Master's degree thesis

ADM755 Societal change, Organization and Leadership

"I am nobody if I don't have my team"

A research study from the leaders perspective: Leadership- and communication skills during the covid-19 pandemic.

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Preface

I am now at the finish line for my education at Molde University College. Five years of higher education has been completed. Even though it is a relief to be finished, I will definitely miss life as a student. I have gained so much during this time, not only knowledge but also close friends and memorable moments.

The thesis has been a challenge from start to finish, the learning curve has been steep, and I will remember this time as stressful, interesting, frustrating, and enjoyable – all at the same time. The pandemic has affected all of us, and for me, it highly affected my motivation in a negative sense, which one might argue is a major ingredient in a thesis. As this has been my main problem during this time, I understand I have been lucky, and I really appreciate that.

I want to grab the opportunity to thank my supervisor, Sølve Mikal, who has helped me through this process and pushed me over the finish line – you have a remarkable ability to motivate, even in the time of a pandemic. I would also like to thank my family for comfort, support, and academic help. I value all of it.

The end of an era is the start of new beginnings!

- **Elice**

Executive Summary

This thesis will revolve around five leaders in the heat transfer industry and their handling of the covid-19 pandemic concerning the organization's internal aspects and the leader itself. The purpose of this thesis is to explore a relatively new phenomenon that has been all-consuming for people and organizations over the past year. The main topic is: *How did the leaders handle the covid-19 pandemic?* Since this is a broad topic, these two research questions are asked:

- *Research question one: What are the characteristics of leadership skills needed during the covid-19 pandemic?*
- *Research question two: How did leaders handle the internal aspects of communication during the covid-19 pandemic?*

Because the covid-19 pandemic is such a new topic, and it had a significant impact on the whole world, an exploratory study has been chosen to have the opportunity to discover new issues. The empirical data is collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a strategic convenience sample of five different leaders.

There has been a thorough mapping of the leadership skills the leaders used and found helpful during the pandemic. In addition, how internal communication has unfolded during the crisis has been studied. It also turns out that, emotions and leadership are two crucial elements in leadership during covid-19, which was possible to detect because of the exploratory design of the thesis.

The empirical data is discussed against various theories within leadership, communication, and emotions. This includes Mintzberg's (1973) framework of "Leader roles," Portolese, Upperman, and Trumpy's (2018) "Leadership approaches", the "Relationship of trust" by Wadel (1999), and how "Emotional intelligence contributes to effective leadership" by George (2000).

In the empirical evidence, it turns out leaders had, in general, similar conceptions about how to lead through a pandemic, despite the differences in their demographic and

geographic segmentation group. The analysis shows that leadership skills and internal communication are intertwined elements of leadership during the pandemic, and emotions such as empathy is a central part. Therefore, it is difficult to summarize and conclude on the two research questions separately.

The results show that the leader's role in a time of crises is highly complex. Leadership skills that have been essential during the pandemic are, among others, the ability to be interpersonal, one-to-one communication, trust, confidence, and flexibility. When it comes to internal communication, trust and open communication are crucial. The empirical evidence shows, as mentioned, that empathy and emotions have been prominent during the pandemic as well. As the three categories are overlapping, it is impossible to place one skill under only one of the three categories, as it can relate to all three simultaneously. In example, empathy is an emotion, but can be classified as a leadership skill as well. This is also relevant for communication, for instance, one-to-one communication is below the communication category but also a leadership skill. There also might be need for emotions and especially empathy to keep the one-to-one communication efficient and credible.

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1.0 Introduction

At the beginning of the year 2020, the world got hit by a phenomenon no one had experienced in recent times. Businesses, schools, and kindergartens closed, countries shut down their borders, people became severely ill, and lives were lost. The coronavirus had arrived. This originated in China, December 2019, and by January 2020, it was officially an emergency of public health. It took no longer than three months from it begun until it was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 12th, 2020 (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020).

Governments decided that it was best to close the society to limit the risk of the virus spreading amongst the population. People were scared for their life, health, economy, and job; what did the future bring? A year later, the crisis is still present, people have indeed lost their job, and for many, life has changed drastically. Leaders were forced to make decisions regarding layoffs, closing locations for a period, or making the hard decision to close permanently. Were business leaders prepared for such decision-making? Did they feel competent leading an organization through the covid-19 pandemic? How did the leaders handle the internal communication? It is safe to assume that the pandemic has challenged leaders in many ways.

1.1 Background and theme

As mentioned, the crisis has now lasted for over a year. Because of this, it is possible to question if it still is a crisis or if it is, in fact, becoming the new normal?

Governments worldwide set strict restrictions to limit the physical interaction between citizens to help control the spread of covid-19. The regulations vary from location to location, depending on levels of infection (Helse Norge, 2021). For many municipalities, cities, and countries, the reality is that the restrictions required home office and no or little physical interaction between people. This means that organizations had to quickly do their best to set up fully digital solutions for communication between all parties. Businesses that require physical labor, for example factories, had an additional challenge as the digital solutions could obviously not operate human-controlled machines. Arguably, this situation could be characterized as an internal crisis caused by a crisis in the external environment, the pandemic.

Doing a quick search in Google Scholar on words, such as covid-19, the pandemic, restrictions, and lockdown – this pandemic has certainly been all-consuming for people worldwide. There has, in fact, been written a lot of articles about the pandemic the past year. Which also makes it harder to narrow it down to the relevant literature needed in this research. However, much of the recent literature revolve around topics such as both physical and mental health, medicines, the virus itself, and infection prevention such as restrictions. When searching for a combination of words, like covid-19 and crisis management, there are many publications. Most of them focus on customers and stakeholders, describing how the new normal is facilitated for them by the organization. Studies of crisis management during the pandemic are still an emerging topic. There is a need for more research about how the crisis has affected the management and the organizations internally.

In this thesis, leadership in the time of a crisis will be explored in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. The examinations will be conducted through in-depth interviews of five leaders in the heat transfer industry, from businesses around the world. There has been chosen only one sector as there is reason to believe that these organizations have been impacted similarly. Because of this, the results of the analysis will probably be more comparable. The leaders have been chosen carefully. They are all leaders with solid experience in the heat transfer industry, which will be discussed in further detail later in the thesis.

1.2 The heat transfer industry

When going to a sports game or observing one on TV, the teams are most likely to be wearing jerseys with decorations such as numbers, names, and sponsor logos. These are most likely to be heat transfer labels – labels applied by a heat press. The labels are also to find on uniforms, work- and promotional wear. Nike, Adidas and Victoria's Secret, and thousands of other clothing manufacturers all use this kind of label – and millions are applied on clothes every day around the globe. The heat transfer industry is an industry that, in many ways, is behind the scenes, and is not a well-known industry. An example of sports that uses this type of labeling is association football, all teams in both Premier League and Champions League uses the heat transfer labels on their jerseys. The sports industry is a huge customer for the heat transfer businesses – which was a challenge when many of the games and other events shut down or were postponed during the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic.

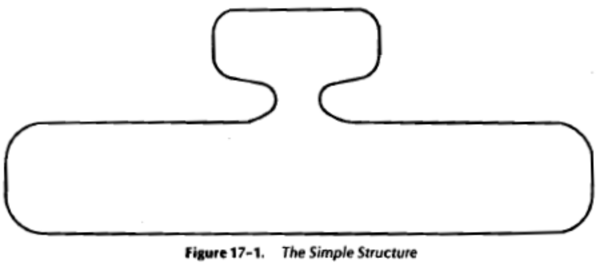
The product itself, the heat transfer, is printed onto a PET (plastic) sheet/carrier. There are used different inks, adhesive qualities, and technologies, enabling the motif to be transferred from the PET (the carrier) onto the fabric through sublimation, using the heat press. The carrier is removed, and the heat transfer (motif) is permanently applied. This label must not be confused with the sewing patches that are made from thread or fabric. Also, keep in mind that the organizations described are professional and are business-to-business related.

Type of organizations

The following will give an insight into which type of organizations are represented in the sample for this research. To start, the organizations are mainly stock-based companies. Defining organizations can be done in different ways, depending on both the industry, but also countries. Van der Wijst (1989) defines small to medium enterprises (SME) as one to nine and 10 to 99 employees, albeit within a Dutch context, this definition will be used in this thesis. Some of the organizations are a part of huge business groups, which put them into the category of large enterprises.

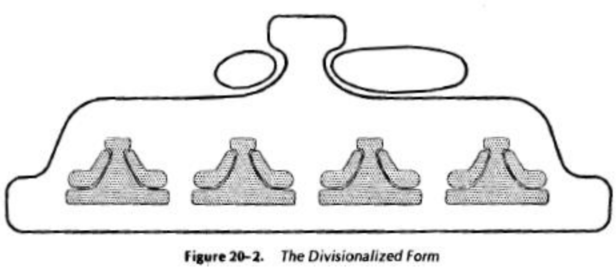
Henry Mintzberg (1979) developed five types of organizational structures. In the following, it will be given an attempt to define the organizations in the sample accordingly. The two that apply to the organizations in this study are the simple structure and the divisionalized form. The last three in Mintzberg's (1979) typology are the machine bureaucracy, the professional bureaucracy, and the adhocracy, which will not be mentioned further. The simple structure is characterized as organic, it is not high in managerial hierarchy, nor is it high on formalization. The decision-making is done by one person, and the supervision level is high – most employees report to this person only, which means the decision-making is centralized. The divisionalized form consists of several divisions and one headquarter. The divisions are not dependent on each other, and are, as Mintzberg (1979) refers to them as: Quasi-autonomous entities. There is one headquarter only, nevertheless, the divisions have enough power to do their own decision-making, which means decentralized decision-making. Though, the headquarters usually has the last say in legal aspects, finances, and planning. See below for the two types of organizations in a visualized form (Mintzberg, 1979) that characterizes the samples in this study.

The simple structure visualized:



(Mintzberg, 1979, p. 307)

The divisionalized form visualized:



(Mintzberg, 1979, p. 393)

1.3 Crisis management

There is reason to believe the organizations in the heat transfer industry had to go into a state of emergency or an abnormal situation when the pandemic started to spread severely around the world. In this thesis, the process of guiding an organization through the crisis will be featured as crisis management.

Crisis management is a relatively new topic within the organizational theory (Hafting, 2017). Crises are rare, but it can be crucial for the organization to have a prepared contingency plan for everything that is a potential threat to the organization's survival. This has become more actualized in the last decade due to increased terror, natural disasters, pandemics, financial crises, and social media. Individuals and entities that are involved in handling crises are, among others, governments, leaders, employees, stakeholders, and customers. Crisis management are the process of leading through abnormal situations to prevent, prepare, and rebuild after a crisis. When a business or organization can continue its business relatively undisturbed under a crisis, it is resilient (Hafting, 2017).

It seems like there are several different definitions of a crisis, but the common perception is that it is related to an abnormal and unwanted situation. We can find the term “crisis” in every area of society, it is used in a negative context, and it is applied to put a label on an extraordinary or unstable situation.

“A crisis starts when an unwanted event occurs that can cause harm or death to people, serious damage to structures or property, loss of important software or procedures, a large financial loss, serious loss of reputation of a person, an organization, an industry or stakeholders, a serious damage to the environment” (Aarset, 2010, p. 263)

This definition describes a crisis on a broad spectrum. It represents both natural disasters, financial crises, and pandemics. A crisis is defined as an unwanted event, and the crisis starts the second the event occurs.

