter 4.3. The first subtheme 'the struggle of not knowing' examines how the shift to exercising every-day leadership is challenging the managers ability to provide direction as no one knows which the right path is. The second subtheme 'the struggle of being present' revolves around how the circumstances of a crisis context have had consequences for the managers ability to be close to their employees. In the third and final subtheme 'the struggle of retaining trust', we identified the dilemma of retaining trust while being forced to implement different changes on a daily basis.

##### **4.4.1 The struggle of not knowing**

There appears to be a shared experience of the struggle of leading in the unknown and how the respondents want to be stable managers. However, the majority of the interviewed managers expressed a frustration concerning not having all the answers to the employees' questions. For example, Mark explained "What has been most challenging is that I do not have the answers. I can't give them [the employees] that". He further explained how he has found the experience of being a leader within a situation where he, on a daily basis, got questions that he could not answer as tough. The struggle of not knowing which direction is the right one appeared challenging for Stacey as well. When asked about what has been most difficult throughout the year she responded:

It is as always, the dilemma of 'what is right and what is wrong', you are clueless. Are we going to take action here in order to be on the safe side or do we have the opportunity to gamble a bit? It has been damn tough and there have been many discussions concerning various dilemmas of what is right and what is wrong because no one has had the answers. (Stacey)

Stacey's expression of being clueless indicates that there is no previous experience that can work as assembly instructions for how to handle the situation. The quote also implies a frustration about not knowing where the boundaries of the playing field are. The situation appears to be challenging the image of the managers as being the ones that are to provide directions as they have to lead in the unknown, because "no one has had the answers". In line with Stacey, Steve highlights the struggle of leading in the unknown in the following statement:

You have been forced to lead in the unknown. We do not know for how long this pandemic will last. When we change our working modes, are the changes supposed to be long term or short term? How much personnel should we invest in? [...] There are so many of those kinds of situations that have been pretty tough and when you yourself do not have the answer, but you still have to keep the spirit up in your group and try to retain energy, that is pretty tough. (Steve)

The pandemic appears to have created a working environment where the managers are uncertain about actions that they earlier would not have questioned, for example the amount of personnel they are to invest in and if the change of working modes are to be long term or short term. From Steve's point of view the situation appears to be challenging as he has found himself in many situations where he does not know how to move forward. Not knowing how to deal with issues that come up seems to interfere with the image of being the inspirational leader who is able to keep the spirit up as Steve describes the situation as tough. Furthermore, it appears as being a knowledgeable manager is important which further can be strengthened by Jennifer in the following quote:

Overall, the most difficult thing for the managers is that they have had to lead in the unknown which has forced you to face reactions that you normally would not have had or that you have had other kinds of dialogues where we [the manager] do not have the answer. [...] we have tested things and some things have gone well and some things have not gone well and it has been messy and it is clear that it is tough when you as a manager have to defend it because 'I actually do not really know either' is not the answer you want



to hear from your boss, instead you [the manager] are often exposed to the requirement of ‘damn, you are supposed to know that’. (Jennifer)

It is evident that leading in the unknown creates an environment for the managers where the managers do not have the answers for what is the right or wrong thing to do. Jennifer’s statement also indicates that the managers have needed to implement various changes that have had diverse success rates. Despite the difficulties with leading in the unknown, it is also possible to interpret how not having all the answers is something that is negatively charged. One can deduct from Jennifer’s response that managers are expected to have answers regardless of their experiences with similar situations. It also implies that even if you do not know if you are right, the manager must defend their chosen actions regardless of whether they prove successful or not. In line with Jennifer, Ella develops the argumentation when asked how she has experienced the dialogue about the various changes with her employees:

No but it is very difficult because it is the same for them of course. Yesterday, we said that we should go right, why are we going left today? And then I need to defend that because I must pass forward the things that are delegated to me. In those situations, I cannot just say ‘yes I know, I do not want to do that either’, so instead I must make it feel like it is the right decision. So it is hard, especially if you yourself do not feel like it is the right thing all the time, then it is extra hard. (Ella)

Just like Jennifer, it appears that Ella also finds the situation as messy where managers are required to adapt to different directions on a daily basis. Many managers expressed the need for being transparent towards their employees about not having the answers to all ambiguities. At the same time, it appears that Ella sometimes experiences the situation as frustrating. Kim strengthens this when asked about how she has experienced the constant changes of working modes:

Sometimes you yourself have felt ‘oh my god, this is so hard’ and you just had to go in and sit in a room and talk to a colleague and say ‘this is so damn tough, I do not know how to deal with this’ or ‘now this is going badly, this is going badly and this is going

badly'. Sometimes you just have to put on your own oxygen mask, but you have not done it in front of a group because we as leaders must in some way be the stable person. But it has not been possible to be that in many of these situations since we have not experienced something like this before, or no one has really. (Kim)

The quote shows frustration about the manager not knowing what to do and how to provide suitable solutions. It is also possible to interpret how the situation sometimes appears overwhelming as Kim is referring to the metaphor of an oxygen mask in order to catch a break from the tough working conditions. Kim expressed the need for going into a room and letting your emotions reach the surface but still highlighting how you are not supposed to do that in front of your group. The image of the leader as a stable person that has control over the situation appears desirable but experiencing a situation that no one has experienced before makes it challenging to preserve that image. Moreover, it is possible to interpret how the frustration of not knowing makes it difficult for the managers to maintain the "stable" image. Even if the managers are working really hard to be the person that finds the best possible solutions for everyone, it appeared as though the high level of uncertainty had triggered a need for leaving the leadership ideals behind and instead embracing the fact that leaders, like everyone else, are human beings. This is exemplified in the following quote by David:

You enter a solution-mode because you want to create the best possible outcome for everyone but you are only human too and you experience the pandemic on your own as well. But maybe as an employee you do not think, on a daily basis, that we [the managers] do too experience the pandemic. I believe it is pretty easy to forget that we are feeling the same things and that we do not have the answers to everything just because we are in a leadership position and that it is much back and forth for us as well before we can make a decision that we feel comfortable with. (David).

