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A case study of how leadership is constructed in a young, fast growing firm

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## A case study of how leadership is constructed in a young, fast growing firm

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## Abstract

This study investigates how leadership is constructed in relation to CoP and how that can affect a team and their performances within a chosen organization. The construction of leadership will in this report have the meaning of how leadership is composed and what it contains. Further, we also address which processes and circumstances, apart from the leader that could be of significance when studying how leadership is constructed. This study uses a qualitative method and is based on a case study conducted in a young, fast growing firm, where a comparison between two teams took place as they showed significant differences although from surface looking very similar. The data was collected during two months were 22 interviews were conducted. During these month close observations were overseen at a weekly basis, connecting the interviewed material to situations appearing in practice. As unlimited access to the company was given, approximately three days per week were spent at the Gothenburg office. Based on our findings, this case study argues for CoP to be a central part of the construction of team leadership. The CoP also requires a key leader who includes, encourages and influences the team in order to reach for the same collective goal. The study further shows that communication is a central part of how leadership is constructed and highlights the importance of communication in relation to leadership. This paper contributes to new insights in the research field as previous studies have not focused on combining CoP with leadership literature in order to understand teams.

### Keywords

## Introduction

What is leadership? According to various research the response appears to be quite simple: *"We assume that leadership is a solution to the problem of collective effort—the problem of bringing people together and combining their efforts to promote success and survival"* (Kaiser et al, 2008, p.98). But from what the majority of existing leadership studies can disclose the answer

is in fact not that simple. Looking historically, the term leadership has experienced numerous stages, starting from traditional leadership theory where the leader was seen as a heroic figure with a high grade of authority who usually is argued to be accountable for the organization's success or failure (Wood, 2005). The topic of leadership has always received great attention and there are thousands of empirical studies and theoretical work that gives the reader what is said to be valid recipes for how to be and become a good leader (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). However, when looking at the results of these leadership studies there is a high level of contradictory in results and also a discontent with what the studies have accomplished, which does not exactly simplify the understanding of leadership (Barker, 1997). Additionally, in recent years a more critical view on leadership has developed where more focus is put on the complexity of leadership where leadership is seen more as an ongoing process (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). However, the mainstream critical studies do not prompt any clear results and it could along these lines be argued to be difficult finding answers or directions about the impact leadership can have on a group or organization. Yet, there is a rising tradition focusing on studying leadership in practice using for example the method of shadowing and other observation techniques (Tengblad, 2012; Nicolini, 2011). Hence, this study will cling on to this rising tradition as it will focus on the  phenomena  of how team leadership is constructed in practice with the help of interviews and observations within a young, fast growing firm. Further the aim is to investigate what consequences team leadership have on a team's functionality and performance. Many studies, e.g. Alvesson and Spicer (2011), bring many legitimate arguments of why we should have a more critical view on leadership, but does not discuss alternative suggestions of what we should do in practice. These studies commence from how to think about leadership and to always be aware of the complexity and ambiguity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Jackson and Parry, 2011; et.al). The lack of practical clear results and the somewhat discouragement of not finding any conclusion in the research area of leadership is from where this study takes its point of departure. As we try to see patterns in how leadership is constructed within the setting of a young and fast growing firm who claim to put intense focus on leadership and their two major teams.

The empirical material for this study was collected in form of a case study, performed on a recruitment company, in this report called Company X, were 22 employees with different levels, both employees with or without a managerial position have been interviewed at the office in Gothenburg. As unlimited access to the company was given, a lot of time was spent at the office in between interviews as we were working on our research as well as listening and making naturalistic observations (Wells, 2010). The firm is young and has shown significant amount of growth within the last couple of years as focus has been put on both leadership and the employees within the organisation. This study will focus on leadership as a process where followers and context is in the spotlight. We aimed to look at everyday tasks as they happened in practice and not only what was told, which made it possible to study the improvised and "on-the-spot" processes within the organisation (Crevani et al, 2010). This process based view with less focus on the leader and more on the group will be connected with a review of community of practice, which brings the group into spotlight and takes away a great focus on the leader as the central part in a group (Lester and Kezar, 2017; Crevani 2010). This view has, in many aspects, the same view as major parts of leadership critics theory. Even though we agree with

the leadership critics given by Alvesson and Spicer (2011) among others, we still believe that leadership has an important role within organizations and groups and therefore distance ourselves from fully agreeing with these critiques. Hence, this case study will also show incentives about how the leader actually does have an important role for a group or an organisation.

The case company can be argued to be of high relevance for leadership studies as the company put emphasis on working collectively as well as highlighting the positive changes made within the organization after hiring a new leader with a new way of working. The empirical material was gathered from the two major teams within the organization, team A and team B and contains respondents from all hierarchical levels in order to create a broader perspective for the study. In addition, this study will have a comparative approach between the two teams, who both have the same working methods as well as the same organizational structure. The differences lay in which line of business they work towards. Team A and team B are both managed by the CEO and the owners of the organization (see figure 1). The findings suggest that one of the teams, team A, perform with higher results and seem to enjoy their work more than the employees in team B. One of the purpose for this study is therefore to find indications and reasons for why these differences have occurred as well as looking into how the role of leadership affects the employees' incentives to perform within the specific organization. This study will investigate if there possibly could be other elements, apart from the leader, that is of significance when it comes to how leadership is constructed as well as putting focus on examining if leadership instead could be seen as a process where co-production and social context is of relevance in relation to work performance.

Due to the high level of contradictory in previous research results and also the discontent with what leadership studies have accomplished in the past the purpose for this thesis is to try to simplify the understanding of leadership by adding strong empirical results into the field of leadership (Barker, 1997; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003 B). Hence, we aim to reduce the conceptual weaknesses that are argued to exist within the field (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003 B). Additionally, the ambition of this report is to focus on elements such as communication and group functionality as well as understanding the local context and cultural dimensions of leadership as we in contrary to Alvesson and Deetz (2000), try to reveal that leadership in fact does exist and investigate what impact it can have on the followers and the team. In line with the critical leadership studies the findings of this report suggests a high level of complexity as many aspects can be argued to play a key role when it comes to leadership. Consequently, the research questions for this report are:

- *Which processes within the studied, young, fast growing firm construct leadership?*
- *What other circumstances, apart from the leader, could be of significance when it comes to how leadership is constructed within teams?*
- *How does the construction of leadership affect a team and their performance?*

# Literature Review

The traditional view of leadership where the leader is portrayed as a hero (Bass, 1985) or where the author claims to have a recipe or steps to achieve "better leadership" (Kotter, 1996) are examples on sources of current mainstream leadership critics, from e.g. Alvesson and Spicer (2011). Another criticized view from previous studies, is the level of power and influence the leader is claimed to have, for example Bass (1985) who discusses that a leader can use transformational processes to move individuals beyond normal expected performance to higher achievement. Something these researchers have in common is their lack of seeing the complexity and instead deliver answers and directions on how leadership should be performed (Kotter, 1996; Bass, 1985, et al) that are criticized to not work in practice (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson, 2012).

## What is leadership? Or rather, how is leadership constructed?

When talking about leadership the ambition is often to try to define it in general terms and thereby trying to say something that is of relevance for many different kinds of settings and situations. The coherent definition of leadership can be seen to highlight the styles, personality, behaviour etc. of different kinds of diverse groups. However, in reality this could be argued to tells us very little about the complexity and richness of the phenomena of leadership. (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000)

Further, research has shown a general discontent when it comes to results in the field. Even though many thousands empirical studies have been conducted, one could see high inconclusiveness and contradictory in the results. Thus, the absence of strong empirical results is argued to lead to conceptual weaknesses (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003 B). Doh (2003) means that there is a possibility that the process of learning leadership is too complex for someone to teach and therefore, some parts of leadership can be taught while others must be learned. Jackson and Parry (2011, p.136) refer to Doh (2003) who expresses *"we can learn to lead, it does not mean that leadership can be taught"*.

As mentioned, leadership is a very complex process and the development can be argued to starts even before birth. Elements, such as family members, education, stamina, sports and childhood experiences influence us and effects the way we act. Conger (1992) means that the "raw leadership" comes from work experience and mentors, that have been shaped from childhood memories which eventually leads to "actual leadership" by providing behaviour skills and knowledge. The final determinations on who gets the chance to lead actually originate from opportunity and luck. (Conger, 1992: 33)

## Critical perspective on leadership

Leadership is often seen an ideology where managers are celebrated as heroes and followers are considered passive and dependent on the leaders (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). Further, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argue that the term leadership often fall into a too broad and powerful discourse, where people are divided into important and superior leaders and less important and capable followers. It is suggested that leadership is one of the most dominant social myths of our time, mainly due to how it has outdone management (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). Another critic against leadership is that many theorists neglect the rest of the

organization, the people influenced by the leadership (Collinson, 2005). It is often seen as a one-way affection where the leader is the one with the power of affecting the followers, not the other way around (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) also discuss that the leader or leadership is too frequently used as the way of making sense of large and complex organization, even though the leader may not have anything to do with it. Leadership captures everything and nothing at the same time, thus the leader becomes the one who gets celebrated for success and blamed for failure (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). In addition, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue that many leadership theory lack studies about what leaders actually do in practice. Many studies are built on qualitative interviews with top-managers which talks about their leadership, which on one hand makes the followers and their influence to become forgotten and on the other hand create a gap between what the leader says he/she does and what he/she actually do (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). The possible existence of leadership such as behaviour, meanings, identity, and discourse can't be taken for granted and after studying leadership in a research and development company, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003 B) find that the way managers describe and perceive leadership in fact differs from how they perform leadership in in practice.