”A crisis is defined to be 1) a major threat to system survival with 2) little time to respond (Herman, 1963), 3) involving an ill-structured situation (Turner, 1976), and 4) where resources are inadequate to cope with the situation (Starbuck & Hedberg, 1977; Webb, 1994).” (Mishra, 1996, p. 4)

This second definition is also quite broad describing four very relevant and essential aspects of a crisis. An organization experiences a massive threat that the business did not have time to plan for, and there are not sufficient resources to handle the crisis.

A crisis can occur similarly in many organizations, but the outcome can be drastically different, depending on how the situation is handled internally. Pearson and Clair (1998) describe crisis management as:

” Organizational crisis management is a systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur” (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 61)

This definition of crisis management states that all stakeholders must do their utmost to limit the potentially harmful effects the crisis can cause. In other words, it says "all hands on deck" is necessary in the time of crises (Gangdal & Angeltveit, 2014).

These specific definitions are handpicked for this study because one can say that they together describe a more significant phenomenon in a more precise way than other definitions. There are given two definitions of crises; this is to cover a broader area and get a better understanding of how complex a crisis can be.

1.4 Research questions

Finding research questions that are original, interesting, and researchable is a challenge. When designing the master thesis, a question of whether hypothesis or research questions was the best problem formulation arose. While a hypothesis is based on claims about reality, questions are open. Thus, both hypotheses and questions can be stated or asked with a different degree of precision (Ringdal, 2018). While this is a thesis that studies a quite new phenomenon in an exploratory manner, it was considered essential to have the openness to discover further information. Therefore, it was decided to use research issues with one main topic and two associated research questions to delineate the topic. The present pandemic is a new type of crisis for most people, making it important to do more exploratory research on this specific topic. Especially since it is predicted to happen again, according to Matthew Baylis from the University of Liverpool (Gill, 2020). As a result, the following research questions are asked:

Topic:
How did leaders handle the covid-19 pandemic?

- *Research question one: What are the characteristics of leadership skills needed during the covid-19 pandemic?*
- *Research question two: How did leaders handle the internal aspects of communication during the covid-19 pandemic?*

The main topic revolves around how the leaders handled the pandemic. Thus, this is an extensive question. To answer the research question in a master thesis, it is crucial to narrow it down. Therefore, the first question is about the leadership skills needed in the time of a pandemic, whereas the second question considers how the internal communication unfolded under the pandemic.

It is not possible to prepare for everything, but worst-case scenarios must be considered for leaders and organizations to be able to prepare for unexpected events. The definition by Pearson and Clair (1998) states that the crisis management's job is to avert or manage the crisis that occurs in a structured and systematic way. Crisis management is a form of leadership linked to an extraordinary situation, such as the tasks and processes that are a direct consequence of the crisis. It is interesting to see what different skills are used and found helpful by the leaders through such a situation and if the internal communication was affected.

Disposition

The thesis structure is as follows: The theories anticipated to be relevant is presented in chapter two. This starts with theories related to leadership followed by communication theories, and theories within emotions and leadership. In chapter three, the methodology is addressed: This includes an explanation of the sample, analysis design, and the interview process. The reliability and validity, together with ethics, will be described towards the end of this section. In chapter four, the main findings are presented according to the themes and categories that were found and defined in the analysis. Towards the end of the thesis, the discussion takes place in chapter five, followed by a conclusion including a suggestion for further research in chapter six.

As a side note: The term "team" is used in this thesis to refer to the employees the leaders are managing, including the leader itself. This can be the whole organization where this is applicable, or only a few people – depending on the organization's size and structure. Some of the teams in the sample have five-ten members, while others have 40-50.

2.0 Theory

This chapter will present the different theoretical frameworks that are relevant to the research questions. The leader needs to function in several areas. Because of that, and the fact that this is exploratory research, it includes various theories. Firstly, the leadership roles and the leadership in crises are introduced, followed by five leadership approaches. From there, theories about internal communication in crises and the theory of the relationship of trust are presented. Then, theories about how emotional leadership contributes to effective leadership, empathy, and stress in a crisis are described.

This is a study revolving around the private sector, which is the background for the theories chosen. There is an ocean of theories and approaches to choose from, while the chosen ones are noteworthy and appliable to the topic and research questions. In other settings, e.g., studies regarding the public sector or national governments, the focus would be different. It might include theories like, for example, Mark Bevir and his theory about governance or theories about legitimacy and politics. There are more factors involved when researching the public sector. However, as this is a study of five organizations in the private sector, it does not concern itself with theories pertaining to the public sector.

2.1 The leader roles

What do business leaders really do? The guru of leadership, scientist Henry Mintzberg, claimed that he had found the answer to this question (Klemsdal, 2013). The answer is that they did not only do administrative work such as analyzing, planning, and organizing. They are involved in so many different situations that are often interrupted. Some duties and responsibilities include calling customers who are in need, answering questions from employees, and fixing problems that need sudden attention. Philip Selznick (1997) also states that the higher up in the administrative hierarchy, the more complex it becomes to analyze the role of the leader because the tasks and issues get more critical and are highly complicated. Because of this, Mintzberg (1973) came up with a framework consisting of three leader roles. **1) Interpersonal roles** - this refers to activities that are related to their status and the authority they obtain as managers that relate to the development of interpersonal relationships, **2) Informational roles** - this relates to the obtaining and communicating of information and **3) Decisional roles** - this involve making decisions about: Changes, how to handle crises, managing resource allocation and negotiation with the surroundings. With these three roles in mind, it is shown that the leadership role is vastly complicated. It is reasonable to believe that their role will be even more complicated in a time of crises (Mintzberg, 1973).

2.2 How to handle a crisis?

The leader has, in many ways, total responsibility for the outcome of the organization. Being a leader comes with a lot of responsibility, and a crisis can reinforce this. When having full responsibility, it is essential to be able to delegate tasks and processes. In many cases, the top leader tends to try to have an overview of everything that is going on around the business, which is close to impossible. Being able to trust the employees is a leadership strength. The ambition of controlling everything in an organization can cause a total loss of control (Gangdal & Angeltveit, 2014).

"The power of action" is a central term when the crisis hits (Gangdal & Angeltveit, 2014). Acting fast can be crucial to be able to handle the situation efficiently and adequately. Some crises start off slow and do not begin with a so-called "big bang." In such cases, a preparatory notice can be carried out. If a crisis is suspected, the leader can inform the crisis management, and alert key personnel. When the crisis arrives, identifying the crisis and threat is the first step. In addition, the team must deliver the message to all employees and the authorities if necessary, as well as informing the stakeholders, customers, and the market in general. Some crises do not only last for a couple of hours but an extended period, as seen with covid-19. In such cases, a support team might be necessary. With a crisis of longer duration, the crisis management needs to keep calm and wait out the storm. Simultaneously they also need to follow the laws and regulations the government requires, and be prepared for sudden changes (Gangdal & Angeltveit, 2014).

2.3 Leadership approaches

Leading an organization is no doubt a considerable responsibility. Choosing a leadership approach might not be easy, and it might not be a conscious choice either. There will now be presented five different approaches to leadership. These are the situational approach, the behavioral approach, the power influence approach, the trait approach, and the integrative approach. As the last approach indicates, the different approaches are not mutually exclusive. There is no guarantee any of these leadership approaches leads to success. A leadership approach usually contains three factors: The leader, the followers, and the situation (Portolese et al., 2018). These three factors are central in the following presentation of the five approaches.

The situational approach

The leader is taking the situation into account while managing their followers. The leadership style will change depending on their followers and the situation, focusing on the competence of the followers or the commitment. It is simply about adapting to the situation, depending on the assignments. The situation can be seen as an historical event, unique in time and place. In this sense, the leader is directed and dominated by a historical moment. To reach the organizational goals, the leader can focus either on the relationship with the follower, or the task (Portolese et al., 2018).

Some of the traits that are needed according to this approach are (Portolese et al., 2018):

- Flexibility
- Ability to delegate
- A clear vision
- Participating

The behavioral approach

The behavioral approach mainly focuses on the behavior that is possible to observe. The followers will observe the leader's behavior, which will stimulate them to act similarly and carry out a task or behave in a certain way. What is noticeable in this approach is that it is not the traits or skills that make the leader; it is the leaders' observable behavior. This means in principle, through observation. Anyone can become a leader. There are two aspects in this approach: The first is the interpersonal relationship with the followers, the second is the actual task that needs to be completed or performed. The followers in a behavioral approach might also follow signals from the leader, the environment, and the culture. This means that the follower might perform a task without actually being requested to do so. Therefore, the leader does not need to communicate directly with the follower, but the leader still influences them, and the leader has intended it to be so by its way of behaving as a leader (Portolese et al., 2018).

The power influence approach

This approach is leader-focused and based on the leader being able to manipulate or influence the follower's behavior and mindset. It is related to the employees, but it also relates to directors, clients, and other people who interact with the business. "*Causality occurs when the leaders direct and the followers act on the direction"* (Portolese et al., 2018, p. 44). This means that there is a cause to effect, where the leader act and the follower react and obeys its leader's demands. The power can be used in either a positive or negative manner to influence the follower's behavior. (Portolese et al., 2018). There are two aspects of this approach, position power and personal power:

- *"Position power includes potential influence derived primarily from the opportunities inherent in a person's position in the organization or from attributes of the leader and leader-follower relationship. There are five types of position power: Legitimate, reward, information, coercive, and ecological…*
- *Personal power includes potential influence derived from the leader's task expertise and potential influence based on friendship and loyalty to the leader from the led. There are two types of personal power: Expert and referent"* (Portolese et al., 2018, p. 44).

The trait approach

The trait approach is based on the integrated skills or traits a person might have. You might say the person is born to be a leader. This approach emphasizes that leadership cannot be learned. This approach can also be referred to as the "Great person theory." (Clegg, Kornberger, & Pitsis, 2016). It is believed that physical and psychological characteristics will make the leader. This include its personality, but also traits like age, gender, height, weight, and ethnicity need to be considered according to some trait theorists (Clegg et al., 2016). The qualities like charm, intuition, good judgment, courage, and intelligence are features that are not easily incorporated/learned (Portolese et al., 2018).

The integrative approach

The last, but also the most interesting one might say, is the integrative approach. This approach focuses on more than one single approach; this means that the leader might use multiple variables from several different approaches and combine them with any of the others. For instance, one variable from the situational approach together with one variable from the behavioral approach. However, the integration is not limited to two approaches and can contain more than two combinations (Portolese et al., 2018). It is found through research that many leaders unconsciously use this approach. Actually, Portolese et al. (2018, p. 41) state that: *"…a variety of leadership methods should be used to achieve leadership success."* This is, of course, arguable, as there might not be a right or wrong, depending on the situation, followers, and the leader itself (Portolese et al., 2018).

2.4 Communication theory

According to Hafting (2017), internal crisis management and crisis communication have grown over the last five to ten years. The internal aspect of a crisis has not been mapped out properly and discovered because it can be hard to obtain information about crisis management from an organization that goes through a crisis. There can be several reasons for the organization not wanting to be examined. The researchers might not even know when and if an organization is going through an abnormal situation. Another reason can be that the organization might not want to expose its internal procedures, come off as unprofessional or unprepared, and does most likely not want to lose its reputation (Hafting, 2017).