The statement illustrates a desire for being the person that is able to find solutions that are suitable for everyone but also how people might forget that managers are human too and that the situation of the pandemic affects them as well. This indicates that David experiences that the employees might have an image of him and other managers to be someone who has all the

answers and someone that is immune to the effects of the pandemic. On the other hand, it also implies an internal struggle of wanting to be the solution-oriented manager that has all the answers and a stable image at the same time as the consequences of the pandemic has created a need for being viewed as more vulnerable. This is also supported by Mark who expresses the following:

We do not have to play heroes either between each other [the managers] or against our employees, we are in this together and it is the first time for all of us. To be damn open with that, just because you are a manager does not mean you are indispensable or someone who is, what is it called, superhuman. You have your own feelings and reflections and strengths and weaknesses. It is very important to be clear about it with the group you lead. (Mark)

The quote shows frustration regarding the manager not wanting employees to see him as someone who had all the answers or have expectations about him being able to solve the situation. Besides the desire to not act as heroes it is also possible to interpret a need for a higher level of transparency among the managers as well as the relationship towards the interviewee's subordinates. Communicating your own uncertainty to the group that you are supposed to lead through the crisis therefore seemed important as the situation is equally uncertain for everyone. This implicates the need for managers to be recognized as more vulnerable and not to be seen as a "hero". It also indicates a wish to be recognized for who they are and their own struggles, rather than only for their title and the expectations that come with that.

#### **4.4.2 The struggle of being present**

As described earlier, the importance of being a present manager was highly evident within all of the interviews. However, even if all managers agreed on the need for being present, the situation of constantly needing to adapt to restrictions and new working modes have had consequences for how much time they actually can spend out in the departments. Charlie described the struggle in the following way:

And I would say that I, as a manager, have earlier spent much more time out in the

department, for example being present and leading out in reality and meeting customers and so on. I have not had the same opportunity to do that now because there are so many other things that need to be done. (Charlie)

Charlie's reasoning is indicating a desire to be a present manager but how the circumstances have made it difficult to be that person. The expression also provides the experience of not "leading out in reality" which further implies that Charlie is experiencing a distance towards the daily operational business and instead there appears to be other tasks that are time consuming which have consequences on the ability to be out in the department. When asked about what "other things that need to be done", Charlie expresses the following:

I need to do things that are more administrative that need to be done within the changes that later need to be communicated to the employees, having a dialogue with the members of the union in order to mediate the information that way as well. So there are a bit more administrative parts that may not be visible to the employees but they need to be done as well. (Charlie)

The quote shows how the increasing changes that the pandemic has caused have also affected Charlie's working tasks. Moreover, it indicates that the prioritized administrative work may not be apparent to the employees and how this has consequences for the image of being a present manager. The increased administrative work is not something that is shared by all respondents which can be exemplified by how Julia expresses "I feel that I have focused less on the administrative parts than I did before". In line with Julia, Stacey also indicated that the administrative parts of her work have gained less attention during the pandemic: "the increased sickness absence [...] has resulted in less administrative work as me and my colleagues have been forced to cover schedule rows and meet customers". In contrast to Charlie, it appears that Stacey has spent more time doing hands-on work and is closer to the operational business. However, when asked what has been needed to be deprioritized when having to be out on the shopfloor Stacy answered: "Unfortunately, there is much that disappears in connection to the meetings you have with your employees" indicating that the hands-on work has had negative impacts on the

time one should have had with one's employees. In line with Stacey's expression, David provides a similar view but develops it further by involving how it has affected his self-image:

Normally, I think that I build trust easily with people around me, but this year I really did not know which leg I should stand on. The feeling of just wanting to be out in the department and be there for the employees but at the same time I also have ten things that I need to do before Friday because otherwise we will not follow the new restrictions. So it is much wobbling back and forth between the feeling of 'I do everything I can' and other times I feel 'Fuck I am a terrible boss, I don't do everything I can'. So there is much inadequacy on all levels actually. (David)

The statement above implies that the previous year has created an internal conflict of wanting to be a present and trustworthy manager but how that is difficult while constantly receiving new restrictions. The restrictions means that the managers must find and create new working modes that appear to be experienced as time consuming which further has consequences on the time spent out in the departments integrating with the employees. It can also be interpreted that the situation has created a struggle between who David wants to be for his employees and who the situation allows him to be, leading to him questioning his own adequacy as a manager. David appeared frustrated which implies that the internal struggle is a serious matter that has had a great impact on him. Moreover, the quote implies that the pandemic has created higher demands on the working environment at the same time as it has created the image of a greater need for being a present manager which has caused a struggle for the managers to feel adequate.