Instead of influencing other through working directly with rules, structures or orders, a leader should according to Alvesson and Spicer (2012) work with influencing the followers' way of thinking, their values and preferences. Moreover, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) suggest that "*it is important to develop a suspicious engagement with the concept leadership*" (p.368). Ordinary acts such as chatting and listening become according to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003 A) significant when framed as leadership. In fact, a lot of leadership does not differ very much from what other people do within an organization, but it gets more meaning when a manager does it (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003 A).

An on-going reflection and communication is encouraged about things like how to establish, maintain, change and sometimes reduce leadership. Leadership should be seen as a co-construction of managers, subordinates, consultants, educators etc. (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011).

## Sources of ambiguity

When studying leadership, we often make sense of whole organisations by studying only the leader, which gives an incorrect picture since organisations often are complex with a lot of complicated situations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). Therefore, looking at the leader as a way of understanding an entire organisation can be argued to be misleading (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). Instead of looking at leadership as something located in a person or a situation, which according to Alvesson and Spicer (2011) is too simple, we need to consider the complexity and ambiguity of leadership. The perceptions in an organisation will change based on aspects like the individual's goals, the organization's expectations on performance and the culture or attitude of the organization (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). The interaction of the leader, followers and context are essential when trying to understand how to lead and affect the employees and their perceptions (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Followers are rarely seen as a source of influence, instead they often become an element in the organisation that the leader has consider (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). This may lead to clashes between the way leaders and followers make sense of a situation and what leaders think it means to lead and what their followers think leadership

looks like (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Accordingly, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) leadership is about understanding how people try to make sense of the world and how they create their perceptions about life.

Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for ambiguity as a basic condition of organisational life, thus a selective process of what is said and done becomes crucial (O'Leary and Chia, 2007). Thus, leadership becomes a complex area (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). According to Alvesson and Spicer (2011) there are three sources of ambiguity, where the first one is the leader. One common assumption of leaders is that they often have a specific style and act accordingly in their leadership, however Alvesson and Spicer (2011) discuss that leader often move between different styles and different leadership processes. In many studies much focus is put on the leader reaching results and getting the employees to follow, thus little focus has been put on the everyday practices such as talking and listening (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003 B). According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003 A) there are many mundane tasks that are neglected in managerial and leadership studies, which also Alvesson and Spicer (2011) discuss as a crucial thing to study. What a leader really do and not only what a leader says he/she does is an area that need to be taken more into account (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). The second source of ambiguity is the followers. Followers have historically been ignored as a source of ambiguity in leadership and also seen as receivers of the acts of the leader (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). However, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) discuss that followers should have a bigger share when it comes to leadership and also that followers can be an important source of influence in an organisation. It is not enough only to consider the followers, it is crucial to study the interaction between followers and leader, where elements such as intentions, interpretations and meaning (Collinson, 2005). These elements will in many situations lead to clashes between followers and leaders (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011), which in turn leads to a higher level of complexity of leadership. The third and last source of ambiguity is context. Context can vary depending on situation, organisation or people involved etc., which makes it a strong contribution to the complexity of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011).

## Process and practice perspective on leadership

Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for moving away from the approach of a leader that leads the responding followers and instead see leadership as a social construction. Even though Alvesson with many other researchers give massive critique (as seen above) towards the existence of leadership and the focus on the leader as an individual, there are other researchers that have a less critical view, with a more process perspective on leadership. For example, Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff (2010) discuss that leadership practices are constructed in interactions where the concept of leadership is both taken for granted but also under constant re-construction. *We must instead try to redefine leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by people in interaction, and study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think." (Crevani et al, 2010, p.78).* Instead of fully criticizing the existence of leadership (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011) an alternative perspective, a "middle way", can be to recognize the importance of not explicitly associate leadership directly to the formal leader, but as a commonly activity within an organisation (Parry and Bryman, 2006). By looking at the local context and involve *all* participants (not just formally appointed leaders) it can open up an opportunity to new ways of collaborations, with openness to

communicate in all levels within a group, that haven't been legitimate in the same way before (Hosking, 2007). Depending on how the process of leadership takes its outcome Parry and Bryman (2006) argue that leadership, or being a person that influences other, does not necessarily have to come from the person in charge, it can come from anyone within the group. Leadership should include efforts to influence projects by more informal means such as casual discussions, tie the employees closely to the company and securing general virtues and principles within the organisation for a stronger collective with the subsidiary (Alvesson, 1992). To use a metaphor, Alvesson (1992) explains this view as leadership as the social integrator, to bring the company together.

Carroll, Levy and Richmond (2008) discuss how despite massive critiques against frameworks, models and instrument for leadership (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003 B) no sufficient alternative of how to translate and develop leadership in different contexts has emerged. According to Crevani et al (2010) studying leadership should be about practice and interactions, where local processes can be constructed and grow into and organisational or social norm. We should look at the everyday tasks that happens in practice and not what only what is told, and by seeing leadership from a practice perspective one could study the improvised and "on-the-spot" processes within an organisation (Crevani et al, 2010).

## Community of Practice

Seeing leadership as a social integration process (Alvesson, 2012; Carroll, 2008; Crevani, 2010) means highlighting the collective and influence of the employees of an organisation. When a group of people who share an interest and engage in a process of collective learning which creates bonds between them, one could call it community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) argue that the phenomena of community of practice can be a tool for understanding the world, in a slightly similar way as Alvesson and Spicer (2011) suggest that organisations are an ambiguous place that has to be reflected upon. Further Wenger (1998) puts a lot of emphasis on the term process, process of culture, process of learning etc. In line with this Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for leadership to be seen as a process or a social construction were all members should be included, not only the leader. Leadership can be seen as a social integrative action, or more specific as an expansion of the culture and ideology of a company (Alvesson, 1992). In addition, Alvesson (1992) claims leadership as a subordinated of the cultural context and therefore, the values, norms and symbolic guidelines, which all are elements that Wenger (1998) discusses could be understood in a better way with the help of CoP.

In a study conducted by Lester and Kezar (2017) CoP was studied in relation to distributed leadership and how the CoP managed to continue this leadership model during critical stages. Also, distributed leadership is a social process with less focus on individual characteristics and qualities (Uhl-Bien, 2006), which is something that Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue as an important part in leadership over all. Distributed leadership can facilitate to encourage bottom-up practices that allow all members to participate and be a part of the decision making, which can result in an increase of the organisational knowledge capability for the overall performance of an organisation, with the help of CoP (Retna and Tee Ng, 2011). Most CoPs in the study by Lester and Kezar (2017) had a key leader, or a community

coordinator, that embody the values and traditions of the group and was the one that the group were formed around, in line with how Alvesson (1992) suggest the leader is a transmitter of culture. Further, Lester and Kezar (2017) argue that the key leader can't handle all the work of the CoP alone and that the leader and the group itself will benefit from helping each other by spreading the leadership from the key leaders to the rest of the group, which corresponds with Alvesson and Spicer (2011) and their approach to consider the followers and not only the leader itself. With distributed leadership it is possible to move the leadership beyond depending solely on the manager, or the key leader, and instead see how leadership arises through interactions and negotiations of the members within a group (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Almost all the CoPs in the study by Lester and Kezar (2017) showed indications of the importance of the peripheral groups outside the inner circle of a group to work alongside the core group. This will expand the boundaries of the core group and thus, provide more opportunities for leadership and maintaining communication to support the mission and values of the CoP (Lester and Kezar, 2017).

# Methodology

## Introduction and setting

The purpose for this study is to investigate how leadership is constructed in a young fast growing company as well as putting focus on examining if leadership instead could be seen as a process where co-production and social context is of relevance in relation to work performance. We will also investigate the significant differences among the two, from surface similar looking teams in terms of leadership, results and teamwork as we try to understand the reasons for how these teams can be so similar but yet very different. The investigated company was chosen due to its youth and amount of growth within the last couple of years as the organization claims to have put much focus on both leadership and their teams which is relatable to what we want to investigate in this report.