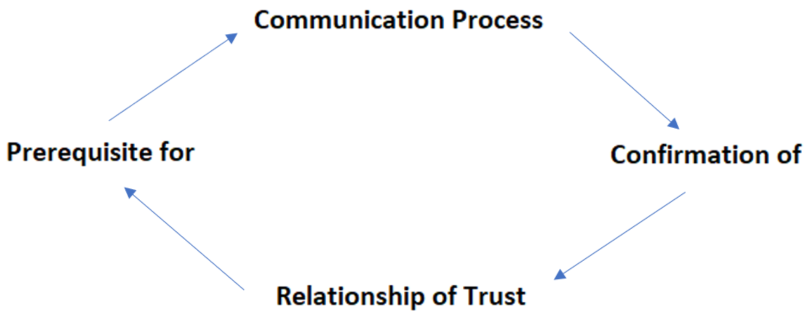
Communication in crises

Most aspects of crisis management revolve around communication, this through in e.g., video meetings, in person, nonverbal- and verbal communication. It relates to management and coordination between management and stakeholders. Hafting (2017) claims that during a crisis, there is an urgent need for information. It is vital to keep the communication intact, if not, it can result in an additional crisis – a communication crisis that makes it significantly harder to solve the first crisis. It is also crucial that the information given is correct and clear to prevent misunderstandings, resulting in unwanted situations (Hafting, 2017).

In other words, having a plan for the internal communication is key to good crisis management. Massey (2001) refers to communication as: *"...an ongoing process that involves gaining, maintaining, and in some cases regaining legitimacy for an organization"* (J. E. Massey, 2001, p. 156). A crisis communication plan will not only give guidelines for communication after the crisis hits, but it is also a tool for detecting crises signals, preventing crises and crises preparation. Even though communication is essential, a crisis management plan is not just communication but is a crucial aspect. The plan must contain responsibilities, sequencing of communication events, and guidelines. It has to be flexible, making it possible to use the plan in many different situations and for other key persons (J.E. Massey & Larsen, 2006). Earlier research has also shown that even though a plan is intact and efficient, if it has not been practiced and evaluated the plan is questionable and might be useless. Practicing and pre-considering the communication plan is crucial for success (J.E. Massey & Larsen, 2006). As Coombs states: *"While a crisis management plan is important, it is only as good as the team that uses it"* (Coombs, 2000, p. 91).

Relationship of trust

According to Wadel (1999), communication would not be possible if human beings were not able to develop trust between one another. It can be put like this: *"Trust is the connection between the present and the future"* (Wadel, 1999, p. 63). While trust is critical, there is also no fixed manual for how to develop this. Therefore, trust is a basic assumption we need to make to be able to communicate with someone. But there is no guarantee that one would know if a breach of trust occurs. Trust is one of our most central social constructions: *"Our mutual dependence on each other is, in reality, a well-secured, protected and completely natural way of relating to each other"* (Wadel, 1999, p. 63). As humans, we become dependent on each other through trust. This is a form of "investment," as Wadel (1999) calls it, and is crucial if we want to connect with others. Trust is not always displayed in verbal communication, so we look for signs in the nonverbal language that can confirm it. Often, the relationship of trust will be verified by the collaboration with others. It is possible to illustrate this, please see the figure on the next page:



(Authors own translation from Norwegian (Wadel, 1999, p. 64))

The establishment of new relations will, in most situations, revolve around creating a relationship of trust. A relationship of trust will cause open, honest, and personal communication (Wadel, 1999).

2.5 Emotions and leadership

This section will highlight the potential importance of emotions for crisis management. First, there will be an introduction to emotions, followed by a theory of how emotional intelligence contributes to effective leadership. Then, a theory of how empathy in the leader role is essential, together with a theory about stress in crises, is presented.

Finding a relevant definition of emotion was a more challenging task than anticipated. There are many different descriptions of the term and much disagreement in this field. Throughout this thesis, the term will be referring to the external and internal emotions that appear in relation to any circumstances or in relation to others. Emotions can be seen as a socially- and situational constructed phenomenon since they are relationship-based and connected to social interaction. How the emotions are expressed is different among individuals, and as a situation changes, so do the emotions (Brundin, 2002).

Senior-level management is often perceived as people who can disregard emotions while making rational choices for the good of the business (Brundin, 2002). This perception might not be accurate, especially in the time of crises. There are cases of neurological findings that emphasize how important emotions are in the process of rational decision-making. The neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio (1994), did research on a number of patients that underwent a brain tumor removal. It shows that after the removal, the patients turned emotionally flat. They scored normal or even above average when measuring intelligence, and they could calculate the pros and cons about the different choices. However, they were not able to make a rational choice. This shows that emotions are relevant in and are affecting the rational decision-making process.

Emotional intelligence contributes to effective leadership

Research by Jennifer M. George (2000) implies that emotions are a central element in leadership, including understanding and managing emotions within self and others. She also suggests that: *"Emotional intelligence may be a key contributor to leadership effectiveness"* (George, 2000, p. 1033). Additionally, George (2000) proposes that there are four aspects of emotional intelligence: 1) The appraisal and expression of emotion, 2) the use of emotion to enhance cognitive processes and decision-making, 3) knowledge about feelings, and 4) management of emotions. These four levels of emotional intelligence are both well connected and necessary in leadership. However, what this thesis will focus on is J.M. George´s explanation of how emotional intelligence contributes to effective leadership, with the following five elements:

1. *Development of a collective sense of goals and objectives and how to go about achieving them.*

   This refers to both strategic thoughts such as vision and mission. Leaders obtain a lot of knowledge and information, which include threats, concerns, and opportunities. From the given information, leaders must form a strategy for their organizations – and emotions are involved in doing this. While in a positive mood, most leaders tend to be more creative and optimistic, while in a negative mood, they tend to be more pessimistic. When aware of this fact, leaders should, as a routine, go back to their previous work to ensure their strategic plan was not excessively optimistic or pessimistic. In addition to this, leaders need to come up with not only a clear goal but also a way to pass the message effectively within the enterprise, to ensure it is received and understood collectively among all employees.

2. *Instilling in others knowledge and appreciation of the importance of work activities and behaviors.*

   To achieve this, leaders must ensure the employees are kept up to date with relevant information such as opportunities and threats, so the employees feel emotionally included and connected to the business. Being able to increase the employees' confidence and make them feel that they have the ability to meet challenges and take advantage of opportunities is essential.

3. *Generating and maintaining excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, and optimism in an organization, as well as cooperation and trust.*
   Leaders must know how to affect the feeling of employees to maintain their excitement and enthusiasm. This includes predicting how the employees will act in certain circumstances and effectively manage their reactive behaviors.

4. *Encouraging flexibility in decision-making and change*.
   Having the ability to manage emotions is a skill that might lead to improved decision-making. If aware of emotions, it is easier to not let these feelings get in the way of effective decision-making.

5. *Establishing and maintaining a meaningful identity for an organization*.
   An organization's identity originates from the organizational culture, where the members form a collective identity over time. In this regard, it is essential that the leaders actively develop and express the organizational culture.

According to George (2000), her analysis suggests that emotions and emotional intelligence need more attention within the leadership field. Emotional intelligence can provide effective leadership in several ways, as described in the five levels of leadership. There are emotional relationships between the leader and employee, which means emotions will be involved regardless.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize and understand the emotions another person might have. It includes being open and ready to interpret information, not only in terms of words but also body language. According to Badea and Pana (2010), nonverbal communication contains as much as 60 percent of human communication. While words can only describe a small part of our feelings, empathy enables people to interpret the nonverbal language of another person. Leaders need empathy in their communication to have a better sense of what the employees are feeling. Their emotions can also explain employee behavior, and the leader should have the ability to act according to this. Leaders who can both control their own emotions and cognizant of others may find advantage (Badea & Pana, 2010).

Badea and Pana (2010) describes empathetic leaders with these characteristics:

1. They are able to create stronger interpersonal relationships
2. They are better at self-motivation
3. They easily motivate the subordinates
4. They perform better as leaders
5. They adapt easier to changes
6. They create a climate of cooperation
7. They are more reconciled with themselves
8. They are trusted by subordinates
9. They create an emotional connection between members of the organization
10. They create resonance.

The interpersonal, empathetic leader can understand another's emotions and be able to respond appropriately. Empathizing aids leaders in preparing for unpredicted events. They can speak to their employees in a way that motivates them. It also helps them connect on a deeper level, which makes them trustworthy. Because emotions are also contagious, the positive empathic leader will possibly create a better team and increase group loyalty.

Stress in crises

Stress represents a fundamental emotion throughout a crisis, impacting both leader and leadership style. Hafting (2017) presents four aspects of stress reactions:

1. Physical changes: This relates to the autonomous nerve system, including palpitations, higher pulse, or muscular cramps.
2. Motoric behavior changes: Increased muscle tension can lead to trembling and stiff movements, making it harder to speak and communicate.

3. Changed reasoning: There is a change in how someone talks, their decision-making, problem-solving and social interaction, for example:
   - Incorrect generalization from a small amount of data
   - Hasty decision-making
   - Over- or underestimate problems
4. Emotional disturbances: Uncomfortable feelings and emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, and guilt.

These stress factors can be applied in relation to the covid-19 pandemic. These four points are emphasized given that stress related to the pandemic has not been a short-lived occurrence. With the virus raging for over a year's time, leaders (or others) may have been experiencing these emotions for an extended period.

These theories will first be mentioned again in the discussion, which is found in chapter five. The theories presented are considered by the author to be interesting and relevant to the topic of this thesis. Since this is exploratory research, it has been considered useful to have several theories to be able to explain a broader spectrum. In the following chapter, the methodology will be described.

3.0 Methodology

There will now be a thorough examination of the methodology, evaluating the pros and cons, and critically assessing why the specific selections have been made for the data collection and analysis. It will first define the sample, including a short elaboration of the participant's culture. Then the analysis design and interview process are described in detail. Towards the end, reliability and validity are considered, together with ethical issues at the end of the chapter.

First, the topic and research questions are restated:

> ***Topic:***
> *How did leaders handle the covid-19 pandemic?*

- *Research question one: What are the characteristics of leadership skills needed during the covid-19 pandemic?*
- *Research question two: How did leaders handle the internal aspects of communication during the covid-19 pandemic?*

To answer these two research questions, the method of qualitative research has been chosen. The reasoning for this is that the topic is relatively new, there is not a lot of research to find, considering the pandemic only started a year ago. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were considered, however, using semi-structured in-depth interviews has been considered helpful in this situation. A quantitative research could be useful in the future to map any missing holes in this study. Using qualitative methods will give the respondents the option to offer additional information and the interviewer the possibility to ask follow-up questions to cover a more extensive area. At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge the weaknesses of qualitative methods, including the fact that one cannot statistically generalize and see reflected trends. This because the sample is rarely representative, and it is time-consuming to interview on a large scale (Tjora, 2017).

The qualitative method is a scientific method to uncover why or how something happens. It tries to explain and understand how people perceive the world and the relationships around individuals. *"Using a qualitative method to express ourselves specifically about* *social patterns within limited areas which happen through an interview or observation"* (Johannessen, Tufte, & Christoffersen, 2016, p. 95).