#### **4.4.3 The struggle of retaining trust**

In this section there will be a closer analysis of the struggle of retaining trust while being forced to provide various directions on a daily basis. All of the respondents highlighted the importance of building trust and how it is key when it comes to solving issues and moving forward. According to several respondents, the ongoing dialogues are expressed as fundamental for both building and retaining trust. This is exemplified by Jennifer in the following way:

The most important leadership tool is the dialogue. But of course, you sometimes feel

that you do not have the time [...] but the dialogues are never to be underestimated and that you keep doing your work chats and utilize the opportunity to talk. However, it relies on the fact that there is an existing trust because it cannot be like this ‘how is it going’ and you expect that the person is going to open up if you never have asked the question before. That’s how it is, I believe it is hard to build a good relationship in the pandemic if you did not have a good relationship before. (Jennifer)

Jennifer’s statement implies that the everyday dialogues are an important part of practicing leadership. However, her expression indicates that the ability to build a good relationship in the pandemic is dependent on the fact that there was an existing trust between the two parts before the pandemic. Further, it implies that it is important to keep asking spontaneous and informal questions such as “how is it going” during the pandemic but how you cannot expect an honest answer if you did not ask those kinds of questions before. In other words, from Jennifer’s quote it is possible to interpret that the leader that you were before the pandemic will affect your ability to build and sustain relationships during the pandemic. In contrast, when asked what kind of impact the pandemic has had on the level of trust, Jessica responds the following:

I think it [the trust] will be pushed to its limits because of how we are within a difficult situation. Everybody knows that it is easy to sail in a tailwind but how do we do it when we are to work together and see each other's bad sides and when we see each other having an outburst or a collapse or what it may now be. (Jessica)

The statement implies that the pandemic has created a working environment where the level of trust will be pushed to its limits. Furthermore, Jessica’s expression indicates that they are in a situation that is emotionally difficult as she explains how they will see sides of each other that is not that appealing. Moreover, Jessica is referring to the situation before the pandemic as sailing “in a tailwind” which further implies that they now are facing a difficult situation where one cannot assume that everything will turn out successfully. Instead, it is possible to interpret that the situation that they are facing will be the ultimate test of how much they are able to trust each other. However, for some managers it appeared as though the wind has turned and that they already have started to sail in headwinds. For example, Kim explained how she struggles with

retaining an image of being trustworthy while having to change her employees' schedules more often than usual:

There have been a lot of changes in the co-workers schedule this year and I understand that... to know when to work and how long etc is a safety for people and something you expect and when something like that changes quite often, [...] it affects the level of trust negatively. And maybe it is not us managers from this department that have initiated the changes but we are still accountable for it and have to build trust and explain why we do like this. So changes that we have not initiated can still decrease the level of trust and something we have to lead in as we leaders cannot walk around and say 'we do not understand this', we have to be united and stand up for what the company and all the other managers say and stand for. (Kim)

According to Kim, the consequences of the pandemic have created a need for changing ways to work which further have implications for the level of trust. Necessary adjustments in the employees' schedules appears to have affected the image that Kim holds of herself as trustworthy. This is exemplified in her expression that she is held accountable for changes that she has not initiated and has consequences for the ability to build trust. Moreover, Kim's quote also implies that there is an image of the leaders needing to know and have explanations for every decision that is to be implemented, regardless of whether the leader is the one initiating it or not. Kim appears to experience the decreased level of trust as something she just needs to accept because of the image she has of how a leader is supposed to be. This can be strengthened by how she said "we leaders cannot walk around and say 'we do not understand this'" and how she feels a responsibility towards the company and towards the other managers that might be the ones initiating the changes. In addition, Mark also addresses the difficulties of retaining the image of being a trustworthy manager while delivering new directions and decisions increasingly regularly. This is exemplified in the following quote:

We have a world that is quite, perhaps more dynamic than ever before, based on the behavioral pattern of our consumers changing with different restrictions. It also means that the management team needs to make a decision one day that may need to be revised

where a decision is made the next day and to build trust as a manager in a group when delivering different decisions and different directions from week to week, it is difficult. (Mark)

Kim agreed with Mark and expressed the following:

I have reflected a lot on this when there are so many small and large changes, how do you create trust while communicating that ‘we will do like this now’ and then next week ‘we will do like this’. How do you create trust in a group when you present something that then rapidly changes again. (Kim)

Mark and Kim both highlight the difficulty of maintaining the image of themselves as trustworthy managers when they have had to deliver changes to their team without guarantees for the future. The fact that the management team is taking decisions about the implementation of different working modes can provide clarity for why the employees need to change their old working modes. On the other hand, the situation with constantly having to deliver new directions and decisions seems to challenge their preconditions of how to practice leadership. Kim’s quote also implies that she experiences it almost to be impossible to create trust in a situation that is ever changing. In line with both Mark and Kim, Julia also appeared frustrated about the situation while explaining how she has experienced the situation:

At times, the flow of information has gone so fast. [...] and we feel that ‘no, this did not work or now we need to change this today or tomorrow’ and then we just had to do it instead of understanding it. And when I really do not understand it, how am I to get my employees to understand why we are implementing a change. That has gone so fast, that flow of information, faster than usual. (Julia)

From the interviews it was clear that the rapid flow of information has created a challenging environment for the managers. Julia’s explanation of the situation implies that you do not have time to think, to ask questions or to analyze the new information. Instead you just needed to act upon it and make sure that your employees do the same. Moreover, Julia appears frustrated as



she finds herself in a situation where she also needs to ask questions in order to understand why a certain change is to be implemented but as the flow of information holds a faster pace than usual, there has not been the time. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret that she holds an image of herself as being responsible for making her employees understand why certain actions are to be implemented. However, as a consequence of the rapid flow of information she struggles with how she is to behave towards her employees.