The company studied in this report is a Swedish recruitment firm, from here on called Company X. Company X is working with recruitment, staffing and outsourcing and have over 1100 active consultants in Sweden. They have three main offices, the case study in this report was conducted at the head office in Gothenburg, where observations and interviews was collected among the CEO and 21 managers and employees within two teams, 22 interviews in total. Even though the company is in a growing phase, it is still rather small where the employees work closely together. The focus lays among five big clients, which stands for the majority of the revenue. Hence, the company put a lot of effort into taking care of these clients and put high emphasis on the value of these relationships. Company X is a flat and decentralised organisation where internal communication is seen as an important element. Regarding the working process, the company receives orders every week from each client describing how much extra personnel the customer will be needing, it is up to the two teams within Company X to meet these demands. The two teams will in this report be called team A and team B. Both teams have the same working methods as well as the same organizational structure, the differences lay in which line of business they work towards. Team A and team B are both are managed by the CEO and the owners of the organization (see figure 1). Already early in the

process we could see significant differences among the two, from surface similar looking teams in terms of leadership, results and teamwork. Hence, this became our main focus as we tried to understand the reasons in relation to leadership, for how these teams can be so similar but yet very different. More explicitly, this study has investigated how leadership is constructed with the two, from surface looking similar teams and how it may affect the team-results and relationships. The study has focused a leadership perspective but also takes into account the importance of leadership in relation to context and followers, which has been investigated through qualitative interviews within both teams. Figure 1 describes how the two teams are constructed as well as giving insights in which employees have been interviewed as well as their level of education.
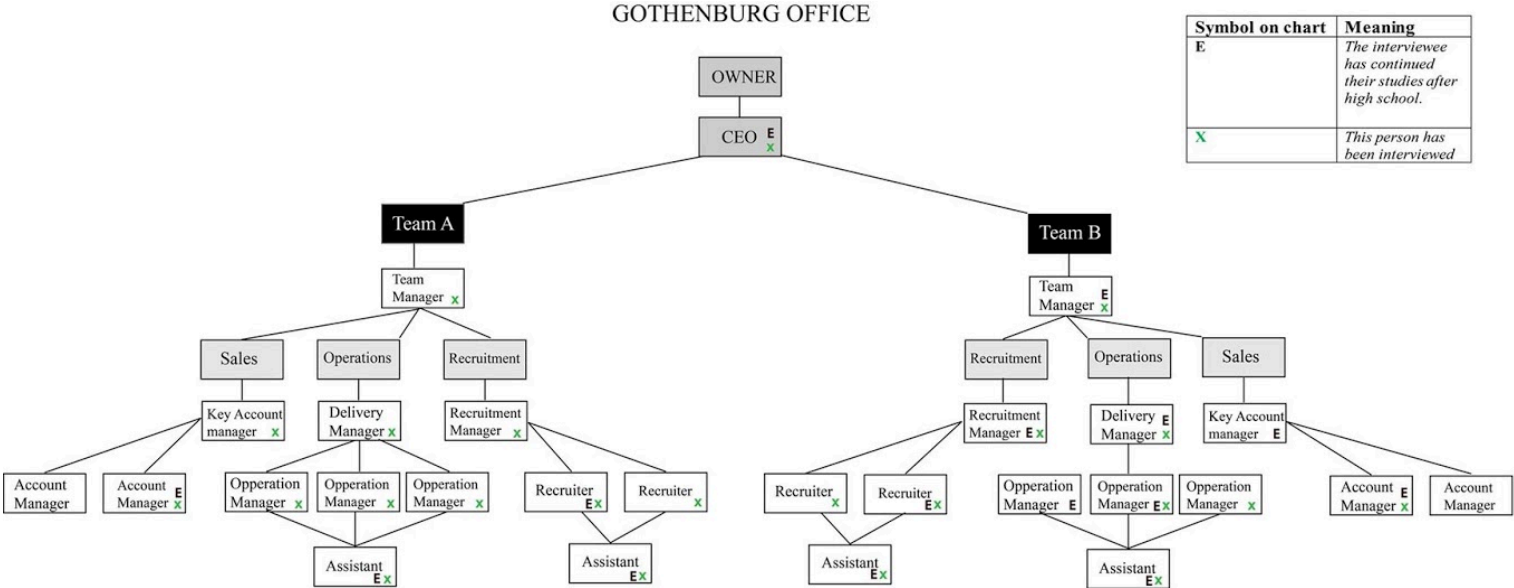


*Fig 1. The chart presents the organisation of the two teams within this case study and their educational background*

## Design of the study

The material collected in this study could be seen to be of significance when studying how leadership can evolve as a process, making the employees work harder and putting in more effort at work depending on social structures in the work environment. With the goal to fulfil the purpose of this study, a qualitative research strategy was established as the most fitting as regular activities and practices are considered best shown with a subjective approach (Silverman, 2013). In order to provide a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon, in our case studying the process of how leadership is constructed within the two different teams, a comparative case study was chosen. Eisenhardt (1989) and Czarniawska (2014) state that a case study can be used as a strategy in order to create a deeper understanding and focus of a dynamic present within a single setting, which is what this thesis are aiming for. A case study was also chosen due to its possibility to access real-life settings and collection of actual experiences (Flyvberg, 2006) as well as to collect knowledge and develop theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). A case study is particularly relevant when the researcher believes the context to be of high relevance to the studied subject which is comparable to our specific case (Yin, 2004). This paper also takes on a comparative approach as the two similar teams within the same

organization was showing significant amount of differences in relation to leadership, group dynamics and results. Hence, a comparative approach is used with the ambition to find differences or similarities between the two teams.

The case study was conducted during two months in the beginning of 2018 where 22 interviews were conducted. During these month close observations were overseen at a weekly basis, connecting the interviewed material to situations appearing in practice (Flyvberg, 2006). As unlimited access to the company was given, we chose to spend as much time at the head office as possible, ending up to approximately three days per week. We usually arrived at the office around 8 o'clock and sat among the employees as we continued our research. During the days spent at the office we had between 1-3 interviews scheduled, spending the hours in between working on our research as well as listening and making naturalistic observations (Wells, 2010). By doing naturalistic observations we were able to study the teams and employees in their natural setting which made it easier to see patterns in behaviours that were of interest (Wells, 2010). We left the office around four in the afternoon, often along with one or many other employees. The organization studied in this report was chosen due to its diverse workforce with a variety of employees from various age, positions and sex. No obvious hypothesis from previous studies was used for direction in the assembling process, grounded theory was first used before connecting the results to previous research within the field (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The study was conducted in two phases, one that focuses on interviews and one overlapping phase of observations of situations and conversations happening in the organization. The interviews were gathered from employees as well as managers with different kind of age, gender and positions within the company. The different respondents were chosen in order for the researchers to get a wide picture of the two different teams in order to find similarities and differences that could be connected to theory and therefore be of significance for the result of the study.

## Data collection

At an initial stage we gathered a meeting with the CEO of Company X in order to get more insight in the organization and its work processes. This information was later used in order to find suitable employees and managers to interview. To get a full picture of each team we requested to interview as many employees as possible. The first interviews were set up by the CEO and were conducted with two managers from each team giving us good access into both teams. After gathering the material from these four interviews a snowballing method were used to continue the collection of data (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). In total, 22 qualitative interviews were conducted, 12 in team A, 9 in team B and 1 with the CEO. All interviews were made with employees and managers of different age and positions within the company (fig.1). All interviews were composed in a semi-structured way which empowered new thoughts and ideas to arise during the interview (Silverman, 2013). To avoid leading questions, the interviews were also open ended (Silverman, 2013; Kvale, 2006). Hence, we wanted the respondents to talk openly about the subjects (Czarniawska, 2014). A semi-structured interview technique allowed us to have open conversation and made us more aware of power asymmetry which according to Kvale (2006) is of high importance in order to stay ethical and objective. All interviews were made face-to face at the case organization and endured around 30 minutes.

Before conducting the empiric material an interview guide was constructed. Silverman (2013) explains how an interview guide can act as a frame for the interviewer and put emphasis on departing from the questions if needed. This way we made sure to eliminate the restriction that an interview guide can have on the interviewer. The aim for our interview guide was to cover the main parts of our area of interest, still keeping an open conversation with open ended question. This technique made it possible for the interviewee to highlight and put emphasis on the parts most important for him/her, which also gave us a better picture of what our report needed to focus on. A brief introduction of the subject of matter as well as lifting the question of anonymity and recording was discussed before starting the interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. After every finished interview, a 10-minute discussion took place in order to gather the most important takeaways. These takeaways were then written down to capture the essence of each and every interview (Martin & Turner, 1986). During the interviews one researcher was responsible for taking notes in order for important issue not being overlooked while the other had the main focus on listening and keep the dialogue floating (Czarniawska, 2014).

| Team A | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Position | In this report called | # of interviews in Team A | Gender |
| Team Manager (TM) | Top Manager | 1 | Male |
| Key Account Manager (KAM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Male |
| Recruitment Manager (RM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Male |
| Delivery Manager (DM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Male |
| Account Manager (AM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Male, male |
| Operational Manager (OM) | Middle Manager | 3 | Male, Male, Woman |
| Recruiter | Middle Manager | 2 | Woman, Male |
| Assistant | Employee | 2 | Woman, Man |
| # of interviews in total | | 12 | |

*Fig 2. The chart presents the interviewees positions and gender within team A.*

| Team B | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Position | In this report called | # of interviews in Team B | Gender |
| Team Manager (TM) | Top Manager | 1 | Woman |
| Key Account Manager (KAM) | Middle Manager | | Woman |
| Recruitment Manager (RM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Man |
| Delivery Manager (DM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Man |
| Account Manager (AM) | Middle Manager | 1 | Man, Man |
| Operational Manager (OM) | Middle Manager | 2 | Woman, Woman, Man |
| Recruiter | Middle Manager | 1 | Woman, Man |
| Assistant | Employee | 2 | Woman, Man |
| # of interviews in total | | 9 | |

*Fig 3. The chart presents the interviewees positions and gender within team B.*

We predicted that it would be a challenge to see what was really going on within the two teams and it was therefore of importance for us to spend as much time as possible at the company. This was preferable as it gave us an opportunity to make observations every time we saw something of interest and made it possible to get a close look into the everyday routines of the

organization (Watson, 2011). Silverman (2013) suggests including several other data collection methods which is why observations was performed both by shadowing, where we followed selected persons in their everyday work as well as stationary observations, where we observed situations during meetings or other happenings (Silverman, 2013). A number of three stationary observations were performed were the researchers joined the weekly meetings in each team. The researchers also spent four days shadowing both middle managers and employees. However, most of our observations were done only by being present at the company and engaging and listening to spontaneous conversation between, about and among employees. All observations were done at the head office in Gothenburg, were the employees of the two teams were present. The aim of the observations was to give us an idea of how the employees and managers communicate with each other and also why they behave the way they do (Flyvberg, 2006). It could be argued to be preferable as it simplify the distinction of the statements made during interviews (Watson, 2011). Observations were also conducted in order to find the "real" answers as Van Maanen (2011) mentions could be seen as an obstacle due to respondent often being reluctant to discuss negative aspects of the organization.