As covid-19 is a new topic, issue, or problem, exploratory research was seen as valuable. It aims to ask open questions, to discover and get insights into a fairly new phenomenon. It is about understanding this phenomenon, and the uncertainty around its specific nature. The advantage of exploratory research is that it is adaptive, thus, the study could go unexpected ways (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Qualitative and quantitative research is often referred to as different ways of thinking, or paradigms, that aim to gain knowledge about society and further analyze the information. The qualitative methods are mainly placed in the interpretive paradigm, where understanding rather than explaining are emphasized, and there is an open relation between the researcher and informant. In this thesis, it is chosen to do a theoretical interpretive research, which means that the existing theories are used to interpret the empirical data, where the purpose is to understand a phenomenon in a specific context (Tjora, 2017). If anything, this thesis is a mix of inductive and deductive research, as the theories are taken into account before the data collection. At the same time, there is an inductive openness to discover phenomena outside the research question and the theories (Jacobsen, 2005). In some ways, the coding in the analysis is inductive, a so-called inductive empirical coding. It has been attempted to code the material as it is, without any impact from the theories and the researcher's expectations (Tjora, 2017).

3.1 Sample

"A sample: The entities that are drawn (selected) to participate in a research, the samples are drawn from a population." (Ringdal, 2018, p. 532).

The informants are carefully chosen through an elimination process, a so-called strategic selection (Tjora, 2017). This strategy is used instead of a case study because what is studied here is connected to an individual, in this case, leaders, which includes their experience, problems, and how they handled something (Tjora, 2017). Since the pandemic has affected the whole world in similar ways, and the heat transfer industry is represented in different countries and continents, this thesis will investigate five separate organizations and their respective leaders. The goal is to optimize the participant's contribution to be able to answer the research question. The information retrieved needs to be reliable and specific (Tjora, 2017). Tjora (2017) also states that it is vital that the participants can reflectively express themselves since the goal here is not having to study every individual in a whole population. With the chosen research question, it is more applicable to use a strategic selection than a case study. The sample of leaders is supposed to represent the population, which is all business leaders in the heat transfer industry. Therefore, the participants have different features such as age, gender, experience, and locations around the globe. This way, it is possible to present a bigger picture. There is a mix of differences in the sample, making it a quite representative sample of the population. The selection of the population is supposed to be a miniature copy of the whole population, which makes it reliable, valid, and it would be a greater chance of being able to theoretically generalize (Tjora, 2017).

Convenience selection

As Tjora (2017) describes it, a convenience selection is finding available and useful participants that will give accurate information. Most of the informants in this thesis are known by the author from earlier experience in a professional matter. The snowball effect could also be used. However, then participants would know who each other were, which was considered negative in this case.

Out of around 13 potential informants, which were all people that the author was familiar with, five leaders were chosen to be included in the sample. This because of their background within the heat transfer industry, together with their solid leader experience. It has been taken into account that the interviewer has met many of the informants personally in business situations, but there is not a close relation. Therefore, the informants have been chosen carefully to ensure enough distance to the researcher. The five will most likely not be influenced by the relationship but remain qualified to do this interview.

Because the participants have been in contact with the writer in earlier settings, it was not a problem getting in touch with them. The challenges appeared when narrowing the participants down since most of the asked objects were positive. All made good candidates, and the uncertainty regarding an individual’s knowledge base and ability to communicate it as such, made it difficult. To make sure a solid and broad sample was made, the participants were selected from the difference in age, gender, location, culture, and their experience. This is often called a criteria selection, where the participants need to meet specific criteria to be included in the research (Tjora, 2017). It is near certain that this can be a relevant strategy in an exploratory study.

Culture

While doing international research, there is reason to believe it is necessary to consider the potential cultural differences. In this case, the leaders are located in areas that the author finds similar cultural-wise, which puts the interview objects in the same silo. One might say that the countries the participants are from are developed countries. This has been considered from the beginning, and because of this thesis design, it is not likely there will be any impacts from the culture on the outcome. Because the location of the respondents and organizations are not applied for in relation to NSD, this cannot be elaborated further. Also, note that culture is not studied in this thesis. This means, even though the culture has been taken into account and been considered not to influence this study, it is not possible to exclude that it has had any impact on the research since there is no empirical evidence related to this.

3.2 Analysis design

Structure and data reduction is a crucial part of the analysis of the in-depth interviews. This is to make sure the reader gets the information needed to be able to understand and increase their knowledge about the research and topic without having to study the whole data material (Tjora, 2017). A thematic analysis was used, which uses the technique of coding, where many different codes are drawn from the empirical data, and then structured in to themes (Grønmo, 2004). As a side note, already during the interviews, it was clear that many of the participants have the same opinions, and themes were recurring. Going deeper into the data material in the transcription and the analysis, it was clear that it was indeed not that many contrasts between the answers, even though the questions asked were open and followed up to ensure the exploratory design of the interviews was maintained. To start the analysis, the recordings were transcribed.

After the transcripts were done, a thorough reading of the data material followed. This included making notes and highlighting essential quotes, themes, and words that stand out.

When this was done, the coding could start. Some 90-100 codes were made before putting them into categories and themes related to their category. For example, “care for my employees” and “I want my employees to be happy” were put in the category “empathy.” The themes were not predetermined; they were derived from the empirical data. There was a lot of brainstorming and chaos in this process. A map of the codes was made by hand, where the codes were reduced, similar codes were put together, and everything was systemized. This process was time-consuming, and it was important to be focused and structured at all times. During this process, avoiding bias on behalf of the researcher is critical, and believed to be fulfilled. Categories were created based on the codes, and there ended up being five main categories and eight subcategories.

In the next chapter’s presentation of empirical data about the main findings, the themes are the starting point, where quotations from the participants are used to support the themes created. The main focus is the themes, to make sure the research is less personal, the study does not aim to explain one individual but a more significant phenomenon.

3.3 Interview process

Since the interviewer has no previous experience with an interview process, besides theory in method courses, the conclusion was to do a test interview before the actual interviews started to get an indication of how it would be. The participant got all the relevant information, information letter, and the test-informants identity has been protected in the same way as the other participants. The test interview was not recorded. This person has a closer relationship with the writer, which is why this test-informant was not considered as an actual participant. However, the participant is in the same category as the other interview objects on the central characteristics for the sample. What was found during this test interview was that the interview guide was well developed. There was no need for many follow-up questions, and the researcher’s confidence as an interviewer increased, which is believed to be a good thing. The test interview was also conducted through Zoom, like the other interviews, to simulate the interview situation.

The interviews were, as stated, conducted through semi-structured interviews, this makes it easier to ask follow-up questions, that in turn can expand the knowledge further. All interviews were, as mentioned, done through Zoom, recorded, and then further transcribed.

An interview guide was made, which was used during all five interviews. The questions were not always asked in the same order; however, all questions were answered, sometimes without even asking for the information. The participants were all very welcoming, open, and ready to give full-worthy and interesting answers. All the participants in the sample have been leaders for a long time, and they have a good ability to reflect on their own actions. This is probably not the first time they have been interviewed, but at the same time, some of them have never participated in this kind of research. It seemed like there was an understanding that this study is entirely anonymous, and there was no reason to hold information back, which the researcher deeply appreciates. The feeling of them holding back any information was not present. The reason for this could be that the interviewer has been in contact with the participants in a professional manner in earlier settings. This seemed to be a positive thing, the relations are not close, but there has been built a something reminiscent of a relationship of trust in the past, making the participants more relaxed (Wadel, 1999).

Since the earlier contact also has been in a professional manner, the knowledge that the interviewer is a professional character in the workplace can have made the participants confident that their information will be handled professionally. Tjora (2017) explains how it is important to have an open conversation about the predetermined subjects in an in-depth interview. The research quality depends on a trust that is established between the author and participant (Tjora, 2017).

After the first couple of interviews, it was clear that similar answers started to occur; this indicates that five participants were a good number. There is little reason to believe more interviews would provide additional information, and there is a good set of data to analyze. Based on the quality of the interviews, there was a feeling of data saturation. It was believed there is no more relevant information to obtain even if the number of interviews was increased (Johannessen et al., 2016).

Overview of Interviews

Participant:	Recruiting:	Interview date:	Duration:
Alex	Phone call	06.04.2021	49 minutes
Taylor	LinkedIn	12.04.2021	38 minutes
Logan	LinkedIn	15.04.2021	52 minutes
Esra	E-mail	21.04.2021	43 minutes
Charlie	E-mail	22.04.2021	70 minutes

To be completely sure the participant's identity is and remains confidential, a pseudonymization is used (Tjora, 2017). The pseudonym is on purpose unisex – names that can be used for all genders in English-speaking countries. According to the author, the reason names are used instead of candidate numbers is simply because it will be easier to follow in the analysis and discussion. Their age or gender is not mentioned, nor is it necessary to mention their business or country by its name, as justified in a previous chapter. Their identity is with this protected, together with other considerations mentioned above.

Challenges in the interview process

There were indeed challenges involved with both scheduling the interviews and conducting them. Please see below for elaboration.

Firstly, these are all leaders who do not have a lot of time to spare, so the interviews had to be conducted on their terms. Finding a timeframe that would fit them was important, it was shown from the interviewer's side that the timeframe was flexible. Considering this is an international study, it is natural that there was a time difference issue. This meant that some of the interviews were held very early in the morning and some very late at night.

Secondly, the interviews were conducted through Zoom. Not all of the participants had good internet connections, but it was sufficient. However, when transcribing the recordings, it was, unfortunately, some sentences that were very hard to interpret. A video call is a challenge in itself, even with good internet connection. There is no way to connect with a person through a screen in the same manner as face-to-face interaction.

Thirdly, there is the relation between the participant and the interviewer. This made some of the interviews longer due to some derailment from the topic. To not break the flow in the conversation, the interviewer did not interrupt if this happened – and the conversation would eventually get back on track. Because of this, the interviews varied from 38 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes, depending on the relation and how talkative the respondent was. Please see the table on the previous page for details about the length of the different interviews.

3.4 Reliability and validity

When discussing qualitative research, two aspects need to be examined, reliability and validity. According to Veal and Darcy (2014), some researchers refer to these aspects as the measured "trustworthiness" of the data, the data quality if you like. The validity does not need to be good, even though the reliability is good. However, Grønmo (2004) states that reliability and validity fulfill each other, as they are describing different aspects and dimensions of data quality.

Reliability

"Reliability – the extent to which research is replicable" (Veal & Darcy, 2014, p. 267)

This describes how reliable the research is: It is measured through the data, how it is collected, and how it is processed. In quantitative research, there are standard ways of measuring reliability. For example, the bigger the group, the more reliable the information typically becomes. In qualitative research, it can be harder to put the data up to a test because the conversation between the interviewer and the respondent restrains possible detection. The reliability of qualitative research is also hard to measure because the social aspect of life is an ever-changing process. The same questions can be asked simultaneously, but in different areas or countries, and the outcome could be drastically different. There is, therefore, hard to state in empirical research that something is theoretically generalizable. As Veal and Darcy (2014, p. 50) state: *"When measures can be taken to ensure a degree of generalizability, strictly speaking, any research findings relate only to the subjects involved, at the time and place the research was carried out."*

In this research, like any other project, challenges can appear. The respondents may be so-called interview biased. As they are still leaders in their representative business, they might be trying to put their own organization in a positive or favorable light. To try to prevent this, the interviewer has reflected on this before the interviews and would be clear from the beginning that the respondents and their organization will be 100 percent anonymized. Neither positive nor negative measures will be possible to identify for unauthorized personnel. With this information given, hopefully, the respondents have provided an accurate and honest description of the abnormal situation the organization has been going through. The crisis started 14 months ago, and the participant's memories can impact the outcome.

Validity

"Validity – the extent to which research accurately represent what it is intended to represent" (Veal & Darcy, 2014, p. 267)

This refers to two factors, the internal and the external validity. It represents the context between an occurrence or phenomenon that is being researched, such as the data gathered.