#### **4.5 Summary of the empirical findings**

In our analysis, we have thematized our empirical findings into three main parts following the key characteristics of the respondents perception of managerial work and leadership within the new context. Accordingly, we can establish the following three main findings from this: Firstly, how there is an image of managers to be strategists that is to plan for the future. However, the situation as such has resulted in the respondents focusing more on hands-on work and how they perceive their work to be much more reactive rather than proactive in the new context. Consequently, this has had implications for the respondents' work as they, in the context of the pandemic, perceive their work to be more operational than strategic. Secondly, we have identified three preconditions that the respondents have highlighted as key characteristics for exercising effective leadership, namely to set direction, to be present and to build trust. Moreover, these are considered as even more relevant within the new context. Lastly, the societal crisis has challenged the held preconditions and resulted in various leadership dilemmas, which we have categorized as: the struggle of not knowing, the struggle of being present and the struggle of retaining trust. All in all, throughout our analysis we have found that the new context has had implications for the respondents' work as well as how they talk about leadership. Considering the relevance of our study, the implications deserve more attention, we will therefore discuss them further in the next chapter.

## **5. Discussion**

The following chapter will discuss the empirical findings from the analysis by using the theoretical framework, with the aim to answer the research question. First, we will discuss the changes in managerial work and its relationship to leadership. Second, a new metaphor will be proposed in order to understand the nature of leadership in this context. Third, the identified preconditions for leadership and the struggles from our analysis will be discussed with the aim to provide our metaphor with meaning.

### **5.1 The interrelationship between managerial work and leadership**

Before beginning the discussion on what implications changes within managerial work have on the respondents' leadership in the context of a societal crisis, it is important to discuss the respondents' formal position in relation to the managerial work theory. Our empirical findings suggest that the managerial role, normally, includes a significant amount of planning and having a long-term perspective was considered essential. This goes in line with Fayols (1916 cited in Mintzberg, 1973; Gulick & Urwick, 1937) classical theories on managerial work, stating that a manager is supposed to plan, organize, coordinate, command and control. Many respondents expressed the importance of being able to lead your work by both having a strategic mindset at the same time as being able to be present and think more short term. This is exemplified by one respondent who indicated that the balance between being here and now and having a long-term perspective is crucial for the ability to be a good manager. This is also in accordance with Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) as they express how managerial work includes handling operational issues and practical problems when necessary. However, our empirical findings indicate that the crisis has strongly impacted the balance between having a long-term perspective and having a more short-term mindset.

From the empirical findings, it is evident that the consequences of the pandemic have made the managers change their way of working. Instead of planning for the future and focusing on long-term strategies, they have been forced to spend an increasing amount of time on the shopfloor, undertaking hands-on-work. For example, the hands-on work involved tasks such as hanging up signs or putting stickers on the floor that say "keep distance". The situation as such appears to have increased the operational work for the managers as they do not have the same

possibility to plan for the future. This is further supported by the fact that many respondents expressed how the pandemic has forced them to adjust the business on a more regular basis. This had negative consequences for how much time they can spend thinking long-term and making strategic plans. For example, one respondent expressed how the work has become much more reactive and even if one has a scheduled meeting, one might be forced to cancel that because something else needs to be prioritized. This is in line with Mintzberg (1973) as he argues how managers are more likely to be action oriented rather than analytical and reflexive when working under severe time pressure. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the crisis has resulted in the respondents focusing on tasks that go beyond what Gulick and Urwick (1937) state as managerial responsibilities.

In correlation with Mintzberg's (1973) critique of the classical school, it was evident that the managers found their role to include a relational aspect that is not brought up by classical theorists. Instead, our empirical findings suggest that the role of a manager appeared to be strongly influenced by the ability to mediate information, which is in accordance with Mintzberg (1973) who stated that the managerial role can be equated with an input-output system of information. Nevertheless, our empirical findings imply that the societal crisis has created a more rapid flow of information which has challenged the respondents' ability to transmit information. This can be strengthened by how several respondents highlighted how they were to deliver different directions on a daily basis whilst having limited time to involve everyone. The authority and status that the managerial role comes with, enables a greater access to information (Mintzberg, 1973), which according to our empirical findings appeared overwhelming as the societal crisis has contributed to a higher level of ambiguity which further has resulted in an information overload.

Mintzberg's (1973) argue that managers have a prominent need for current information in terms of gossip, speculations, and hearsay, which are beneficial parts of transmitting pressing information. This appeared especially important in times of crisis as several respondents expressed the need for being close to their subordinates to grasp "what is going on" and how the emotionally charged situation was experienced. Hence, the table has turned as the employees might be the source of information which might have resulted in the respondents experiencing a

greater need for being closer to their employees. It is therefore possible to argue that the crisis has affected the respondents' managerial work. However, based on our empirical findings, the ability of being present was highlighted as a key characteristic of exercising effective leadership within the crisis, as to why it is possible to argue that the effect on managerial work also has implications on the respondents image of how to practice leadership.

The new context has, according to several respondents, resulted in them focusing more on everyday-practices. In other words, the respondents have been forced to focus on the next day instead of planning for the upcoming years. Based on the shift of focus it is arguable that the managerial work within the crisis is characterized by setting new agendas for each day and thereby focusing on carrying out everyday management. In other words, they must plan, staff, and organize their work differently on a daily basis. At the same time, our empirical findings indicate that the main concern among several respondents is how they are as leaders when following an ever-changing agenda. This can be exemplified by how one respondent expressed how the reactive work has made it hard to find a clear direction forward. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the shift in managerial work has implications for the ability to practice leadership as Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue that leadership is to be understood as the process of influencing ideas, meanings and understanding to provide direction.