During observations notes were taken by both of the researchers. Martin & Turner (1986) advocate to not wait too long to take notes after your observation. Hence, when the observation was finalized a quick discussion took place in order to at the end of the day write down and explain the observation in a descriptive way. This way we made sure we didn't lose any important setting or surroundings that might had interfered with the observations (Silverman, 2013). By both focusing on observations and interviews we were able to include the different layers and complexities that a company can obtain (Martin & Turner, 1986). Van Maanen (2011) also discusses how observations can benefit the research as it can give a new picture to the setting, one that the researcher has not seen before. Observations therefore helped us understand connections to why employees acted the way they did and how leadership was performed in practice.

## Data analysis

When beginning to analyse the data a grounded theory approach was taken. Grounded theory is described to make it possible to ground an abstract notion of a subject in the collected data (Martin & Turner, 1986), which was of relevance for us due to the complexity of our studied topic and also due to the large amount of data collected through the semi structured interviews. Using grounded theory also made it possible to compare the collection of data as time progressed which enabled us to combine different theories and for us to discover new concept based on theory and from the collected data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

We organized the material gained from interviews by transcribing them, making the data more rational and easy to structure. Transcription and coding of data was continuously worked on as well as finding the subjects of highest relevance and who were recurrent, which made it easier and more clear for us to analyse (Martin and Turner, 1986; Silverman, 2013). Since the interviews were semi-structured, we gathered big amounts of collected data where many theoretical concepts and models could be applied. Hence, using grounded theory made it possible for us to focus on the parts most relevant for the research question and find patterns suitable for the analysis (Glaser & Barney, 1995).

In order to best approach our data we took help from previous studies within the field to

find inspiration on how to divide our data and continue the coding process. The data analysis started after a few interviews and was done in phases which early on gave us an implication on how proceed and divide the coding. We took use of Czarniawskas (2014) approach and tried to find connections in the collected data by comparing the parts we claimed should have more focus. The core concepts of coding are argued by Langley (1999) to appear already at an early stage in the process and therefore the later interviews were coded in relation to the already existing categories. First the collected material was divided in five categories, Co-production of leadership, Freedom in work, the existence of leadership, Employees incentives to work hard/less hard and Social environment. These categories were chosen due to its relevance in relation to the collected data and made a base for the theoretical framework in this report. However, grounded theory argues that new themes could arise as the collection of data progresses, described as emergence of theoretical accounts and therefore, the categories were modified as the study moved forward (Martin and Turner, 1986).

A limitation of this study is that is cannot be used for generalization as every organization can be argued to be different. Moreover, something to take into consideration is that personal questions asked during interviews can be sensitive for the respondents to answer. This may lead to the risk of the answers being modified from the truth. By keeping both the company and the employees anonymous, and instead focus in an objective way exclusively on their answers and actions we tried to eliminate this limitation. However, due to the amount of time spent at the head office together with the deep insight in the organization through qualitative interviews the validity of this thesis and its results could be argued to be high and of significance for future studies.

## Empirical Results

The company studied in this report is a Swedish recruitment firm, from here on called Company X. The company is working with recruitment, staffing and outsourcing of personnel and interviews have in this report been done exclusively at the head office in Gothenburg. This empirical results are based on 22 interviews and observation from the two teams within the office, team A and team B. Both teams have the same working methods as well as the same organizational structure and are both managed by the CEO and the owners of the organization which can be seen in figure 1, page 10.

### Can leadership be taught?

**Team A:**
The majority of the employees with management positions in team A put emphasis on their previous experience within sports as a crucial part in how they behave and react in work situations. They discussed that their previous life and background, in particular sports and being part of a team related to sports, affect the way they perform leadership today. They all explain how much they have learned from those experiences when it comes to how to handle different types of people, stress and working together to reach the same goal. *"It's often not the result that matters in the long run, it's the journey towards it. When you finally reach the goal, you realise that working against the goal together with the people you like was the most rewarding part of the journey" -Middle manager team A.* Another middle managers explains that his

childhood has had a high impact in how he performs leadership today. He grew up among as he explains it "the wrong kind of people" which have acted as a source of motivation in order to remove himself from that particular situation. He also claims that his childhood has taught him valuable lessons in how to understand different people, as he knows that they all can have variable backgrounds who impacts their behaviour. When describing what good leadership is, many of the members in team A mention that it is of importance for the leader to be flexible and for him/her to adapt to the situation. The members of team A with a managerial position highlighted the importance of being able to adapt their leadership depending on the receiver, something that they claimed was the key to being a good leader. Also, a lot of the members in team A stressed the importance of having someone to look up to as a role model, someone that work hard and thus create an environment for hard working individuals. *"My boss needs to work at least as much as myself, otherwise the respect as a leader will be lost. Therefore, I have become extremely aware of me working more than my employees. My boss likes to handle things on his own and often I don't know exactly what he is doing or what he expects of me, I don't want my employees to feel that way"* - Middle manager team A. The observations also showed that most of the members in team A with a manager position acted with a humble approach to the fact that they were leaders over other individuals. This was showed by continuous communication with their subordinates, giving a helping hand if needed. Especially one particular middle manager, who worked a lot with short employee meetings to give them feedback on things he thought could improve and gave them tips in general. The majority of the members in team A don't have a higher education than high school. Instead many of the middle managers have been working at company X for a longer period of time and instead grown within the company. For example, a middle manager started as a warehouse worker for one of the company's clients in Gothenburg. He then grew to become a production leader and eventually got the chance to work at the head office instead, where he now has a number of employees below him.

**Team B:**
The majority of both middle managers and employees in team B comes from a background with higher education and the majority of those has taken courses in recruitment and leadership, which especially one operational manager underlined had changed her way of acting as a manager. *"Before the leadership course I had a completely different view of leadership. This course did open my eyes and changed the way I thought about leadership."* - Middle manager team B. The top manager in team B has been in the same position for 15 years and the members in team B are of differences ages and have worked at the company for various time frames. Some members in team B has worked at company X for many years and some were recruited only a few months back. Two months ago a new employee was hired and have since that time given pointers in how she believed the recruitment process could enhance, with support from her theoretical knowledge from university. These suggestions have been perceived in both positive and negative ways. One middle manager explains the suggestions as *"Everything seems so simple when you study at the university, you learn how to do things through models and by reading theoretical articles but this is not how it works in real life. I have worked as a recruiter for three years and there is not simple 'model' of how to perform your work. At least not when you work with people."* However, another middle manager says that he is satisfied

with the new inputs as he believes there is always room for improvement. *"Our new assistant has come with a lot of new suggestions in how to improve our work, it feels good to have someone with a fresh set of eyes".*

**Analysis**

The answers that were discussed varied between team A and team B in the majority of areas that were covered during the interviews at Company X. Even though only a few employees in team A had higher education one could not see any indication of managers in team A performing a lower quality of leadership (measured from the employees' satisfaction of their boss) or any lower performance when it came to reaching the budget. Quite the opposite, it was team A that seemed to be most satisfied with their closest managers and working routines. Team B, were almost everyone came from a higher education, had a harder time keeping up with both the numbers and getting along with their closest manager. One could argue for a possibility of clashes arising between the employees with higher education, that had learned a lot of theories etc., and the employees that have learned more from practice, e.g. team A. We believe that this could be explained by team B having higher expectation on both their work and their boss as a result of going through a higher education, which prevent them from feeling satisfied with a job where they don't see any development. In team A many of the middle managers discussed that they had learn leadership from own experiences (Conger, 1992) or actions of leadership in practice. When discussing leadership with many of the members in team A we could see that they all have a background of result driven activities such as sports. The same individuals that talked about their leadership in relation to previous experiences within a sports team were the ones we also consider to work hard and to be driven. Doing sports is also something that they all mentions as an important aspect in how they stay motivated, as they reach for a goal and find the way to the goal very fulfilling, often referencing it to performing a sport. However, this assumption is based on how these middle managers talked about leadership and not how they actually acted in practice, which is something that for example Alvesson and Spicer (2011) criticize. We believe that it is hard to find evidence of the previous sport activities as a strong contributing source of good leadership, since it could be something that they have found as a common variable within the team and made the assumption that sport is the key factor, thus they believe "good leadership" is constructed through a background of sports. On the contrary, if the reality looks like these middle managers in team A are saying, this could be argued to show that leadership might be formed already early in a person's life, upbringing, from activities and friends and therefore have a high impact on how you chose to perform leadership when you get older (Conger, 1992). As Conger (1992) mentions "raw leadership" has its outcome from work experience and mentors, and these have often been shaped from childhood memories which eventually leads to the "actual leadership" by providing behaviour skills and knowledge.