Internal Validity

This mainly refers to the quality of the research, the researcher's abilities to do the study, and if the research can be done in a proper manner. It also questions if the relationships explored and tested are reliable and not affected by other factors or variables (Streefkerk, 2019). Another question that can be asked in this context is: "*…is the data gathered actually related to what is being investigated?"* (Johannessen et al., 2016, p. 232). The data must be accurate or relevant to the research questions.

External validity

This refers to the generalizability, if the study is relevant in other relations and larger contexts in the society – if it is possible to apply the data to other cases or situations (Streefkerk, 2019). In quantitative studies, statistical generalizability from the sample to the population is often a purpose for the research. In qualitative studies, theoretical generalizability can be argued for but might be difficult to prove.

This is an in-depth interview research of five leaders in different countries but within the same industry. On the one hand, only five cases are studied worldwide. There is more focus and depth on the individual organization and leader than broad generalizations. The results are specific for these particular cases and may not be applicable in other cases and countries (Ringdal, 2018). On the other hand, there will be made an attempt to theoretically generalize the data, which can make it possible to adapt it into other cases in the same industry and similar organizations. The data found will also be set up against already existing theories, which will make it easier to theoretically generalize if there is a connection between the findings and the theories. It will, therefore, most likely be found possible to use the findings in further research about management in this type of crises.

3.5 Ethics

"Ethics is the doctrine of morality, of what is right and wrong" (Ringdal, 2018, p. 57)

As a first-time researcher doing a master thesis, there are many things to consider when it comes to ethics. As a student, assignments are primarily based on other's work, as in secondary data. Transitioning to individual research is challenging. Additional issues that have not been present in earlier years as a student, now has to be accounted for.

NESH, which is the National Research Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences- and Humanities, Law and Theology, is the main committee that gives proper ethical guidelines for researchers. Their guidelines were updated in 2016, and there is as many as 46 separate entries (Torp, 2019). The guidelines are all considered and applied when doing this research. The guidelines include, among others, that respondents are not to be harmed in any way during the study, they need to have the opportunity to withdraw at any time, the researcher must be clear and make sure the respondents understand these facts.

The information given must also be confidential at any time. The respondents need to be able to trust that this research is done in a professional manner. The findings must be presented in a way that is professional but also representative. This research will also be published as a master thesis, which makes it essential to present the information from the interviews as the participants intended, and at the same time be sure to conceal their identity. The main issue of the qualitative method is the identity of the participants, where the option of being anonymous in relation to the researcher is taken away (Ringdal, 2018). Because of this, there are typically more ethical guidelines to consider than it would be in quantitative research, where the person can be 100 percent anonymous. In this particular study, the respondents are directly identified by the researcher during the video interview, in addition to their voice on the recordings. This means the researcher has to take precautions and make sure the identity of the respondents is protected. The information given has been stored safely, and only the author has been able to access the interviews. After the thesis is handed in and approved, all data will be deleted permanently.

Another issue is how the gathered material is interpreted. As a researcher, it is essential to consider that there can be a chance of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the interviews. In this case, it will be vital to view the data with an open mind and choose not to see the findings as how they are expected to be, but exactly as they are (Ringdal, 2018). The variety of ethical questions has been carefully reviewed and considered throughout this thesis.

NSD

According to the laws and regulations, the research has been reported to NSD, the Norwegian center for research data, and has been approved with the notification number 104200.

It is not in any way possible to identify the individuals or organizations in this thesis. The personal information is stored appropriately and will not be available to unauthorized persons.

The European privacy law (GDPR) is fundamental and central in a research study like this. The respondents have many rights, and the researchers have strict rules and regulations to follow (Enevold, 2019). It is not only critical to do what is ethically appropriate, but it also must be done according to the laws and regulations that apply.

In this methodology chapter, it has been presented what was considered essential to discuss and describe in relation to this thesis and its topic. There is an attempt to defend the choices made in chapter five, and the choices will be critically discussed in further detail. Before this is discussed, the main findings will be presented in the following chapter, according to the themes found in the analysis.

4.0 Main findings

The empirical findings that were found through the interviews and analyzed are revealed in this chapter. What is presented is believed to be significant concerning the research questions and the relevant theories. The participant's answers are sorted into categories and subdivided into subcategories when necessary. The first category involves the nature of covid-19, crisis management, along with the subcategories: Crisis and safety. This is followed by the research question's main interests, leadership, with the subcategories: Leadership skills, team building, motivation, and decision-making. The communication category will then be presented. Towards the end, emotions and its' subcategories: Empathy, and optimistic attitude as a leader is provided. The last category is the negative aspects of the crisis, which will be found at the end of the chapter.

4.1 Crisis Management

Crisis

There was a common conception that the business was not currently in a crisis, as the organizations were still up and running, even after a full year of lockdowns, restrictions, and other obstacles. There has been a loss of revenue for most of the organizations, but the question of closing permanently has not been present. However, it becomes clear through the interviews that the organizations are still in abnormal situations and in a state of emergency. It is also evident that four out of five leaders are located in countries where the pandemic is still very present, and the countries are highly affected by this.

Alex: "The organization as such, has not been in a crisis in that sense. Because we have worked all the time and been in a limbo, in a state of emergency. Will not call it a crisis."

Four out of five participants also mentioned that they realized that there was a crisis coming due to their close communications with China, either in the form of customers, joint ventures, or partnerships. Some managed to react to this and decided to increase the organization's stock level since many of the organizations in the heat transfer industry get their raw materials from China, even though none of them prepared anything specific in terms of safety protocols, contingency plans, and so forth. This was because no one anticipated the situation to spread worldwide and hit as fast and hard as it did.

Safety

As a part of the opening to the interview, it was asked about how a typical working day unfolded during the pandemic. All five participants explained how all employees were asked to work from home by the government. This meant for many that the IT department had to assist with technology and knowledge to make this efficient; for some, it meant that the employees were temporarily furloughed. Considering this is an industry in which the production process relies heavily on physical labor, some of the businesses did not have the option of working from home. This caused a complete lockdown over a longer time frame. One of the organizations that had to close entirely for a period was Taylor, who was very cautious in terms of following the restrictions recommended by the government.

Taylor: "...we were shut down for two weeks, and then we were classified as an essential business, so I was able to reopen. And we set in very strict covid safety protocols. ... we took their temperature before they could come in the building... we required everybody to wear a mask. We made sure everybody was working 10 feet apart from each other and those employees who could work from home, we asked to work from home so we would reduce the number of people in the building."

The strict restrictions were followed by all leaders in order for business continuity. If the company did not follow the restrictions, it could have resulted in a longer lockdown due to the employees being contaminated by the virus. This was not an option for any of the participants; without their employees, there is no business – their safety came first.

Charlie: "For me, a typical working day during the pandemic was in the early days planning, it was around planning and HR management and safety. It was focused on ensuring the continuity of the business."

4.2 Leadership

The participants reflect on their leadership as changed through the pandemic. Even though there has not been a conscious change for all, they are aware that there has been a change. The question was formulated like this: Do you believe the pandemic has had any impact on you as a leader on a permanent basis?

Logan: "Definitely."

Charlie: "Yes."

Alex: "This is such a new and strange situation that will define me in the future."

Esra: "...you can only control what you can control... It probably changed me in the way I work, in the way I act, but I do not think there has ever been a conscious change."

Taylor: "...and I have a lot of gratitude and appreciation for what my employees have done during this time, and I know it has changed me. As a leader."

Leadership skills

Flexibility, foresight, empathy, confidence, and optimism were skills that were mentioned. There was flexibility in terms of having to find new and different customers, but also in the aspect of the employees. Flexibility regarding home offices and giving them paid time off if this was necessary. For example, when getting a vaccination shot against covid-19 or having to stay at home with kids when schools or kindergartens were closed. Several participants expressed that they had the ability to look forward and be confident that the organization will get through the crisis as a whole.

Teambuilding

It has been vital to keep the team together and to keep the team strong. The leaders did this in different ways, but all of them said that the one-to-one relationship between them and their employees had to be strong. There were times when leaders sat down one-to-one and had a chat while other leaders went around the building to have a chat with every employee. One organization used an app for group messages and video calls to make sure everyone could contact the leader or other employees. According to the informants, the primary conception of team building is that despite less physical contact, their team has actually gotten more robust and closer in this period than they were before their first lockdown.

Logan: "… I always said with our team, you know, I can be the best leader, but if I don't have a team, of course you're nobody."

Esra: "And I'd probably also say that we probably are a better team and a closer team 12 months into it than we would have been if it hadn't been for the lockdown. And it sorts of forced everybody to be together… But your team, the company, is the people you've got. So, yes, your number one priority is looking after them, bringing them in. Taking them through as a company, because if you lose a team, the company is going nowhere anyway."

Being a leader is a huge responsibility. Their concerns are not just the business, production, budgets, and product, it is also the employees. One of the leaders puts it like this:

Charlie: "I don't hire for skill. I can teach skills. I hire people. And I hire good people, and that's what it has to be. You just have to be a good person."

Motivation

The Leaders had different ways of motivating people. There was a focus on keeping them satisfied and making the work environment their happy place. Some created this kind of place at work, where the employees could have a sit-down, chat, and talk together during the lunch break. Some were making sure the employees stayed mentally healthy through the company's health insurance.

Charlie: "But it's a beautiful dual Italian coffee, as good as you'll find in any cafe and a proper fridge, you know, café style fridge. And we fitted out with a big kitchen table, big, long bench table, tops everything and got a proper bench put in there for the coffee machine and stuff."

Taylor: "And so I would send out communications with my employees about mental health and that we have services through our health insurance, that we offer insights and communications, that if you're feeling stressed or depressed, there is support for you and please take advantage of it."

Decision-making

There has been no evident change in the decision-making during the pandemic, according to the leaders. However, employees had a presence and input in the decision-making processes in much the same manner as before the pandemic.

Taylor: "I asked their opinion before. I'm asking their opinion now. And I like to. I always believe in what I call a 360-degree perspective. And we see my perspective. I don't see their perspective unless I communicate with them."

Logan: "I am very open to them, to the team, and if something is going wrong, we always discuss, and we always say, OK, what do you think? What do you think? What is your opinion? Even if the guy from production or back office, it doesn't matter."

4.3 Communication

Esra and Alex agree that it is important to show confidence and keep the positivity up, even though this means they will be worrying alone. As the business leader, they do not have any interest in causing extra stress and anxiety for their employees by communicating negative aspects of this pandemic.

Esra: "I don't think I've ever, lie is probably the wrong word because you were never in a position where you couldn't pay or do things…. But you're sort of making promises and exaggerating the confidence levels that you have to make sure everybody else is reassured. It doesn't do any good, everybody else worrying about what you're worried about?"

Alex: "You should inspire and be positive even if you may have the impression that this can quickly go to hell. Flagging too much about how bad the company's finances are can be difficult. So, you feel a little alone in this."

In contrast, Charlie, Logan, and Taylor have been focusing on being totally transparent in their communication towards their employees. In their opinions, it is essential to keep everyone in the loop.

Charlie: "So clarity, transparency. Truth is critical… In talking to your team like respect for them that everybody is going through this, so respecting that this is a challenging situation, so respect the situation that you need to be true, to be honest, you need to have transparency in what you say, and that communication needs to be regular to all, and it needs to be upfront."

