Leaderhip in Geographically Dispersed teams
The Impact of Virtuality on Leader’s Role

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Abstract

Globalization and fast developing technology are allowing organizations to spread their operations across the world. While this is often cost effective and increases companies’ competitiveness, a new challenge for leadership has arisen as people and teams are becoming geographically dispersed. Leaders and followers are relying more heavily on computer-mediated communication instead of traditional face-to-face interaction.

The aim of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of leadership in geographically dispersed teams. As communication is occurring primarily through virtual channels, the purpose is to study the effect this phenomenon has on the leader’s role and how followers experience virtual leadership. This thesis also outlines the impact of leadership in virtual teams; how to create and maintain team spirit, how to establish trust, and how to ensure team effectiveness. Additionally, this study examines the main challenges and opportunities in virtual leadership, what competencies are required for virtual leaders, and how important communication is in the concept of virtual leadership.

Data for this study was collected from ten various professionals, including both leaders’ and followers’, by conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with each individual. The findings of the empirical research show that there is a relatively optimistic attitude towards virtual leadership. However, there are certainly critical challenges when it comes to relationship building, team cohesion, and communication. There is a significant need for raising awareness of virtual leadership, as it is becoming more the norm than the exception in the modern business world.

Keywords

Virtual Leadership, Geographic Dispersion, Virtual Teams, Computer-Mediated Communication
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With my warmest thanks,
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1 Introduction

“Today, business leaders typically lead teams in which members are located, not in the same office or building, but in different places around the world.”

(Zaccaro & Bader 2003, p. 377)

The current trend of globalization and rapidly developing technology are enabling people to work anywhere and anytime, teams are becoming more dispersed and diverse, which is setting a new challenge for leadership. Because of this, it is necessary to gain deeper comprehension on the subject of remote leadership. The purpose of this chapter is to cover the problematization of geographically dispersed leadership, and as well to present the purpose of this study, to justify the importance of this topic, and to define the research questions that this study intends to answer.

1.1 Background

Information technology has been part of human life for over a century, political leaders have been able to communicate their messages via radio and television for large audiences since the beginning of 20th century. We could say that the era of communication technology started with the invention of telephone in 1876, after that one major invention was radio in 1896, followed by television in 1919 (McNeil 2002, p. 692), and from 1920’s onwards, radio, television and newspapers started to be used for a mass communication, and much later, in 1970’s started the modern era of communication technologies; telecommunications and computers (Cantoni & Danowski 2015, p. 4). But only after the invention of World Wide Web, offline computers could be connected to the networks, and in 1990’s the Web, Internet, started to become more widely used around the world (Cantoni & Danowski 2015, pp. 129-130).

Although Internet has been remarkable invention in the human history, it also made it possible to evolve media communication means to become more interactive. According to Cantoni and Danowski (2015, p. 142) this phenomenon, the new interactive way of communicating via computer constructed realities, can be called virtuality. Virtual realities are increasing in our daily lives, because ‘computing and new telecommunication technologies are creating a global network of social communications with near instantaneous
transmission of information, ideas, and value judgments in science, commerce, education, politics, religion, entertainment, and every other facet of human activity’ (Cantoni & Danowski 2015, p. 155). Therefore, we are no longer dependent on our physical location, because we are able to communicate, interactively and instantly, with each other in virtual environments.

In addition, globalization has been occurring over the past two centuries, but only recently it has become more intensive and apparent in our everyday lives due to the significant improvements and innovations in technology and transportation. This development is noticeable in economic, political and cultural aspects. Advanced technology increases our accessibility, makes the distinction between professional and personal lives more unclear, and reduces the physical boundaries of traditional work (Fisher-Yoshida & Geller 2009).

Nowadays, there are more possibilities for different social activities among people regardless of their geographic location. The online environment makes it possible to share information and documents, and work collaboratively without being physically in the same location. This geographic dispersion happens in many organizations in wide range of industries, because companies are - not only adapting to the current trends - but proactively seeking cost-effective solutions to run their businesses. Therefore, ‘organizations can be located anywhere around the world to take advantage of local expertise and advantageous economic conditions’ (Fisher-Yoshida & Geller 2009, p. 4). Globalization is the key element behind ever-increasing work team and leadership dispersion across the world. Geographic dispersion between professionals can occur within the national borders in multiple locations, or internationally across different time zones and cultures.