The inability to find a clear direction forward was experienced as frustrating as the majority of the respondents put much emphasis on the importance of leadership and how it is their role to provide direction and explain why certain changes need to be implemented. This is in line with Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018) as they argue that the ultimate goal with leadership is to manage the ongoing sense-making and meaning-making. As argued by Weick (1995), crisis situations imply that there is much more equivocality and therefore a need for more sensemaking and sensegiving. Accordingly, our empirical findings suggest that the respondents experienced a greater need for being present and close to their subordinate. Moreover, the shift in managerial work and the respondents' increased hands-on work could be interpreted as there being much more ambiguity of what to do in the operational business. Consequently, there is a greater need for more sensemaking and sensegiving around everyday work than there was before. If

considering Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018) explanation of leadership as a meaning-making process, it is also possible to argue that there is a need for every-day leadership.

The empirical findings show that there is no longer a question of setting strategies for the future, but how the respondents need to provide different directions on a daily basis. Further, this challenges Kotter's (1990) distinction between management and leadership as the time frame for setting direction as well as plan for the future is now the same. As the flow of information has been quicker than usual, there are more changes to be implemented and an increased demand for managing meaning with those decisions than in a non-crisis situation. It is therefore possible to argue that the respondents find themselves in a situation where the distinction between managerial work and leadership is more diffuse. More explicitly, as their managerial work is now characterized by reactive work, the respondents have been forced to set strategies and provide direction in the here and now. Not only does this challenge the perception of managers as strategists, but it is also contradictory to what both Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) and Kotter (1990) state about leaders having an overall purpose of providing meaning that goes beyond the here and now. All in all, the empirical findings imply that going from focusing on the future and long-term strategies in a non-crisis situation, to exercising every-day leadership in a crisis situation has challenged the image of how to exercise leadership. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## **5.2 Moving towards a new leadership metaphor**

Leadership is a complex phenomenon and there are various definitions in the literature of what leadership means (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018). How leadership is understood and talked about therefore varies between individuals (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011), which also became evident in our study. Through how the managers talked about their own role and what leadership meant to them we identified that various views of leadership were evident in the company. However, it became clear that leading through these metaphors in the context of the COVID-19 crisis was challenging as it became difficult to live up to those views. We therefore propose a new metaphor to help understand leadership in this context, leaders as navigators and leadership as navigation. The metaphor consists of three dimensions, a temporal, spatial and relational one which will be elaborated on in the next three sections.

### **5.2.1 Setting direction in the here and now**

It became evident throughout the empirical findings that leadership is about providing meaning, or as one of the interviewees talked about, the importance of explaining why. As defined in the literature review, leadership is understood as a meaning-making process (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). By understanding leadership as a meaning-making process our findings show that providing direction was one of the most important aspects of being a manager. Earlier research has highlighted the importance of effective leaders in crises to provide clear direction as well as reflect on past experiences (Boltax, 2010). Further, within the literature on metaphors of leadership, leading by commanding is argued to be needed in crisis situations as people seek simplicity and direction which a commander can provide (Weick & Sufcliffe, 2001, cited in Spicer, 2011). Despite the willingness and eagerness to provide direction, our analysis shows how in the context of a societal crisis, that became problematic as the managers did not have all the answers or had to rapidly implement new ways of working or change tasks on a daily basis. Also, reflecting on past experiences in order to move forward can be argued as difficult as the situation is new for everyone involved and there are no past experiences to learn from.

It can be argued that managers in the context of a societal crisis lead by navigating as it facilitates direction and works as a helping tool to reach the goal. In the temporal dimension, the role as a leader can be argued to be a GPS that often suggests several routes to reach the destination, some routes may include a detour or obstacles along the way, and it may not always be easy to know which route is the fastest one as circumstances may change during the journey. The GPS may therefore need to propose a new route in order to reach the destination in the fastest way possible. This relates to the experienced struggle for the managers of not knowing themselves which decision will prove to be the best for the company, despite being expected to provide direction by their subordinates. A navigator can also be someone who sits next to the driver and helps them, which is exemplified by one of the interviewees stating that “I, as a manager, am also clear that there are no rear-view mirrors in this car, we must move forward and get through this together”. From this quote, it is possible to compare the followers as the drivers where the leader and the followers are to move forward together. Emphasizing the togetherness differs from the view of leading by creating clear direction as a commander since a commander

is neglecting the importance of emotions and is relying more on coercive power in order to get someone to do something (Spicer, 2011). As a GPS one still provides direction, but not through coercive power, more as a helping tool in order to move forward, accepting that the route may need to be adjusted along the way.

### **5.2.2 Reading a map**

Several researchers highlight how emotional intelligence is an important leadership quality (Humphrey, 2002; Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002; Jin, 2010). This is also something that was recurrent in our analysis as the majority of managers expressed how the crisis situation has created a greater need for them to be a present, sensitive and available leader. It was evident that the managers experienced the need of being visually and mentally present as they wanted to know what was going on and to be able to analyze and interpret what was happening beneath the surface. Moreover, it seemed important to both be visually and mentally present in order to grasp what the employees were talking about and which emotional state they were in. To be present appeared important in order for the managers to be able to find ways to provide help and support to their employees. The managers emphasis on their employees' emotions is in accordance with Humphrey (2002) and Pescosolido (2002) as they argue that leaders must be able to handle and interpret the emotional state of the group while facing times of uncertainty. As mentioned earlier, the empirical findings indicate that the managers experience a greater need for being close to their group members, which further indicates that the transition to a crisis context has had implications for what they perceive are key leadership qualities. This can be strengthened by how one responded and expressed that there is a need for a different kind of leadership during the difficult times where you as a leader need to be much more present. In other words, the aspect of emotional intelligence appears to be more important than ever.