All leaders agreed that the communication had to be clear, the one-to-one communication increased drastically, and the leaders were open for their team to contact them at any time. As for the question of the leader's communication skills, there is the common perception that they are good at communicating with their employees on a general basis. They have also become more directly connected with each employee during the pandemic. Having high social intelligence was emphasized as a key leadership skill by several of the participants. Again, the leaders have also developed a closer relationship with their employees, compared to before the pandemic.

Alex: "I think social intelligence is important. Being able to read people and see what is important to them. It is even more important in crises situations… people feel things in different ways… and not focusing too much on the negative, but rather trying to focus on the positive. I think it's a skill… to suppress your own frustration to rather try to see something positive in things."

Esra: "I became more personal, more directly involved in the communication, in the employee's personal life."

Charlie: "So communication is about the transfer of knowledge, but communication is also about, being one, I suppose, so communication provides that sense of belonging and being one, everybody being aware of what's going on."

Taylor: "But it's also talking with employees about what's going on in their personal lives, because everybody is very stressed, more so than normal… Is staying in touch with each employee, not only on the business aspects, but on how they're doing in their personal lives, how they're handling their children and theirs and their parents and their siblings who might be exposed to this virus."

Logan: "I want to be open. And I know we're going to say I'm open 100 percent. But I think the open communication is to be able to be open with the person. And be honest during communication..."

Esra: "It's basically being able to get different people to talk, different abilities to understand what's going on, different ways of knowing what people have in their emotional thoughts we're way through to and encouragement from a management point of view into improving productivity, making sure that things flow, making sure the factory runs."

4.4 Emotions

Experiencing negative emotions such as frustration, tiredness, grief, responsibility, powerlessness, fear, and stress were common amongst the participants. The pandemic was mainly associated with negative feelings. However, on the positive scale, confidence and optimism were also mentioned.

Taylor: "There was a time when I felt scared. Because there were so many unknowns with this virus, that it was very scary, that I didn't want my employees to get this virus by coming into the office."

Logan: "So for me, the feeling is I think you get scared. I think I never felt that before… Being scared in the office, about being close to them, I need that closeness..."

Empathy

Empathy was definitely mentioned the most, with its 16 times through all the transcripts.

Esra: "So, again, empathy is number one."

Charlie: "…empathy, as a leader, empathy for our staff and for their concerns and their life. I believe empathy and understanding, and people is the most important thing in our business. We just happen to sell transfers. But it's about creating an environment, a place where people are safe and feel they can express themselves and grow and learn and the whole works and all of those sorts of things."

The leaders have focused on keeping people present at work, even though this was not necessary. In some countries, businesses had the luxury of being able to temporarily furlough the employees with government subsidies. The furlough coverage differs by country. All participants said that it was at this time important to keep the employees and make sure they got paid. It was clear through this that it was essential to them not to let anyone go. Finding a new job during the pandemic is seen as impossible or very complicated, as few organizations hire at this moment.

Esra: "…your number one priority is to pay your staff's mortgages. Keep them employed, get the things due, that's what you're there to do. You've got, at that time we had eight (people present at the factory), so we had eight people. They probably got eight partners. They've got kids, they got houses… So your number one priority is to keep the team together, keep them paid and keep them fed."

Taylor: "My focus is to, I mean, I've had to help people, you know, keep them on payroll even if I don't need them. Because you don't want them to be in that situation because there's no way once you're not working, you're not going to find a job anyplace else right now."

Charlie: "...people's lives are on the line. And there has to be a greater sense of responsibility in being an employer… you have a greater sense of responsibility. You don't just have a job and create some product and employ people... We actually do have a great *responsibility in people's livelihoods. Like, they literally rely on the employer for their life… the rent and their food on the table... And, you know, it is a profound responsibility."*

The empathy for the employees is strong, and this has been mostly shown through different actions, such as not letting them go under any circumstances. Some of the organizations had to cut the salary by a certain percent. However, in this situation, all wages were cut with the same percentage, even the leaders, from top to bottom.

Optimistic attitude as a leader

In the leader's reflection about their emotions around the pandemic, optimism was clearly important to keep them going. Considering this is more an attitude than an emotion, it has gotten its own heading as a subcategory below the primary category, emotions.

Charlie: "I think there's still… is a level of optimism. There's a hope."

Alex: "…that you see that there may be opportunities, there may be a boost, you can have an optimism at the end of this. Thinking about planning, how can we manage to climb and do much better after such a situation…you have to keep the light at the end of the tunnel…How can we get out of this, how can we do better, how can you turn this around, something really negative to become something positive."

4.5 Negative aspects of the crisis

Some apparent negative aspects were mentioned in the interviews. During the lockdown, some had to divide the organization into smaller cohorts, some were required by the government to wear a mask, and some were not allowed to come into the office or factory at all. One leader had the conception that the pandemic might have a negative effect on its communication skills, as the participant had become less outgoing. It is also common that communication gets more complicated and artificial through video meetings.

Alex: "I have experienced that I am negatively affected by the situation. Knowing that I'm less outgoing. Then what I've been before."

Another negative aspect was the productivity in the business. Esra and Alex briefly discussed this. The employees tend to fill their days with work, regardless of how big the workload is. The conclusion was that they could have done a better job examining the employees' efficiency.

Esra: "We probably let things drift with some staff that wasn't the best performance for too long because we weren't busy. We left them in there. We knew that their productivity level wasn't right."

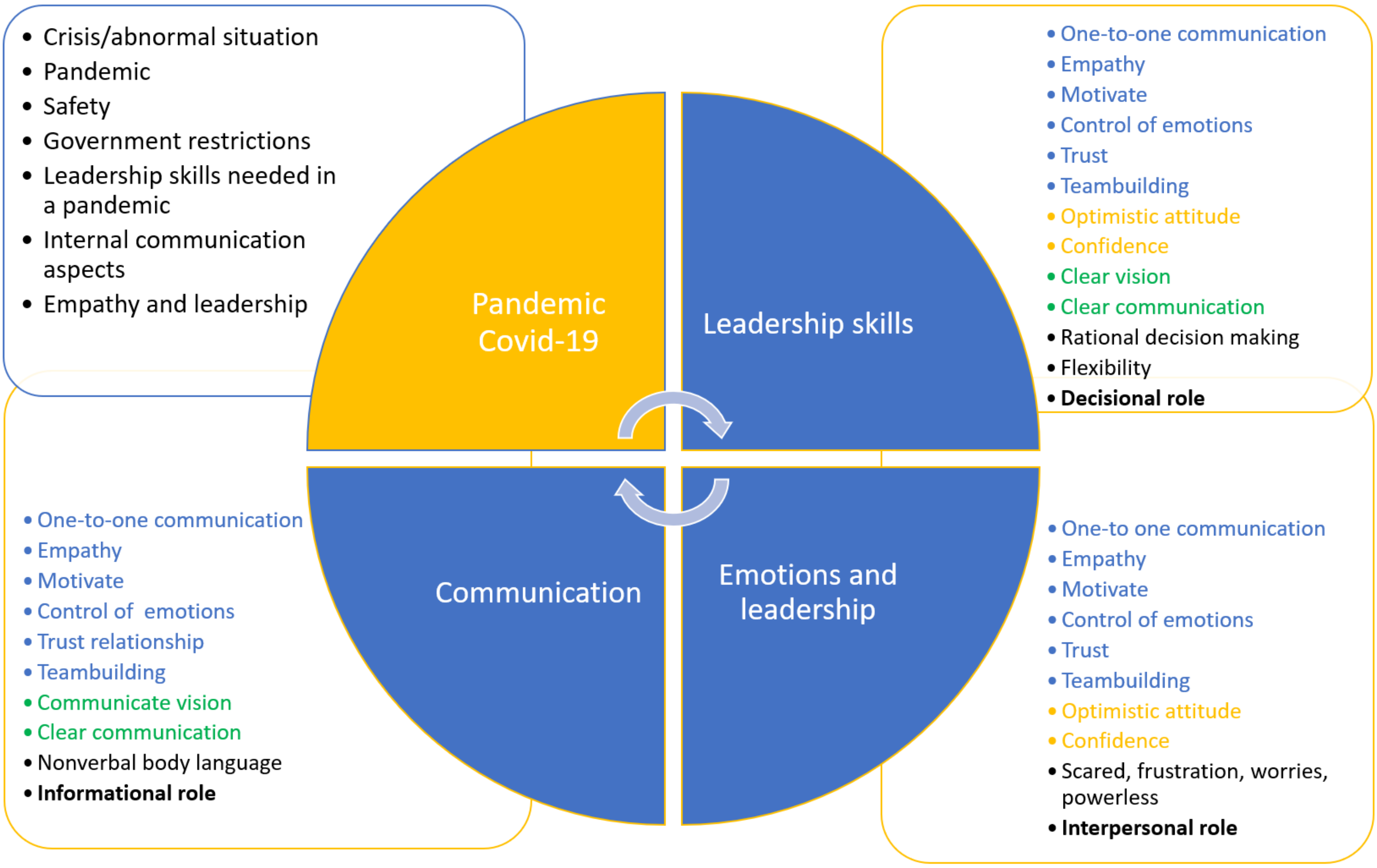
Alex: "The challenge is that many people tend to make sure that the working day is filled by work no matter how much or little they have to do. With all the years I have with experience, I have often seen that in periods with low workload, a lot of mistakes occur because people are not very concentrated, they have so little to do that they drop out."

All leaders were overall positive about their own way of leading through the pandemic. There was nothing significant they would have done differently in this type of situation, considering it happened so fast, and it had a substantial impact on the businesses. This chapter has taken the reader through the main topics and subcategories of the analysis. In the following chapter, these findings will be discussed up against the theories found in chapter two.

5.0 Discussion

The empirical material presented in chapter four will be reviewed up against the theoretical perspectives presented in chapter two in this discussion. The purpose of this discussion is to concretize how the empirical evidence can answer the thesis's overall research questions. The chapter will be structured after the two main research questions. However, considering this is exploratory research, towards the end of the chapter, there will be discussed findings outside the research questions related to empathy, emotions and leadership. One might say that one of the main findings was that leadership skills, communication, and emotions and empathy, are in many ways merged. Therefore, in the discussion, some topics might be slightly repeated, and parts of the empirical data can be discussed up against the theories more than once. At the end of the chapter, there will be a discussion about the methodological choices that were made.

There has been made an attempt to visualize the discussion in a model. The model also represents some of the codes that were made during the analysis. Please see the figure below:



Blue: Relevant for all themes

Green: Only relevant for two themes

Yellow: Only relevant for two themes

Black: Only relevant for one theme

This figure shows how leadership skills, communication, emotions and leadership overlap, as many topics are relevant to more than one section. Some areas do not overlap, but these three themes clearly go hand in hand. One way to look at it is through Mintzberg's (1973) three roles of leadership. Arguably, in the section on leadership skills, the decisional role is placed. In the emotions and leadership section, the interpersonal role is to find. The communication section includes the informational role, which is shown in the model above. As all these three roles are assigned to the leader, it is also evident that there is supposed to be an obvious merge between these three topics.

As it was stated earlier in the thesis, the leadership role is more complex in the time of crises. After the analysis has been done, this comes forward as clear: The leader role is indeed more complicated during the covid-19 pandemic.

5.1 Leadership skills needed during the covid-19 pandemic

Leadership skills turn out to be so much more than a couple of key points. The most prominent skills needed, mentioned on several occasions were: Interpersonal, clear communication, one-to-one communication, trust in the employee, confidence, flexibility in relation to both the employee and the leader themselves, keeping the team together as a whole, and the ability to motivate the employees on different aspects. In the following section, this will be discussed further.