We live in a global village, and with advanced communication technology we are connected through time and space everywhere and in every way. It becomes more common that our colleagues, team members, customers and other stakeholders are in different location than we are. And moreover, we have various communication methods available in today’s world; telephone, email, video conference call, social media platforms and many other ways to stay connected with each other.
1.2 Problem Discussion

Geographically dispersed teams are becoming more common than ever before, globalization and fast developing technology are enabling companies spreading their operations to different locations and time zones, and make it possible to work around the clock (Wakefield, Leidner, Garrison 2008). It is important to note, that there is a certain level of difficulty to make a clear classification between geographically dispersed teams and global virtual teams, as many of the attributes are similar for both. Therefore, both features, geographic dispersion and virtuality, will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Due to the geographic dispersion, team is depended more on computer-mediated communication, when compared to co-located teams with traditional and frequent face-to-face communication (Polzer et al. 2006; Connaughton & Daly 2004; Daim et al. 2012).

As mentioned, the term ‘geographically dispersed team’ can be indistinct, and there are many definitions and levels for it; some teams are working only partially in different locations, other teams are geographically dispersed only for a certain period of time due to a short-term project, some employees work full-time remotely from home, others might work at the company’s premises but in a different location than their direct manager and other colleagues. Therefore, it is hard to show in details with the statistics, how common it is that leaders and followers are geographically dispersed, and thereby rely on computer-mediated communication. Moreover, it is challenging to predict how the current situation might evolve in the future – will the number of people working in these conditions increase dramatically in a few years? According to Purvanova (2013), virtual team work is a trend, which is increasing in the global business organizations. Furthermore, the digitally native generation is entering into the workforce, which might foster the virtual team work in the near future, because they could refresh the outdated and to some extend even negative attitudes towards virtual communication (Purvanova 2013).

Eurofound and the International Labour Office have recently released a report ‘Working Anytime, Anywhere: The Effects on the World of Work’ (2017), which gives some insights of the current trends in the modern work life, and also provides some statistics of the remote work in different parts of the world. Eurofound has also published another similar report in 2010, where the focus
has been only in the countries of European Union. According to Eurofound (2010), the average proportion of telework employees in 2000 was approximately 5.3% in 15 EU countries, and in 2005, the average proportion of teleworkers increased to 7% including 27 EU countries this time. One important note in the Eurofound 2010 report is that it counts both, part-time and full-time remote workers. Nevertheless, it shows that the amount of teleworkers has been increasing. In the more recent report from Eurofound (2017), it is stated that in total 17% of employees in European Union worked in some level remotely, part-time, or full-time, in 2015. And when looking at the European countries, it is interesting to note that some countries are more willing to adapt the concept of telework than others. For instance, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Spain are behind the EU’s average proportion of remote workers, whereas Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, and Belgium are clearly above the EU average (Eurofound and the International Labour Office 2017).

In the US, the concept of remote work, has been increasingly promoted, because it has many advantages, such as reducing commuting time and cost, and decreasing the costs of office facilities (Eurofound and the International Labour Office 2017). According to Global Workplace Analytics (2016), regular home-based work has increased in the US by 103% since 2005. Furthermore, approximately 2.8% of the workforce in the US are working at least half of their time from home (Global Workplace Analytics 2016). In addition, according to the report written by Lister and Harnish (2011, p. 4), there are even more possibilities to expand the number of people who are working remotely, because approximately 45% of US workforce is holding a job that is compatible with remote working conditions.

Although, the statistics above are purely focused on telework and home-based remote work, it gives an indication, that in the future people are increasingly working outside the traditional office location. If we think further, there is also increasing number of people who are working in geographically dispersed teams due to the globalization and the huge demand of outsourcing services. Therefore, we can say that more and more business leaders have to face situations, where some, or even all, of their team members are working in different locations, and the main forms of communication are based on virtual media.
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Considering the fact, that full-time work is no longer necessarily tied to a specific place or time, it is important to note, which sectors are most affected of this phenomenon. In the global business world, we could say that every sector is affected in some level. According to Eurofound report (2010), higher skilled workers are most likely using telework, especially in real estate and financial sectors. Working in a global virtual team is increasingly more common in business areas like R&D and customer service, but also in IT services, marketing, human resources, and in many other business operations, such as supply chain management and procurement, strategy development, and project management (Wakefield, Leidner & Garrison 2008; Hertel et al. 2005; The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited 2009).