Moreover, the empirical findings highlighted how many respondents are experiencing the ability to be close and catch the small signals as preconditions for the ability to exercise effective leadership. Not only does this indicate the desire of having a high level of emotional intelligence but also how the managers hold an image of how to exercise leadership within a crisis situation. Many of the respondents indicated that the situation as such has changed the way the managers talked about leadership and heightened their concern for their employees well-being. Furthermore, this is aligned with the third metaphor on leadership, namely leaders as buddies

(Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Sveningsson and Blom (2011) argue how being there for people, including employees in meetings and being observant to employees' well-being are all activities that the buddy takes part in. Moreover, the literature highlights how leading as a buddy might facilitate organizational change as the activities that the buddy takes part in creates a strong bond between the leader and the follower. Accordingly, our empirical findings suggest how the environment of constantly implementing new changes has contributed to the need to be more present.

Ibarra (2015) argues that leaders are expected to take on different roles in a complex and changing world. Ibarra's (2015) statement appears relevant in the studied context as it is categorized by a societal context which has forced organizations to adapt to new restrictions and regulations faster than usual. As mentioned previously, the empirical findings indicate that many respondents had an image of how they are supposed to be as leaders which was in line with the metaphor of leading as a buddy. However, the empirical material also implies that the respondents put much emphasis on being present to provide help and support to their employees, or as one respondent expressed "in order to lift them up". These qualities are more in line with the metaphor of leaders as gardeners than leaders as buddies. Leaders as gardeners are people that help others improve and facilitate growth (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011). The empirical findings show that the respondents have an image of how leaders in crises are to listen and grasp their employees emotional status. Again, these characteristics are aligned with the metaphor of the gardener or as Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue, as a therapist since this metaphor puts emphasis on listening as it is assumed to improve well-being and emotional status. However, the literature does not consider how the gardener is an appropriate metaphor for leadership in a crisis situation, which our empirical findings are indicating.

It is evident in the empirical findings that the managers had prejudices on how to exercise leadership. However, little attention has been given to leadership dilemmas that challenges the prejudgments. Our empirical findings imply that the societal crisis has had consequences for the managers ability to be present, which was one of their main preconditions for exercising effective leadership. While facing a situation where the respondents have been forced to move their focus to exercising every-day leadership, the situation appears overwhelming. Some



respondents indicated that there was much more administrative work that needed to be done while others expressed how the amount of workload has made them feel inadequate. Such statements indicate that the situation challenges the ability to persevere during critical circumstances (Humphrey, 2002). Even if the respondents have recognized the need for a higher level of emotional intelligence, the situation seems to challenge their ability to regulate their own emotions.

To understand how the leadership is talked about within the new context of a crisis, we have proposed a new metaphor that is to capture the dilemmas as well. Both the precondition as well as the struggle of being present is captured under the second dimension of the proposed metaphor, namely the spatial one. Within this dimension, we argue that the role of the leaders is to be map readers where they need to be close to the followers if they are to be able to evaluate the environment and read the map correctly. This is further related to how our empirical findings indicated that the crisis situation created a greater need for the leaders to be present in order to grasp the emotions of their subordinates and what is discussed beneath the surface. As mentioned earlier, the map reader can also be the one sitting beside the driver and the role is to be aware of when changes in the route must be made. In the current context, this task may not always be straightforward, resulting in the map reader potentially missing a turn or other factors that may affect the journey, relating to our identified struggle of being present in the situation.

### **5.2.3 Dealing with an emotional environment**

According to the empirical material, several managers appeared to perceive trust and the importance of being trustworthy managers as a precondition for exercising effective leadership, regardless of being in a crisis situation or not. This is in accordance with how Alvesson (2011b) is arguing that there is a strong assumption that leaders who are honest are more effective. Further, the experienced precondition can be argued to be in line with the metaphor of leaders as saints (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). The saint is to provide moral guidelines and is someone who is open, honest and helps increase the employees motivation (Alvesson, 2011b). Accordingly, the empirical findings show that several respondents put considerable emphasis on getting to know their employees as that is considered to be a prerequisite for the construction of trust. Further, the articulated importance of personal chemistry can be compared to how leadership is perceived

within the metaphor of a buddy (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) where the strong bond between the leader and the follower is emphasised. Moreover, the way the respondents talked about leadership in relation to the aspect of trust shows that it is possible to see similarities with the metaphor of leaders as gardeners (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011). This can be strengthened by how another respondent expressed the importance of having a supportive and trusting manager otherwise “it is better to let go of the moorings and go look for something else because it will not end well”, indicating how trust is an essential part of the ability to exercise leadership.

Even if the empirical material clearly highlighted how trust is a precondition for the ability to practice leadership, we could identify how the new context has had consequences for the ability to retain the image of being a trustworthy leader. The literature about metaphors on leadership is rarely considering how a new working context has implications on how people talk about leadership. More specifically, how the context challenges the image of how to practice leadership. In contrast, our findings imply that the societal crisis has caused several managers to question how they are to be trustworthy leaders while having to change directions on a regular basis. According to Humphrey (2002), leaders in crises are to set out a vision that is the foundation for how to guide and help the employees to get on the right path. Comparing Humphrey’s (2002) argument to our empirical findings, it can be argued as challenging since our empirical findings highlight both the struggle of not knowing and the struggle of guiding followers when being forced to change path regularly. Our empirical findings indicated that the situation has made it almost impossible to retain trust as there is no time to grasp why the changes are to be implemented. Instead the respondents had to take action and make sure that their group did the same, even if the respondents themselves did not understand why certain changes were to be implemented. Further, this indicates a struggle of needing to be the task-oriented leader but wanting to practice relationship-oriented leadership (Humphrey, 2002).