The observations indicated that the members with a manager position in team A practiced their leadership through actions and thus spread their leadership though the other employees. For example, one middle manager in team A acted out his leadership though talking and always checking with the employees to make sure they were on board, while another middle manager in team A acted out his leadership through working long hours and was the first to enter the office and the last to go. In contrast, the members in team B with a manager position sat by themselves (often in a smaller room) and only communicated with their colleagues at official

meetings. This may indicate that a theoretical background from higher education does not automatically lead to higher performance in monetary results nor performing a leadership that is perceived as well working leadership by the subordinates, in other words this points towards leadership being too complex to teach (Doh, 2003). Instead this study showed implications that leadership can come from own experiences and that it is possible (or perhaps even better) for an employee to learn from practice and see how the manager act and then follow his/her actions when the employee become a leader himself/herself. A big part of being a leader could therefore be argued to be about adapting to a situation and see the leadership as a learning process of interactions (Crevani, 2010). Therefore, we believe that leadership cannot be learned from a recipe, which also Alvesson and Spicer (2011) criticize and discuss to be a big mistake within leadership studies. In line with this many middle managers in team A stated the importance of being able to handle different types of humans with different personalities, in order to be able to communicate in an effective way. However, one can question if this is something they actively work with or if the members in team A often have the same opinions as they can be seen to be quite homogeneous and be of same age. Therefore, the middle managers might not have to adapt their behaviour as much depending on who they are talking to. Hence, even though it's hard to find concrete evidence we believe that team B may have a harder time to understand each other which also requires more effort from all members within the team. One of the main reasons for this is their lack of communication, something that is noticeable much better n Team A. Communication in Team A was better in all aspects in comparison to Team B, both when it comes to how superiors communicated with subordinates, how the members of the team communicated with each other and also how communication was modified dependent on context. With this stated, it can be argued for team A to possibly be a smoother running machine contradictory to team B and also that communication is a central part of how leadership is constructed. In addition, in contrary to Alvesson and Spicers (2011) critique against seeing the leader as a hero this study show that it can be important to have a role-model to look up to and to get inspiration from. Even though the leader alone can't make an organization perform, it could be discussed that the leader can have a significant role as a role-model to "lead to way". Which brings us to the next section of this report, where the extent of influence a leader can have will be discussed.

## Leaders and their leadership can influence organizations

**Team A:**
In 2015, a new top manager for team A was hired. The top manager has the overall overview of team A and works under the CEO of the company. Many members in team A has worked at Company X for more than two years and has therefore been a part of this transformation. The majority of the members in team A mentioned that they could see a significant change within the culture and the work processes after the change. According to the respondents it seemed as if the top manager succeeded to change the work environment by entering the company without any consideration of how they worked before. However, one middle manager said that *"A number of employees that worked here two years ago have left, because they did not fit in anymore. Many of them were from the older generation and had a hard time understanding the change that were happening pretty fast"* - Middle manager team A. The new top manager

pushed for development, quick results, expansion and was not satisfied with "slow results". After the new top manager was hired, nearly everyone that has been hired in team A has been young and driven, something that the majority in team A described as a source of a changing work environment. When asking the members of team A they all agreed that it is important for a leader to know what the employees are doing and have good idea of what is going on within the organisation, who is doing what etc. Otherwise they all agreed that praise and positive feedback does not matter since it loses credibility. Instead of giving praise many of the members in team A described a good leader as a prestigeless person that sees where help is needed and have a good vision of what needs to be prioritized. Also, the majority of the respondents gave the impression that they consider it to be important for a leader to be straightforward and honest, however not mean.

**Team B:**
One middle manager in team B mentioned that she is dissatisfied with one of her superiors and feels like she does not see the employees as individuals that need different kind of encouragement. The same superior was also described by some members in team B as someone who work a lot alone and no one had a good idea of what job assignments she was really doing. Another middle manager in team B described one of her superiors as a person who likes to have power and takes advantage of this by giving critiques to the younger and more uncertain employees. This specific middle manager has been working at Company X for many years and expressed herself as a strong woman, her superior therefore never have tried to authorize her power over her. *"When my boss and I has a difference in opinions she often takes out her aggression on the young and new employees in our team, which I believe is unprofessional."* - Middle manager team B. In team B the answers on the question of good leadership pointed more against the importance of being able to listen and consider other suggestions coming from other members than the manager her/himself. *"My boss usually has a pretty clear vision of what she wants and does not listen to us 'regular' people when we come with a suggestion. That is not good leadership in my opinion"* - Middle manager team B. Another middle manager described how he always has to handle everything by himself and never gets any help unless he literally asks for it. The majority of the members in team B described that they often work individually and during the observations we saw that no one asked another if they needed help. Despite this, many members in team B highlights the importance for a manager to be able to adapt to a situation and see the employees and their needs.

**Analysis**
When looking into the reasons for the differences between team A and B we believe that the change of the top manager in team A has been of significance in how the employees plan and execute their work assignments. One could argue for the new top manager to become a social integrator, as he is a transmitter of culture and value (Alvesson, 1992). The new top manager was described by the other members in team A to push for development, quick results and expansion and he was not satisfied with "slow results". This was something that some of the middle managers in team A discussed to be the reason for why the people who not were in line with his vision left the company, which could be argued to show that the new top manager in team A changed the culture within the team (Alvesson, 1992). Even though Alvesson & Spicer

(2011) has a critical view of the existence of leadership where processes as followers and context play a key role, we saw tendencies during interviews and observations that the new top manager in team A had some level of influence to affect these processes, in line with Carroll et al (2008) and their "middle way approach" to leadership between seeing the leader as a hero and the unquestionable critique (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2011).

The new top manager in team A described his actions as actively working on the culture as he put value in hiring young and driven employees who according to him have shared his vision of work ethics. However, one could question if it is hundred percent the actions of the top manager that has led to the outcome of performing better monetary results and development of a better culture within in team A. We argue that this could be a too complex situation with more ambiguity than the interviews in team A can describe. Therefore, one cannot say for sure that there is a direct connection in the hiring of a new top manager and the increasing monetary results in team A. Therefore, we believe that the new top manager had some level of influence, however not the high level that many of the members in team A argue for.

The majority of the members in team A has worked at company X since before the new top manager entered. From the answers on the interviews we could see an indication that it was the younger employees that could handle the change in a better way and therefore stuck around and continued their work at the company. This indicates that even though the leader plays a key role in the change, it's not only the leader who made the change happen, it's also the rest of the organization such as the young employees (Collinson, 2005). Since the younger employees adapted better to the change and this was also the generation the new top manager put emphasis on while hiring, we argue that the success of team A cannot be seen as a one-way affection. Instead, the leader has an impact on the followers as well as the followers have an impact on the leader and the organization (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). This way, we can see that the leadership practices are constructed in interactions between managers and subordinates (Crevani et al, 2010). When comparing to team B, you can see that many of the members with manager position for this team has been the same for 15 years, something that can indicate that a change in this team have not been present for a long time. One could therefore argue for team B to be stuck in old patterns as a lot of negativity is placed on the top and middle manager's leadership, something that possibly may affect the employees work ethics as well. It seems like many of the members in team B often blame their superiors for the lack of monetary results. Instead we argue that the reason can depend on everyone within the team and their actions as they all contribute to leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). Subsequently, it could be discussed that the members of team B associate leadership directly to the formal leader in order to have something or someone to blame for failure and for their dissatisfaction at work, when it could be argued that they instead should take more responsibility for their actions and have the approach of leadership as a commonly activity within an organisation (Parry and Bryman, 2006).

It's obvious that the members with a manager position in the two teams act very different and that their view of leadership differs from each other. One middle manager in team B was described by the subordinates as enjoying to have power and takes advantage of this by giving critiques to the younger and more uncertain employees. This leadership could be identified with what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) discusses as a leadership driven by rules, structure and orders. Alvesson and Spicer (2012) instead mean that a leader should work with influencing the

followers' way of thinking, their values and preferences which cannot be seen in team B were many of the members with a manager position are described to handle things by their own and not care about the employees. This leadership approach could instead be seen in team A, where many of the members described that there is a freedom of action and everyone dares to speak out, something that we also saw during the observations. However, it's obvious that the members with a manager position have authority and are the ones making the decisions which makes us question if the climate within the group really is as open as it seems. The fact that the leader gets involved and become "one of the guys" seemed to be appreciated in team A and also something that the members in team B didn't talk about at all, which can indicate that it is something team B is lacking. We could during observations see that the middle managers in team A helped their colleagues out much more than the middle managers in team B, which according to Alvesson and Spicer (2012) is of importance. Crevani et al (2010) state that everyday tasks happening in practice, such as chatting and listening, should be studied as it is important in the process of leadership. In fact, a lot of leadership does not differ very much from what other people do within an organization, but it gets more meaning when a manager does it (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003 A). This was seen in team A when one middle manager did telephone interviews, which is something that the employees normally are supposed to do. However, he saw that this needed to be prioritized and therefore acted upon it, even though it was not really his assignment as a middle manager. The leadership styles in the two teams were noticeable to be different, as the members with a manager position in team A encouraged an on-going reflection and communication while many of the members with a manager position in team B did not communicated at all (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). This could be argued to have a high impact on the employees and also the team as a whole as Alvesson and Spicer (2012) and Hosking (2007) mention reflection and communication as important for leadership.