Leadership roles

As Mintzberg (1973) states, the leader has three roles, interpersonal, informational, and decisional. The leaders did come closer to their employees during the pandemic, making one wonder, was the interpersonal role not as essential before the pandemic, or did it not get enough attention? It does seem like there is a higher need for closer follow-up with each employee during a crisis, but as the leaders are closer to each employee at this point, there is no apparent reason the interpersonal role will become less important in the future, even after the pandemic. One might say the relationship between the employee and employer is changed for the better. There was also a shift in the way of informing. While the information used to be more superficial, the communication and information during the pandemic are based on one-to-one communication. It was also emphasized that the communication had to be clear and concise, with this, it is also evident that the pandemic impacted the informational role. Decision making was not as affected as much as the interpersonal and the informational role, as their role as a leader has always been about making decisions. Taylor describes her way of making decisions from a 360-degree perspective. The leader does not see everything and needs input from the followers to make the right decisions. This was a common perception in the interviews. Even though the leader had the last saying, the followers are encouraged to provide input and give their opinions.

Gangdal and Angeltveit (2014) state that the ability to trust the employees is a strength the leader needs, especially during a crisis. Logan, Esra, and Charlie agree that trust is important. Even though Alex and Taylor do not specifically use this word, it is clear that there is a form of mutual trust between them and their employees. All the participants also ensured that the safety of their employees was a priority when the government allowed the organizations to reopen after the lockdown.

What none of the leaders mentioned was a contingency plan – which according to Hafting (2017), is crucial while managing through a crisis. It was understandably difficulty to plan ahead for covid-19 however, this is primarily what defines a crisis! There is not a lot of time to plan, and the future might be unclear. Therefore, a contingency plan would most likely be beneficial. Some of the leaders saw the crisis coming, which makes one question why there was no plan. As the organizations are still running without a contingency plan, and debatably, have not accrued long-term damage, the question arises of whether there is even a need for a contingency plan for a pandemic? If each one is so unique and complex, a contingency plan might not be useful in this type of crises. The leaders do not mention a crisis management team, which can be considered questionable. However, since the organizations or departments are quite small, this can indicate that smaller organizations do not need this due to their size. The reality can be that both contingency plans and crisis management are present in the organizations, but not discussed under the interviews as this was not asked for directly.

Leadership approaches

In the chapter of theory, five leadership approaches were defined ((Clegg et al., 2016) (Portolese et al., 2018)). To make this discussion clear, the approaches will be discussed in order. Please have in mind that there are many more approaches than the five mentioned. The leaders never mentioned any leadership style directly, only their leadership skills and traits in the time of the pandemic. It was never directly asked which type of leadership approach was preferred, both because it can be hard to label oneself in one approach, and in reality, may be doing another one. Because of the methodological choice of doing an exploratory study and interpreting the data with the help of coding and themes, it was helpful to ask open questions and use semi-structured interviews to ensure that important topics in the research questions were covered. One might say that it is not the participant answering the research question; it is the researcher who needs to find the answers in the empirical data (Tjora, 2017).

The situational approach, which is about leading according to the situation, seems to fit well in the time of a pandemic (Portolese et al., 2018). The leaders were very clear that their way of leading was changed and challenged. Among others, Alex reflected on the fact that the communication had to change between the individuals, and the overall situation had an impact on how tasks and processes were performed. All participants were flexible. They delegate work as they did before the pandemic, their visions were clear, and it seems that the organization will get through the crisis. However, since the pandemic has been going on for such a long time, this situational approach might not apply after all. The pandemic has lasted for over a year now. Can a year be classified as only one situation, or are there, in fact, many tiny situations? The pandemic in this sense might not be classified as a situation, but as a stable new order. Again, one might state that it is not the situation or the pandemic as a whole that is relevant, but the transformation of everyday situations, thereby making the situational approach applicable after all.

The behavioral approach focuses on the observable part of the leader (Portolese et al., 2018). This approach can be hard to interpret, as the only observations of the leaders was made through the interview, and not as an employee. Both Charlie and Logan stated that the employees are cognizant of tasks. There is not always a need to be delegating as the employees do what needs to be done – which is one part of the behavioral approach. Through observation, it does seem to the author that they are all structured, confident, and empathic leaders, but there is a need to emphasize that this is only speculation as the observations are only done as an interviewer.

The power influence approach is about influencing the behavior and attitude of the followers (Portolese et al., 2018). Taylor specifies a need for a presentation about how the vaccine works to influence the skeptical hesitant employees that does not want to get the shot. There might have been situations proving such measure's effectiveness, indicating that there is used a power influence approach between Taylor and the employees. It does also seem that the power is used in a positive manner. Esra, Alex, and Charlie also discuss the fact that they try to come off as confident. If they are confident, this will spread to their employees, indicating the power influence approach is used by the majority of the leaders interviewed.

The leaders come forward as people that know what they are doing and are confident in their role. Considering how they have handled the crisis, it can always be discussed if the trait approach or the "Great person theory" is applicable (Clegg et al., 2016). It might seem they are born to become leaders. However, there is not enough empirical evidence to say this for sure. The interviewer only had about an hour with them and is not discussing the participants on a personal level, but as leaders.

The last approach is the integrative approach. As Portolese et al. (2018) state, it is found that many leaders use this approach unconsciously. Considering the leaders are spread around all the approaches discussed above – it seems that this is the approach that fits the best for a leader in the time of a pandemic. They were affected by the situation and the way of leading changed. There was also a development of closer interaction between leader and employee. The leaders additionally might have key personal traits and that there is no right or wrong approach, but rather, an amalgamation that leads to success, especially during a crisis.

Other skills and traits

Another skill that stands out as important during a pandemic, is the ability to build up the team's unity. They need to work together as a whole, and the idea of being able to get through the pandemic together is crucial. The responsibility of getting the team together also lies on the leaders. Their followers must be motivated through them, which can be done in different ways. Either through one-to-one communication or simple measures like pizza night. Charlie went even further than pizza night and purchased a new table, an Italian coffee machine, and made the break room into a café. Considering that work is probably the only place where people can be social besides with their families, it can be important to do these kinds of measures to keep the employees' motivation up. One can claim that this is not only from the perspective of getting the employees to perform at work; it can be seen as fuel for motivation in their personal life as well. The ability to be social after work is taken away, and this coffee break at work might be what they need to keep their motivation up in several aspects of life. This might have a connection to the empathy the leader has for their employees.

5.2 The internal aspects of communication during the crisis

The main finding of the internal aspects of the communication during the crisis was that the one-to-one communication was more intense, extra frequent, and personal. Even though the communication rarely happened physically, but through phone calls or video meetings, the employee and leader became closer in this period.

As this thesis has been able to study five different leaders in five various organizations, there has been an elaboration of internal communication during a crisis or abnormal situation, which Hafting (2017) state needs more attention. J.E. Massey and Larsen (2006) emphasize that it is necessary to have a plan for internal communication during a crisis. However, after analyzing the empirical data, this does not seem to be correct. As mentioned, the communication is on a one-to-one basis, which does not necessarily need planning, but rather being there for the employee when necessary, not on a set schedule. Other than a few planned communication- and information meetings, there was nothing in the empirical data indicating that there was a specific plan for how to communicate with the employees. The communication plan can also be presented against the lack of a contingency plan, as mentioned in an earlier section. With no clear plan on how to communicate with the employees, that question can be asked if one is necessary. Despite a lack of structured communication plan, the communication was strengthened, nonetheless.

Relationship of trust

To have a close relationship with the employees is essential; trust is key, and not only during a crisis (Wadel, 1999). As mentioned earlier, the leaders did not have a set plan for communicating with the employees during this time, which is supported by Wadel's (1999) theory of relationship of trust. According to this theory, there is no possible way to construct an instruction manual for how to develop trust and be able to have close interpersonal relationships. A relationship needs mutual trust, even though it is just based on the assumption that it exists. Wadel (1999) also describes the relationship of trust as an investment – which is what the leaders have been doing the past year during the pandemic. There has been a higher involvement with and investment in each employee, which most likely has increased the relationship of trust. Interpersonal relationships have developed and become stronger: This has caused open, honest, and personal communication between employers and employees. This can also be an advantage in the future. Maybe the employees enjoy their job more and feel a stronger connection to their work. If someone had thoughts of quitting or changing careers, these thoughts might have disappeared because the work environment and employer connection r are now satisfying. If employees feel like they are thriving, this may translate to increased performance.

Transparency

The leaders were split between 100 percent transparency concealing the negative aspects of the crisis in relation to the employees. On one side, transparency is positive, as all the employees are kept in the loop. On the other hand, is it necessary to inform them about negative aspects that might or might not have an impact on their life in their future, and cause them needless worrying in the process? If something were to happen to the organization, say downsizing was needed, would it be better that the employees were kept in the loop so they could prepare for such an outcome? It can be discussed in several ways, but one might say that it does depend on the organization, the team, and how this is practiced in a normal situation. If the employees are used to not normally kept fully in the loop, this might be a good thing to keep doing during a crisis, as this would be their normal, and contingency can be important. However, if the organization is usually 100 percent transparent and suddenly stops keeping the employees updated, this is most likely not beneficial either. One might state that: Keep doing what has been done before. The contingency can be good for the employees – sudden changes might increase their uncertainty and worries even more.

5.3 Emotions, leadership, and empathy

It was discovered throughout the thesis that these topics, emotions, leadership, and empathy, are not possible to only categorize within either of the leadership skills as it also is relatable to internal communication. Therefore, it has gotten its own heading in the discussion chapter. As the research has been reviewed and analyzed, it plays out that emotions, such as empathy, are even more critical than first anticipated. This was initially meant to be classified as a leadership skill needed during a pandemic. It is arguable if this should have been a separate research question, as it is clearly vital to leadership during a crisis. Empathy was emphasized in all interviews; understanding another person's feelings and worries was important. Brundin (2002) describes how emotions are socially constructed and situational as they can vary between different relationships and settings. Alex explains how there is a need to differentiate the interaction between people, which confirms what Brundin (2002) describes as situational emotions.

Emotions and leadership

According to George (2000), there are five elements of how emotions contribute to effective leadership, which was described in the chapter of theory. The five elements are repeated here: 1) Development of a collective sense of goals and objectives and how to go about achieving them, 2) Instilling in others knowledge and appreciation of the importance of work activities and behaviors, 3) Generating and maintaining excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, and optimism in an organization, as well as cooperation and trust, 4) Encouraging flexibility in decision-making and change, 5) Establishing and maintaining a meaningful identity for an organization (George, 2000).

The empirical evidence has roots in all of these five elements. George (2000) states that it is vital to make rational decision-making, even though your emotional state is unpredictable or negative. However, the empirical evidence points towards a collective optimism, so even though there have been unstable emotions, the optimism has been present, categorized here as a positive feeling. On the one hand, the leaders have been both scared and worried, which means their mood can be described as negative – their optimism, on the other hand, has also been present, which is why it is possible to argue if the empirical data do not support this part of element one in George's (2000) framework. As the leaders have been able to have a closer relationship with their employees, there is reason to believe the empirical evidence reinforces the second element in this theory. This states that the employees are kept informed with relevant information, making them feel emotionally included and connected to the business. In this sense, the leaders were split: Esra and Alex went for an approach where there was some concealing of the facts, while Tylor, Logan, and Charlie were 100 percent open. According to George's (2000) elements, one can argue that the 100 percent transparency method would lead to success. However, since Alex and Esra did not have any noticeable negative effects of concealing some details, there might not be a right or wrong. As discussed earlier, the continuity of what the organization did before the pandemic happened might be important in regards to transparency issues. George (2000) also states that it is essential that the leader have an insight into how to affect the feelings of the employees, which they have been able to do, according to themselves. It also becomes clear through the analysis, that their empathy is strong. While interviewing the leaders, it seems like there is awareness of their feelings, which indicates that the ability to manage their emotions is present, which also, according to George (2000), leads to effective decision-making. While teambuilding also has been an important factor for the leaders, they have had the ability to maintain a meaningful identity for the organization. All in all, the five elements are present in the empirical evidence, which means that emotions are crucial for organizational leadership during a pandemic. It is noticeable from the empirical data that not only being able to interpret other's emotions, but also being able to manage and cope with their own emotions, is a good skill to have as a leader in a pandemic.