The empirical findings indicate that there is an image of the leaders being held accountable for actions which they themselves might not understand or have initiated. Again, it is possible to argue that leadership in the context of a societal crisis is talked about in terms of leading as navigating. More specifically, within the relational dimension we argue how leaders are tour guides where they are to gather the tour group and make sure everyone is on the bus. As a tour

guide the leader might not be the one that has decided where to go, but one is still accountable for how to get there, which further relates to the importance of building trust as the tour group must trust that the tour guide knows what he/she is doing. Additionally, even if the tour guide does not fully understand where the group is headed or if the tour is decided by the travel agency, it is nevertheless their responsibility to gather the tour group. In times of uncertainty, where there is no clear way forward, the leader needs to try out different ways in order to get on the right path. In the process of doing so, one must deal with the emotionally charged working environment and try to get everyone on the same path. This includes handling people's emotions as the emotional state has a powerful effect on behaviour (Manz, 2015), which is something that has been identified as difficult by the respondents. Also, if the tour guide leads the group in the wrong direction, the leader will appear less trustworthy. This relates to the identified dilemma of how to retain trust within a context that is categorized by constant change.

### **5.3 Leadership as navigation**

As earlier mentioned, the empirical findings indicate a close relationship between managerial work and leadership in the context of the societal crisis. Dotlich, Cairo and Rhinesmith (2009) argue how leaders, in times of crisis, must be able to master the navigational tools of understanding and responding to strategic directions, using the heart to see the world from various perspectives and making tough decisions. The context, as such, challenges the managers ability to be strategic which further has implications on the required leadership characteristics that are mentioned by Dotlich, Cairo & Rhinesmith (2009). We have therefore proposed a new metaphor that aims to facilitate the understanding of the relationship between managerial work and the nature of leadership and how it has changed in the context of a societal crisis. The characteristics of the navigation metaphor as discussed is summarized in the following table (see table 5.1).

*Table 5.1: Summary of leadership as navigation*

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Role of leader</b>	<b>Role of followers</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Nature of decision making</b>	<b>Nature of relationship</b>
Temporal	GPS	Drivers	Moving forward	Close to daily operations	Teamwork
Spatial	Map reader	Drivers	Evaluate the environment	Close to the followers	Very close
Relational	Tour guide	Tour group	Gather the group	Decided by the travel agency	Strained relations

As illustrated in table 5.1, the navigation metaphor contains three dimensions, which have been captured by our second order themes. These dimensions are temporal, spatial and relational. The temporal dimension illustrates how leaders are to set directions in the here and now where the goals are to move forward. Further, as the environment is constantly changing the need for being more present has increased which is captured within the spatial dimension of reading the map, therefore needing to make adjustments and make new decisions on a daily basis. Lastly, the relational dimension highlights the relationship between the leader and the followers in an emotionally charged environment which has been discussed as dealing with an emotional environment. The relational dimension of the metaphor implies a close but strained relationship between the leader and the followers.

## **6. Conclusions**

In the final chapter, the conclusions from our empirical findings will be presented in order to answer the research question. The chapter will also discuss theoretical contributions, limitations, practical implications and provide suggestions for further research.

### **6.1 Empirical findings**

The purpose for this research was to obtain a better understanding of the nature of leadership and its relationship to managerial work in the context of societal crisis. We therefore aimed to answer the following question: *How do managers make sense of their own role during a crisis and what implications does that have for leadership practices?*

In order to understand the complex phenomenon, we have proposed a new metaphor, leadership as navigation, which captures our findings from the analysis. The first finding shows how the respondents' way of working has changed in the context of a crisis. Further, how there was an image of managers being strategists who were responsible for planning for the future. The crisis has resulted in the respondents focusing more on the present day as the everyday work is increasingly fragmented and characterized by interruptions. Consequently, this has had implications for the respondents' work as they must spend more time being operational and doing hands-on work which further has negative effects on their ability to be strategic and have a long-term mindset.

In our second finding we identified three preconditions that managers highlighted as most important for exercising effective leadership. The three preconditions are setting direction, being present and building trust. We conclude that setting direction and building trust as a leader was considered important regardless of the situation, whereas the importance of being present seemed to have become increasingly important during the last year as the environment had been more emotionally charged due to the pandemic. Our third and final finding is the identified leadership dilemmas which challenged the held preconditions for effective leadership. Further, we categorized the dilemmas as follows: the struggle of not knowing, the struggle of being present and the struggle of retaining trust. We discover that the change of managerial work to be more operational and more reactive by, for example, providing different direction on a daily basis

resulted in consequences for the ability to practice effective leadership that is in line with the held preconditions.

All in all, our empirical findings facilitate an understanding of the nature of leadership and its relationship to managerial work in the context of a crisis. In our specific case, the consequences of the societal crisis have had implications for managerial work which further has affected how leadership is talked about. In other words, the relationship between managerial work and leadership is strongly connected as changes in managerial work leads to changes in the nature of leadership. Lastly, how managers make sense of their own role during a crisis is captured under the metaphor of leadership as navigation where they focus on setting directions in the here and now, reading the map and dealing with an emotional environment.