When interviewing top and middle managers in both teams about their position they often responded with long and evaluated answers which gave the impression of them really knowing what they were doing. However, when interviewing their employees and observing their work one could see that the way they describe their leadership often did not go in line with the way they act. Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for many leadership theories to lack studies about what leaders actually do in practice as well as many studies being built on qualitative interviews with top-managers which talks about their leadership. This is similar to what we found in our research. For example, a member of team B with a manager position believed her leadership to be very good while the employees did not agree. Alvesson and Spicer (2011) also mean that this leads to the followers and their influence to often become forgotten and also for it to create a gap between what the leader says he/she does and what he/she actually do in reality, which we also could see in our research. Therefore, we argue that leaders need to take their followers into consideration and allow themselves to be influenced by opinions instead of only acting in a way that suits the leader himself/herself. Something we consider was lacking especially in team B.

## The importance of context and followers - understanding the complexity of leadership

**Team A:**
When getting asked about leadership, many of the middle managers put emphasis on the process of syncing with the environment and surroundings. One middle manager also discussed that interaction is an important part in his leadership: *"I'm not just watching what other people do, I ask how I can help".* In team A many of the middle managers mentioned that they did not believe in perfect leadership, instead they describe leadership as more about the ability to adapt to the surroundings. Further, the same individuals also claimed that it's therefore important to see the employees and members of the team on an individual level, that everyone is different and therefore needs to be talked to and treated in different ways. However, one could question if the middle managers may have a too romantic approach when discussing leadership and what they are saying is in fact is not what they believe in reality. One middle manager mentions that the most important thing in being a good leader is to build relationships with the employees and understand that all individuals are different. Different personalities need different styles of leadership and this is something she is working on a daily basis. *"One employee might need praise in an open environment where everybody can hear what is being said while another one would prefer to get the praise in a closed environment. It's therefore crucial for the leader to be responsive, to listen and to understand the employees on an individual level."*

Many of the respondents with a middle manager position also put emphasis on context as different situations require different types of leadership. They describe it as some situations can be very stressful and the leader then needs to step up and take control, while the leader in another setting must be very calm and more of a friend. One employee in team A mentions that the leader encourages the employees to come with own suggestions and improvements, as well as two middle managers mentioned that they see their team members as equals and values their opinions more than the CEOs.

**Team B:**
When discussing leadership with the members of team B many of the answers differed in relation to the answers given from team A. Even though the members of team B also mentioned the importance of communication many of the members mentioned it as something they are lacking from their middle managers and top manager. The middle managers and employees middle managers and employees in team B talked about how tasks often become misunderstood and that the loss of effectiveness is notable. The reason for this is explained to depend on the fact that the middle manager and employees often don't know what is expected of them. One employee mentioned *"Sometimes I get the feeling that my boss expects me to read his mind".* Another employee mentions a situation where her superior gave her instructions to a specific type of work assignment, however he was not satisfied with the results as it was not what he expected. During observations in team B we as researchers could see incentives that many members in team B with a manager position did not listen to their subordinates. When the employees or middle managers expressed concerns or improvements they were often neglected and this was also something the middle managers expressed during interviews. One middle

manager mentioned *"Sometimes it feels like I'm just one among everyone else, actually I'm looking for new positions within other companies"*

**Analysis**

As the theory of leadership critics suggests (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Collinson, 2005; et.al) more focus should be put on the followers and less on the leader itself. One could therefore argue that it is crucial for a leader to have the tools to interpret and understand the perception of the followers (Collins, 2005) to be able to reach them and connect with them. The members with a manager position in team B did not seem to have the approach of being open and involved with their subordinates at a deeper level, while the middle managers and top manager in team A stated that they often took advices and appreciated the influence by the followers. According to the middle managers in team A they seemed to have the understanding that the employees can have better or other ideas then themselves. We question if this statement can be constructed with a background of how the respondents consider the leadership discourse to look like, in other words they state answers they believe we as researcher "want to hear".

Having an open environment were feedback and advice is looked upon as rewarding and as an asset could be argued to lead to an organization where communication flows more easily which in turn can help the organisation to deal with the complexity of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). This was more noticeable in team A where it could be interpreted from the observations that the team worked more with an open communication, trying to create an understanding of how their colleagues made sense of a situation. By looking at the local context and involve *all* participants it can open up an opportunity to new ways of collaborations, with openness to communicate in all levels within a group (Hosking, 2007). An environment where the employees do not dare to speak up and do not want to express their opinions, could instead be argue to create a one-way communication where the leader will get much focus and attention and thus be blamed for failure that he/she does not deserve. Indications of this behaviour could be seen in team B, which also could be a reason for why many employees and middle managers expressed a feeling of dissatisfaction for their superiors. We believe it can be seen as a down moving spiral where many of the members with a manager position pull back and does not want to be involved with the other team members, which in turn make the members doubtful and not willing to share their thoughts and reflections. The top manager in team B mentioned that she has taken leadership courses and had learned a lot from them, therefore one could imagine that she knows in theory what "good leadership" is. A possible outcome of this way of thinking could be that the top manager neglects the subordinates and work alone without being able to adapt to the rest of the team. However, as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003 A) discuss, leadership is fragile and managers often have a vision of how they want to act, yet it's often seen to be hard to stick to. In contrast, team A seemed to work more with a two-way affection (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011), moving away from solely the perception that the manager should lead and the employees should respond and instead worked with leadership as a social construction. Both middle managers and employees mentioned that suggestions and improvements are encouraged and seen as positive. However, during our time spent at the company we as researchers could not see any suggestions either coming or being encouraged from the employees or middle managers. This could be argued to show that what both employees and managers say must not always be what they do in practice (Alvesson and Spicer,

2011). In addition, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for the leader to work with influencing the followers' way of thinking and their values and preferences.

## Team before individual - creating knowledge through communities

**Team A:**
When studying how group dynamic differed in each of the team it was clear that the teams were very different. Team A put much emphasis on their colleagues and expressed that *"If you enjoy your colleagues and work, you are happier and work harder"* - Employee team A. The majority of the members of team A also mentions that it is of importance to see that there is a possibility for development. Team A were conclusive when mentioning good team as an important reason when it comes to working harder within the organisation. One other important element mentioned by the employees was that the middle managers as well as the top manager sometimes gave praise to people who "did not deserve it". For example, one middle manager described that a project was showing negative monetary results but the middle manager who was in charge still got praised. She meant that this resulted in a loss of credibility and respect for the middle manager in charge, something that is hard to win back. Instead, the majority of the members in both teams mentioned that more responsibility is a sign of trust and therefore actions in form of more responsibility motivates them more than only saying they are doing a great job. *"When your boss gives you new assignment you know that he is satisfied with you, then it feels more real"* - Middle manager team A. One of the middle managers in team A mentioned that it does not matter from where the praise is coming from, he means that it almost means more when it comes from someone who works close to you and thereby knows how much effort you put in. When asking the employees and managers about what makes them work harder the answers were very individual. One middle manager said he works harder when getting critique while another one said she works harder from personal goals and thrive out of competition. Another middle manager also put emphasis on teamwork: *"It is important to work both individual and it teams, a team is not as vulnerable as an individual"*. One thing that that all members within team A mentioned as an important matter for enjoying work is their colleagues. During observations done within team A it was noticeable that they often talked about subjects that were none job-related, such as their weekend plans, parties and social life. It was apparent from our observations that the atmosphere in this team was very laid back, with a lot of laughter and good relationships among the employees. In general, we got the impression of a good social environment. Many members in team A also mentioned that it's important with good communication, open dialogue and giving good feedback as well as critique. They also highlighted the importance of having fun outside of work and helping each other out as it is important to "give each other energy". Another element mentioned as important by the employees within team A was to have a good relationship with their superior and that the superior needs to be "one of the guys". In line with this a middle manager in team A said that it is important to trust that all team members put in their time at work and see what needs to be done without clear directions from the top manager. Hence, he also argued for the importance of trust and to trust that delegated work gets done.