Empathy

Empathy is a part of the emotional aspect, and it might seem like the ability to feel empathy has increased during the pandemic. It has not been as present in earlier stages of the participant's leadership as it is now during the crisis. The pandemic does not discriminate and impacts all of us, regardless of job, ethnicity, or location. Arguably, this can be one reason the leaders are so empathic in a time of crises. The situation was the same for all: Worrying about their job, future of the business, and the health of their family and friends is most likely applicable to most. Badea and Pana (2010) describe individuals with much empathy through ten different characteristics (please see the theory section for details, page 17). With these characteristics in mind, being empathic can make a person a better leader. Because of this, it is possible to state that: The leaders have become better leaders during the pandemic because they developed empathy towards their employees. There will always be a question of what happens after the pandemic if the leaders are changed permanently or temporarily during this current situation.

As there has been a focus on empathy as a leader, it is worth mentioning that it did seem like there was genuine empathy for the employees among the leaders. However, in an instrumental light, it is important to recognize that there is a probability this is not the case for two reasons. The first reason is that the leader has empathy, not because they have empathy for their employees, but because there is an interest in keeping the employees happy and efficient. Without the employees, there is no business and no revenue. This means, it is not the employees' best that is in their interest, it is the organizational gain that arises as a result of employee happiness and efficiency. The second reason is that the leaders might say they have empathy to look good in front of the interviewer. It is impossible to exclude these two factors, even though the empathy seemed genuine at heart in the interviews and the empirical data.

Stress in crises

Hafting (2017) discusses four elements of stress in crises, where none of them seem to be relevant according to the empirical data. Number one and two refer to physical changes resulting from stress, which might be accurate, but not visible in the empirical data of this study. The leader never discussed their physical changes in detail, however, Esra mentioned that there had been some sleepless nights because of stress and worry, which would cause tiredness, and other biological factors could be affected – which again could have an impact on, for example, decision-making. Element numbers three and four refer to changed reasoning and emotional disturbances. It does not seem like there has been done any hasty decision-making by the leaders. One might argue that this is because the different governments set such harsh restrictions that the leaders may not have had the opportunity to make the difficult decisions like, for example, closing down. The fourth element is present in the interviews, the emotional disturbances – all leaders refer to either stress, fear, or anger. However, they are called emotional disturbances by Hafting (2017), which does not seem like the proper way to describe them. Removing disturbances would make it more relevant. It is reasonable to believe that emotions like the mentioned ones will occur in crises, however, from the perspective of the leader, it does not seem to be necessary to call them disturbances.

5.4 Methodology discussion

It is important to discuss whether the method used was the best way to study a specific phenomenon. The leaders are picked mostly because of their differences. Even though they differentiate, their answers and reflections are quite similar, making it possible to discuss if this study is theoretically generalizable. The heat transfer business is not an industry with millions of companies. As Alex states in the interview, *"…there is not that many of us."* It would be a bold statement to say that this is, in fact, a theoretically generalizing study, but Alex might have a point, if there are not that many of them, the results of this study would most likely apply to more than these five cases. At the same time, trying to find how many businesses that produce heat transfer labels is close to impossible.

It can also be discussed if it was the right choice to study one industry only. The reason for this choice was mainly to make the results as theoretically generalizable as possible. If this were a heterogenous study, it would be harder to generalize the empirical data. Considering only one industry has been studied, it can be called homogenous, and easier to theoretically generalize. However, a qualitative study is at the same time rarely generalizable. This was also exploratory research, which makes it easier to support the choice of having a small number of participants, since there was also a focus on exploring.

Tjora (2017) mentions that, in many cases, it is an advantage to do both qualitative and quantitative research if the resources are there. However, considering this is a master thesis, there is rarely an option to do both. On the one hand, since this topic is so new, it might be possible to criticize the method and discuss if a survey would have been preferable. A survey could give an overview of the situation before going into more specific topics in in-depth interviews. In a survey, it would perhaps be possible to catch that, for example, empathy was so important. In further research, it would be possible to identify the need for a separate research question in a qualitative study by doing quantitative research beforehand. On the other hand, it can be hard to find enough leaders willing to answer a survey, even though it does not take as much time as an interview. There is a risk of a low response rate in surveys to leaders. An interview might seem more important as they are more personal than a survey that does not have any personal interaction.

It does seem, however, like the chosen method has been successful. There has been a solid mapping of the research questions. It also discovered another important aspect of the leadership during a pandemic, namely emotions such as empathy, probably because of the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Another methodological discussion worth mentioning is that this research is done on leaders only. There might be a reason to believe the outcome could have been different if employees were the participants. Do they feel empathy for each other and the leader, the same way the leader feels empathy for them? The leaders can definitely have a different perception of the situation than the employees.

It is also worth mentioning that these leaders are well experienced. One might say that the outcome could be different if the leaders were not as experienced before the pandemic started. Maybe because the leaders are so familiar with their job after many years, they handled the crisis in a proper manner, for they contended only with new external factors? Suppose a participant would only have a few years of experience as a leader. In that case, the confidence in their job might not be on the same level, and there could be a bigger uncertainty than for the experienced leaders in this industry.

The design of the analysis might always be arguable. It is believed that the material was analyzed in a proper, unbiased way. However, there is never certainty in regard to this question the researcher was very cautious while analyzing the interviews, considers it done in an unbiased manner.

This chapter has critically discussed the empirical data up against the research questions and the theories found in chapter two, to try to answer the research questions. It has also included a discussion about the methodological choices made. The empirical data has, in many cases, been supported by the theories and vice versa. As theories are based on a system or idea that tends to explain something, one specific theory or parts of it will not always be relevant for all cases. There will always be exceptions. All in all, the research questions have been addressed, it is shown in the chapter above what leadership skills were relevant during the covid-19 pandemic, and the internal aspects of communication are accounted for.

6.0 Conclusion

This thesis has done an exploratory study about leaders during a pandemic in relation to leadership skills and internal communication. Based on qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews of five leaders in the heat transfer industry, there has been a thorough mapping of the leadership skills the leaders used and found helpful during the pandemic. In addition, internal communication has also been studied in the form of how it unfolded during the pandemic. As it also turns out, emotions such as empathy are crucial, which is why there was an own section dedicated to this topic in the discussion chapter.

In the empirical evidence, it turns out leaders generally had similar conceptions about how to lead through a pandemic, with minor deviations. This, despite the differences in their demographic and geographic segmentation group. As discussed, the three themes, leadership skills, communication, and emotions are overlapping and partly merged, which was discovered since this has been an exploratory research. Therefore, it is difficult to summarize and conclude on the two research questions separately. The analysis shows that leadership skills and internal communication are intertwined elements of leadership during the pandemic, and emotions such as empathy feature as a central part of this.

The leaders agreed that there had been a change in their way of leading throughout the pandemic, and their communication- and leadership skills have been challenged in various ways. The findings indicate that having a personal relationship with the employees is crucial, and this has been achieved by using more one-to-one communication. There is a need to follow up with every employee and their respective concerns. Leaders with growing empathy are genuinely interested in their employees, evidenced through the level of one-to-one communication.

Keeping the team together as a whole and cognizant of necessary information was also vital. However, when it comes to openness about the organization's problems or issues, continuity is found to be a key. If the leader before the pandemic used to include the employees in everything, keep doing that. If not, keep doing that. In this way the employees can experience continuity in the information sharing.

It came forward in the data that none of the leaders had contingency plans or communication plans for such a crisis, which does not seem necessary either, since a pandemic is so complex and uncertain. One may argue that some preparation is fundamental, but a complete contingency plan does not seem to be necessary. As the governments set unpredicted restrictions, things change rapidly.

What was most unexpected was that emotional leadership and empathy were very important in the time of crisis. This might be, as mentioned earlier, due to the fact that the pandemic does not discriminate; it affects everyone with potential severe consequences. The leader's empathy also did seem genuine, and there is no reason to believe they did not mean what they said.

6.1 Further research

As this thesis has only been able to grasp the beginning of leadership in a pandemic, suggestions for further research will presented here.

Emotions, leadership, and empathy are not a highly researched phenomenon; it would be beneficial to do more specific research on these areas to expand the knowledge. However, again, since the pandemic is such a new topic, more research on leadership skills and internal communication during a pandemic could be valuable.

It is, as mentioned, only leaders were interviewed. There is no way for the interviewer to know if the leader's indication matches employee perception. This study is about the leaders' thoughts and reflections, and this only. There has been a common perception that they have become closer to their employees, while this might not be correct in the employees' eyes. For further research one might advise additional research in which both leaders and employees discuss various themes, thereby covering a broader aspect of leadership during a pandemic.

There is also most likely a need for similar research after the pandemic has ended. In such a study it would be possible to map out what has been learned along with permanent changes directly resulting from the pandemic.

Conducting a research through a survey could also be a good idea, to reach out to a broader segment, possibly statistically generalize, and get another and broader view on the phenomena. This could be done both before and after the pandemic is over.

Indeed, this thesis only focuses on one industry, and research on similar topics in other industries can also be beneficial to see if the findings are relevant to other areas.

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Appendix

Interview guide

A – Introductory

- How long have you been in this job/industry?
- Please tell me about your responsibilities.
- Briefly take me through a typical working day during the pandemic.
- How big is your organization/how many do you manage?
- Are your organization still in a crisis?

B – covid-19

- How did you realize there was a crisis/abnormal situation ongoing/coming?
- Do you believe the pandemic has had any impact on you as a leader on a permanent basis/future leadership?
  - How?
- Has the pandemic, as you see it, had specific noticeable phases in relation to your organization?
  - If yes – please elaborate
  - If no – go forward

C – You as the leader

- How has the pandemic challenged your leadership skills?
- While leading during the pandemic, in what way do you:
  - Motivate
  - Monitor employees
  - Delegate work
  - Support employees (sensitive to members concerns/support groups)
  - Involve employees in decision-making during the pandemic?
- Which leadership skills did you find helpful during the pandemic?
- Tell me about the three strongest feelings/emotions you associate with being a leader in an organization during the covid-19 pandemic.

D – Communication

- What do you associate with the word communication?
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- Written communication
- Listening
- Visual communication
- How did the internal communication unfold during the pandemic?
- How has the pandemic challenged your ability to communicate?
- Which communication skills of yours did you find helpful during the pandemic?

E – Interview is coming to an end

- Can you please summarize what you think is the most important when it comes to internal communication during a pandemic?
- Can you please summarize what you think is the most important when it comes to leadership traits and skills during a pandemic?
- How will you reflect on your leadership during the covid-19?
- Do you have any information that you think would be useful to me that I have not talked about or asked for?