## **6.2 Theoretical contributions**

As implied in the background and problematization, there has been a considerable amount of research on how leaders are to act and behave while facing a crisis (e.g. see Dotlich, Cairo & Rhinesmith, 2009; Humphrey, 2002; Boltax, 2010). Moreover, we argued that the distinction between leadership and management has received a lot of attention (e.g. see Kotter, 1990; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017) where it is common to focus on the leader in crisis and not consider how the nature of leadership in crisis might be affected by the implications that the crisis has on managerial work. In order to understand the phenomenon, we have presented a new metaphor, “leadership as navigation” that aims to capture how the respondents made sense of their role as well as how leadership is talked about in the context of a crisis.

This thesis has gained insight into how the respondents identify themselves as managers that practice leadership and how the context of a crisis has implications for the relationship between those two. Our research adds to prevalent literature as the findings are similar to Mintzberg (1973) who stated that managers are more likely to be action oriented while facing uncertain times, and further how effective leadership is essential in times of crisis in order to overcome unforeseen events and obstacles (e.g. see Boltax, 2010; Klann, 2003; Maak, Pless & Wohlgezogen, 2021). The thesis also strengthens previous research on the importance of emotional intelligence in times of crisis, as our findings indicate that one must be able to grasp

the emotional state of ones' employees which is in accordance with earlier studies (e.g. see Pescosolido, 2002; Manz, 2015; Dotlich, Cairo & Rhinesmith, 2009). Even if this study has similar findings to previous studies, we add to the research field by examining how changes in managerial work has affected how leadership is talked about in a crisis situation, thereby connecting theories of managerial work and leadership and by doing so, enhancing the knowledge on how the two phenomena are related in the context of a crisis. Secondly, we also contribute to the literature on leadership, with our metaphor on leadership in the societal crisis, which according to our knowledge has not been studied before.

Even if metaphors on leadership already exist within the field of research (e.g. see Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Hatch, Kostera & Kozminski, 2005), we argue that the existing metaphors are not exhaustive, and especially not in the context of a societal crisis. We found that earlier studies on metaphors on leadership did not grasp the characteristics of the studied context and what implications they had for the nature of leadership. Our metaphor, "leadership as navigation", is therefore proposed in order to understand the nature of leadership in a crisis situation. Explicitly, we illustrated how changes in managerial work had affected the way leadership was exercised and talked about in relation to a crisis, where the respondents have been forced to set directions in the here and now, reading the map as well as dealing with an emotional environment. The proposed metaphor not only captures how the respondents made sense of their role in a new context but it also provides insights to the connection between leadership and emotional intelligence.

To conclude, the theoretical contribution of this thesis is captured in the metaphor "leadership as navigation". The metaphor provides a better understanding of how changes in managerial work have implications for the nature of leadership, as the situation hinders managers' ability to provide meaning beyond the here and now.

### **6.3 Limitations**

Our thesis examined what implications the crisis context has on managerial work and how leadership is talked about. Even though the COVID-19 crisis is universal and has created a new working context for the majority of organizations, it is important to acknowledge that the crisis

might have affected organizations differently and the context they operate in might differ. For example, the implications of the crisis might not have affected industries such as higher education in the same way as it has in retail. More likely, our findings are limited to the retail industry, where companies have had to adapt to similar restrictions as the studied organization. Nevertheless, we believe that our finding of how a new context can result in dilemmas that challenge one's preconceived image of how one wants to behave can be generalized to other industries and organizations. Especially among industries who are characterized by a rapid, ever-changing environment.

Another limitation is that our study only contained eleven interviews. It is therefore important to consider that the result might have had a different outcome if more interviews were conducted. Furthermore, one must be aware that our findings are a result of the respondents' subjective thoughts and opinions. It is therefore of importance to acknowledge that the opinions and experiences that were highlighted among our respondents might not be supported or shared by other organizational members. However, our respondents talked openly about their roles, their experiences and what they consider to be challenging as to why we argue that our empirical data is reliable and credible.

#### **6.4 Practical implications**

Based on our findings we believe that this thesis has some practical implications. First of all, it might be fruitful for practitioners and organizations while going through challenging times or crises. Managers have an important role when it comes to dealing with unforeseen events and are argued to be the ones that are to provide direction, meaning and understanding. However, if acknowledging the fact that the context might have implications for the image of being the "strategic manager", one could reach a higher level of acceptance and overcome feelings of frustration, and the experience of being inadequate. Moreover, it became evident that the managerial role has been affected by the specific context, which in turn has affected their leadership actions. As the preconceived image of how to be an effective leader is challenged by the context, we therefore suggest that it would be beneficial for managers to self-reflect more on their own role and at times leave the leadership ideals when the context demands it. In sum,



some reflexivity therefore might prove beneficial for organizations and especially management whilst going through and trying to manage challenging times or events.

### **6.5 Future research**

This thesis has provided important insights to an already complex phenomenon in a new context. Drawing upon our findings, we identified that the leadership theory and linking it to emotional intelligence could be a useful lens in order to answer the questions of how managers made sense of their own role during a crisis. However, we also acknowledge that interest for future research could be to draw on another theoretical lens, for example identity, in order to understand how the societal crisis has worked as a trigger for identity work and how that has affected the managerial role.

As we were only interested in the managers' perceived experiences and realities, one cannot take for granted how the respondents talk about leadership is the same as what they actually do in practice. We therefore suggest further interpretative studies based on observation and more interviews in order to understand if, how and in what way leadership talk results in different leadership actions. To deepen the knowledge on leadership in the context of a crisis it would also be of interest to take on a follower perspective. A follower perspective would give important insight into the nature of leadership in the context of a crisis as their views might differ from the managers.

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