**Team B:**

The members in both teams mentioned that it is of importance for them to feel needed at work and to get paid in relation to their workload. However, the members in team B all mentioned that they feel neglected by their superior which also could be seen through observations. For example, one employee was asking for help with a task she had been given from a middle manager. It was clear that the employee had a lot on her table and needed some assistance. Instead of taking action, the middle manager told her to do her best and then continued to make calls by her own. As mentioned in team A, many of the members in team B also mentioned that praise is a source of motivation, however they also said that it is crucial that they feel like the praise is genuine and honest, something that were mentioned by the employees to be an issue in team B. *"When praise is given to often, and also given to someone who in my opinion do not deserve it is loses credibility. How do I even know if my work then is good?"*- Employee team B. A middle manager in team B also mentioned that she does not care about praise from her superior as she does not respect her or thinks she knows what she is doing. *"The manager needs to see people for who they are. She is very close minded and does not value other employees' opinions, everyone needs to adapt to her ways. As a leader you need to realise that everyone is different, someone might need a pat on the back while others don't."* A middle manager in team B also described her relationship with her boss as *"My boss does not have any social competence, he can't see the individual differences of the employees".* She described her superior as negative and that this has an impact on everyone in the team. One employee also mentioned that he loses energy in work when he does not feel needed or seen *"I don't want to feel like a hamster in a wheel".* When doing observations within team B one could see a lot of tension among the members. For example, when one employee tried to get the attention of the other team members she was often neglected and ignored. Also, the conversations were mainly job related and when the conversations were about anything else they were very formal and short. One middle manager expressed that she does not have a very good relationship with her colleagues, it's mainly work based. However, she has one colleague that she is a bit closer to. She said that *"Sometimes we take a glass of wine just to ventilate about the work situation".* Another middle manager in team B also mentioned that he likes to work alone and does not enjoy his team as he believes the team has a lot of tension and "back talk" which leads to a lack of trust and negativity. *"They are supposed to help me, but I usually do everything myself"* - Middle manager team B. Many of the members in team B also explained that the team had a better team spirit if the numbers were good, which was also expressed by a middle manager *"the team is ok as long as the numbers are good".* When observing team B one could see that the members have very different personalities and are of different age, in different stages in life and have different work ethics. All employees at the company could in general describe their work situation as having much freedom. The top manager described it as she likes flexible work hours, but have learned from experience to not bring work home. Instead she is thorough with sticking to her 40 hours a week. *"I have already been through that, when I was 25 years old i worked tirelessly but now when I'm 35 I know that it's just not worth it."*

**Analysis**

When looking at team A the members with a manager position seemed to have the approach of feeling equal to their employees and colleagues. This way, the leadership could be argued to be

more informal where casual discussions are taken place and the members are tied closely together. This could lead to the top and middle managers in team A securing general virtues and principles within the organisation for a stronger collective with the subsidiary (Alvesson, 1992). During the observations we saw that the members in team A share a special bond as they are similar in age, have similar interest and are driven by similar things. Based on the observations they also seem to really like each other and talk outside of the work environment. This could be argued to show tendencies of community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) argue for leadership to be seen as a process or a social construction were all members should be included, not only the leader which can be connected to how the members in team A describe their team. The members of team A talk about basically everything which therefore lead to the members knowing each other on a personal level. This could be argued to give them a better understanding on how to communicate about work related subjects in a more efficient way.

Regarding how the employees discusses praise from their colleagues, praise from leaders did not seem to be connected to feeling appreciated. However, we question if this is the full story as many of the members during observations seemed to work towards making their superior satisfied, and were also satisfied from praise and positive feedback. In team A the majority believed that action speaks louder than words, and instead of showing appreciation by saying praise, many of the respondents discussed that the superior can show it by actions in practice and by giving more responsibility. Therefore, it is important for a leader to be aware of the impact his/her actions have as the receiver can interpret the praise in different ways. How a leader sees a situation might not always be how the followers interpret the same event (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). In team B praise was generally not seen as positive as the members did not trust or believe that their superior really knew what the subordinates were doing in practice. Hence, praise in both teams was seen to mean more when it came from colleagues as they believed that the colleagues have a better understanding of what has been done, in comparison to a manager who may not always be present. It was also discussed in both teams that praise sometimes is given to people who don't deserve it and this makes the employees lose trust in their superior. However, we believe that from a manager's perspective it is possible that he/she can use praise to encourage the team when the team did not perform well, which can make them want to continue working hard. In addition, it was discussed by many respondents, especially from team A, that their superior rarely gave praise to the "high performers". The same respondents also said that this did not bothered them, but we question if that is the case and we believe that this actually have an impact on them as they put much emphasis on this subject during the interviews. When asking a manager at a high level within the company he explained this behaviour as he did not want the lines between the employees to be "good" and "bad" and instead encourage the ones that had fallen behind to be able to catch up with the others. When looking at how top and middle managers work with praise in company X one could argue for seeing a clear one-way affection where the leader thinks he/she has a clear picture of what is going on inside the organization. We question this way of leading and agree with the critics from Alvesson and Spicer (2011) within that area. Therefore, one could question their answers and also see how important it is for a leader to be aware of the impact of his/her actions as the receiver can interpret the praise in different ways. How a leader sees a situation might not always be how the followers interpret the same event (Alvesson and Spicer,

2011). This can be argued to shows one implication of why it's so hard to define and fine concrete guidelines in how to act and think when it comes to leadership, due to the contrasts in interpretations and context.

One thing that all members within team A mentioned as an important element for enjoying their work is their colleagues, something that team B did not mention at all. The members in team A seemed to have the approach of seeing their colleagues as a mix between friends and colleagues while team B did not seem to think of their co-workers as more than just "colleagues". The members in team A were conclusive when mentioning the team as important when it comes to working harder within the organisation, in contrary no one in team B mentioned this as an important variable. Even though, one could see big differences among the teams and one could argue for both team A and B to be CoPs (Wenger, 1998), however one of them, team A, is a more functional CoP. The members within team A all share knowledge and previous experiences, which help the team to develop and create new ideas and solve problems that would be hard to solve individually (Wenger et. al, 2002). Team A could also be seen to be connected by the passion for results, being very committed, and identify with each other, something that can be argued to show similarities to CoP (Wenger et. al, 2002). When looking at how the members of team B act, talk and behave they all have different personalities, are of different age and have different drive. However, they also have similarities that we consider make team B a CoP, for example their shared background of higher education. When comparing team A to team B one could argue for team B not to have developed the same team spirit and functional communication nor a strive to help each other out. Hence, we believe a group who is held together by shared responsibilities and a vision to work together could be a major key in performing better monetary results as well as creating a stronger team. Further, the members of team B are seen not to work collectively or help each other out, instead this team is influenced by individual work where decisions are taken by superiors without including their subordinates (Wenger et. al, 2002). This could be one of the reasons for why team A shows better results that team B, because they work together as a group, helping each other out without being forced by management to work together. They have created the working environment and the group dynamics on their own, where communication is a central part, which could be argued to make team A a stronger CoP than team B. The members with a manager position in team A often ask and are aware if help is needed and then act upon it which creates a good work environment built on appreciation, while in team B the leaders role was much more individual and harsh.

As mentioned earlier, the hiring of a new top manager in team A have had a high impact on the members in team A and the organization as a whole. One could therefore argue for the top manager to have become a key leader or a community coordinator as Lester and Kezar (2017) describes it. Hence, the top manager in team A could be argued to seen as an important figure in this collaborative process where he includes, encourage and influence the team in order to reach for the same collective goal (Kaiser et al, 2008). Empirical evidence shows that team A could be argued to be a CoP and the top manager could therefore have been the one who embodied the traditions and values that the group has been formed around. These traditions and values could for example be connected to team A and the member's similarities in personality, age, background and drive (Lester and Kezar, 2017). The top manager has chosen to hire many of the other members with a manager position in team A, that have helped him create the team and lead the employees towards the "right" path, possibly similar to himself

and his view of leadership. With that said, the top manager can't handle all the work of the CoP alone and therefore takes help from other leaders such as middle managers within team A (Lester and Kezar, 2017). As mentioned earlier, the members in team A all discussed during interviews that they felt free to come up with suggestions and have responsibilities, regardless of which position they have within the team. This also indicates that leadership has spread beyond the key leader and core group into the peripheral groups in team A and thus creates a distributed leadership (Lester and Kezar, 2017; Uhl-bien, 2006). This also gives strength to Alvesson and Spicer (2011) and their approach to consider the followers as an important element within leadership and not only the leader itself. By taking help from subordinates and having a distributed leadership, with a bottom-up approach, team A is able to have a better communication as the members within the team interact and negotiate with each other (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In contradictory, team B is not taken advantage of distributed leadership as the top manager and middle managers solely acts on their own and choose not to listen to employees and each other (Uhl-Bien, 2006), which could be another reason for why team B could be argued to be a less functional CoP. We also believe that the members in team B are not willing to work hard towards reaching results, perhaps due to the lack and will of working alongside the key leader (Lester and Kezar, 2017).

## Discussion

After collecting and analysing the empirical material it stood clear that there were big contrasts between the two teams inside the considered organization. Both in how the members performed in a monetary aspect but also in how the members of each team explained how they perceive their work, superiors and their colleagues. The answers in team A were in general positive and they described their work as developing and fun. Many members in team A also describe the positive changes that had happen in the last two-three years relating it to the hiring of a new top manager, something that could indicate to explain their higher monetary results. We argue that the changes made within team A imply that the leader in fact can be important and play a key role in how leadership is constructed. Be that as it may, we contend that the appropriate response isn't as basic as saying the leader is the main source of the high monetary results and well working team, that would be as praising only the leader for good results, which Alvesson and Spicer (2011) also gives critique against. We believe that leadership may in fact exists yet not in the way that a leader himself/herself can influence an entire organisation. Alvesson and Spicer (2012) explained it as instead of influencing others through working directly with rules, structures or orders, a leader should work with influencing the followers' way of thinking, their values and preferences, which we agree with and could see tendencies of within team A through their good communication. The increase of monetary results also initiated when the new top manager was hired in team A. The top manager influenced the organization and team by determining who he wanted as part of his team, which was individuals he considered to have the same strive for development and performance as himself. Hence, the leader created a solid and well working team with individuals who were similar to himself and to each other. The argument that leadership is of importance is also strengthen when looking at team B, where many members with a manager position did not seem to be respected or considered as good leaders from their subordinates. Hence, this could be one of the reasons for why the group

dynamic and monetary results were not as positive as in team A. Consequently, this study shows that the leader has a level of impact on the results and the team, however the group as a whole also have an impact on leadership and their collective performance.

Another significant difference between the two teams is the findings relating to community of practice, where we consider both teams to be CoPs, however with different levels of functionality. The study indicated similarities between the process perspective of leadership (Crevani et al, 2010) and the results from Lester and Kezars (2017) study of CoPs. Therefore, we believe CoPs can be a way of understanding leadership within a group and how to work with leadership, i.e. open communication where leadership is spread from the key leader thought the whole group (Lester and Kezar, 2017). As team A has a lot of components of the ones needed in order to call the group a community of practice one could argue for their strong results to be correlated to how they work together as a group and team (Wenger, 1998). Hence, the group dynamic of team A and B were significantly different and while team A chose to work collectively team B would rather work alone (Alvesson, 1992) We argue that the group members themselves also had a high impact in creating a strong team as relationships started to form with strong bonds to each other, which could be argued to be the start of building a community of practice. One other aspect worth discussing is weather the educational background of team B had an impact on the way they view their leaders. Perhaps one could argue that they had higher expectations of their managers as they compared their leaders to theoretical learnings and their previous knowledge, which could be a reason for why team B seems to be a less functional CoP compared to team A. When expectations on the superior weren't met, we believe that a dissatisfaction within the team occurred and lead to lower strive for reaching better results in team B. While in team A, the members all came from a background without higher education and thus had a different view on leadership in comparison to team B. Perhaps with lower expectations on the superiors to "lead the way", which lead to all members in team A taking action of the construction of leadership within the team.

One central finding in our study relating to Cop is the importance of communication as this element seems to be important when it comes to both leadership, followers and context. This was also one of the main differences between the two teams which lead to team A enjoying their work, managers and colleagues while team B had the opposite approach. We believe one of the reasons for the differences in the teams and their monetary results therefore to depend on the way the communicate with each other. This also relates to Cop where team A could be argued to have a better team work in general which also made them enjoy work and perform better results. We believe communication is a central part when it comes to the construction of leadership and managers should therefore try to focus on this ability in order to develop as leaders.

Further we argue, in line with Alvesson and Spicer (2011) that the situation is too complex with too many variables that may affect the outcome in order for us to be able to present clear results of why the current situation looks like it does. One could question whether the good results in team A depends on the leader, follower, context or a mix of them all. To refer to Alvesson and Spicer (2011) this question would be impossible to answer since leadership is constructed and therefore too complex to see any connection between results and leadership. It is not as simple as to only look at leadership, you have to consider other parts as team and context as well. Even though evidence in this specific case showed that the highest leader can

have a degree of influence on a group, it could be argued that the followers need to take responsibility for leading their subordinates in all levels of the hierarchy. This could be argued to create a working environment where everyone strives to be as good as their boss and thus everyone moves in the same direction. Due to the complexity of the subject, what is found in this report and case might not be applicable in other situations and could also be the reason for why many critical leadership studies do not lead to any practical clear results.

Our study challenges Alvesson et al (2000, 2003 A; 2003 B; 2011; 2012) way of looking and thinking about leadership as the result of this study shows implications of how leadership in fact is important and that the leader can play a key role within organizations. In addition, this study is built on strong empirical evidence including observations on what the members in team A and B does in practice, which is something that Crevani et al (2010) encourage researchers to do. The study also shows how leadership is of high relevance for organizations, but not to the same extent that the traditional perspective argues. Instead this study gives depth, and more confirmation to the process based view of leadership, where the leader is of importance but other actors and context needs to be taken into account in the process as well. This study will add on to previous research by combining Cop with leadership literature in order to understand teams. Consequently, we have used previous research on *how* to study leadership in a process based view (or the "middle way" between seeing the leaders as a hero and fully criticize the existence of leadership) and our contribution is thus an empirical study on this research where we have used the approach of seeing some existence of leadership, however not always the formally appointed leader. Instead this study shows indications of leadership as a construction of integration (Crevani, 2010) within a team or an organisation. The leadership critique can be too "hard" to be of any use when trying to applicate it in practice. Therefore, we believe that it is important to find some kind of guidelines of how to think about leadership, however still be aware of the complexity. By being part of a company who has had a high significance of growth within the last couple of years we were able to see how the two different teams had developed differently in relation to the growth. This made the empirical material for this study high in density as we were able to focus on a specific timeframe. By placing ourselves in the setting of company X as well as doing in depth interviews we were able to get a more practical aspect of how leadership is constructed which we later could relate to theory.

# Conclusion

We have investigated how leadership is constructed in relation to CoP and how that can affect a team and their performances within the chosen organization. Further, we address which processes and circumstances, apart from the leader that could be of significance when studying how leadership is constructed.

This case study indicates that it is hard to give a clear and well defined answer to these questions as many aspects plays a key role when it comes to the construction of leadership within the teams. However, one thing that is clear is that leadership in fact may exist and could have an impact on the followers and results of a team. One other aspect that can play a key role in the success of leadership is the followers and their ability to work together. Relationships and enjoying work assignments seems to be showing positive employees who deliver good results, i.e. creating a good team that contains elements of CoPs where focus is put on communication. One could also question whether it is the leadership that affects the team or if it in fact is a reverse causality. The enjoyable atmosphere within the team creates a well working community and therefore the team have the tendency to ascribe the success in relation to the superior. Hence, an illusion of how leadership matters is created when instead its other elements such as the enjoyable atmosphere that really have made the impact on the results. The two different teams studied in this report were different in many levels, both in leadership styles, relationships and communication which makes it hard to draw a clear conclusion on why the teams are so significantly diverse. However, it's clear that the processes of both leadership, context and followers play a key role in how leadership is constructed and performed, and one should therefore try to look at them collectively when working with leadership.

Based on our findings and the conclusions drawn can be added to the field of research as we argue for Cops to be a central part of the construction of team leadership. The CoP also requires a key leader who includes, encourages and influences the team in order to reach for the same collective goal. The study further shows that communication is a central part of how leadership is constructed and highlights the importance of communication in relation to leadership. This study shows that communication is seen to be important no matter if you are a superior or subordinate nor which context the leadership is performed within. Further this case study shows the importance of studying leadership in practice as we argue that many variables can affect the construction of leadership. Hence, it is hard to grasp all variables without getting a full picture of the organization, employees and leadership.

The topic of leadership has always received a great attention (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) and many studies have been made with different outcomes and contradictory in results (Barker, 1997) which does not exactly simplify the subject. The different outcomes, including the study in this report, indicate that leadership in fact is very hard and that its very context based as therefore it's hard to find any clear guidelines in how to perform leadership in the best way. Even though studies show that leadership is complex the subject continues to be a discussed and studied area, with the aim to one day, figure out how to lead your subordinates in the best way. When looking at leadership studies it is clear that this subject is of interest for many individuals and society usually either blame leaders for the success or failure of situations or happenings, often without considering the team or other aspects that might affect the outcome. The process based view with less focus on the leader and more on the group could therefore be

argued to get lost in societies desire to solve the leadership enigma. In this report we highlight community of practice and bring the group into the spotlight as we take away a great focus on the leader as the central part in a group (Lester and Kezar, 2017; Crevani 2010) which we believe is of importance when moving forward with leadership studies. Even though studies have shown that leadership is of relevance a leader will never be able to lead without followers which is why leadership in relation to CoP can be used to widen the leadership perspective. Hence, is it really the leader who leads the way, or is it in fact the followers and the construction of teams who are the "real" leaders?

Future studies of Cops in relation to leadership could be argued to be needed from other fields or from other team structures in order to gather more empirical data to make it easier to fathom teams and how they become successful. More studies made within this area will make it easier to get to some kind of consensus regarding how to think about leadership. We want this study to open up the way for studies within other organizational fields but with the same leadership questions, which makes it easier to answer the question if the results of this study mainly is applicable on companies who are young, with fast growth or could leadership be argued to be constructed in the same way in other fields. One limitation with this study could therefore be argued to be that leadership is complex and contains many variables and accordingly, hard to study. Group dynamics and relationships between employees has in this study shown to play a key role when it comes to performance and leadership. This could be argued to be interesting to continue studying in future research as perhaps the team members are of more importance than the actual leader him/herself. We also want to highlight how IT-solutions are appearing within the leadership field as they claim to help organizations with their planning and communication, which could be argued to be a tool used my leaders in the future to improve their leadership. IT- solutions in relation to communication and leadership is therefore a subject of interest when it comes to future studies.

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