Furthermore, global multinational corporates are eager to increase their virtual team operations even more, because it has many benefits for them. One important advantage for multinational companies is that they can capture better exceptional global talents by spreading their teams geographically (Purvanova 2013). Another significant advantage is linked with the cost savings, such as reduced traveling expenses, but also, virtual team work makes organizations more flexible and increases their global competitiveness, and therefore companies will most probably continue to adopt virtual team practices in the future (Purvanova 2013).

It is clear, that geographically dispersed virtual teams are the current, rapidly increasing trend in a modern business world, but what this mean for the business leaders? How can they succeed to lead effectively their teams when team members are spread into different countries and time zones? Is it possible to influence others, and build trust through computer-mediated communication channels? What are the key competencies for future global leaders, and how can leaders develop their leadership style in the technologically advanced global world?

Organizational scholars are starting to adopt terms like "virtual leadership" and "e-leadership" to describe the new phenomenon of leadership, which is mainly carried out via electronic channels (Zaccaro & Bader 2003). In traditional co-located teams, leaders are able to influence their followers with their body language, voice tone, use of symbols, the way they dress, and other non-verbal communication cues (Zigurs 2003), but how can leaders influence people in
virtual environments? Moreover, as teams are dispersed geographically, there are also issues with language, and unique set of cultural differences, and global virtual leaders must be aware of these challenges of language barriers and cultural expectations (Daim et al. 2012). Similarly, than in traditional leadership settings, the concept of emotional intelligence is critical factor in virtual leadership as well. Furthermore, there are set of other skills that are highly relevant for global virtual leaders, such as: effective communication, deep understanding of change and conflict management, team building expertise, and knowledge how to build and maintain trust (Zaccaro & Bader 2003).

1.3 Research Questions

According to Corbin and Strauss, the research question should be seen as 'a statement that identifies the topic area to be studied and tells the reader what there is about this particular topic that is for interest to the researcher' (2008, p. 25). With this in mind, in this thesis I want to gain deeper understanding of the concept of leadership in geographically dispersed teams, and therefore I have formulated the following research questions for this study:

- **RQ1:** What are the key competencies for global virtual leaders?

  With this first research question, I want to focus on, what are the main competencies for leaders in a global virtual environment. Can virtuality have an impact on leadership? How different virtual leadership is when compared to leaders who have regular physical presence among followers, and therefore the possibility for regular face-to-face communication? And also, how they can develop their leadership style to be more effective in the future business world, where technology gives new possibilities to form teams across different locations?

- **RQ2:** What are the main challenges, and opportunities, when leading geographically dispersed teams?

  The second research question is linked to the previous one, meaning that, I would like to gain deeper understanding, what are the main challenges for leaders in geographically dispersed teams. In addition, and based on my own current understanding, I believe that virtual team work is still seen more as an
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action which is forced by the circumstances, and therefore, I would like to understand what are the positive and negative outcomes of it.

➢ RQ3: How do followers experience their leaders in geographically dispersed settings, and in virtual environment?

With the third research question, I want to highlight the importance of leader-follower relationship, and include the concept of followership to my thesis. With this in mind, I would like to discover, how followers experience their leaders with physical distance, and through the virtual communication methods.

➢ RQ4: Is it possible to be identified as a leader, rather than a manager, when physical presence among followers is very rare and limited?

The fourth, and last research question is linked to the previous one, and I hope to find out, if it is possible to be identified as a leader in a global virtual environment. Clearly, there is some kind of managerial relationship within virtual teams, but is it purely managerial position, or can followers experience him or her as a leader?

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study, for the reader and for myself, is to gain better understanding of virtual leadership in geographically dispersed teams, and particularly, what kind of impact this phenomenon might have for the leaders’ role, and also, how it might impact followers and how they experience their leaders without physical presence.

I believe that all the investigations and research presented in this thesis, can be useful for the future leaders, and as well for the technologically savvy followers, who might even demand more adaptation of virtual team work, because it provides more work-life balance and flexibility for them. The purpose of this thesis is to provide deeper knowledge on, how to lead effectively virtual teams, what are the critical issues around this topic, and how to develop global leaders to adopt the essential know-how of leading geographically dispersed teams. Furthermore, how future leaders can gain better understanding of the possible
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challenges that rapidly developing technology and globalization might cause, and how to overcome these challenges.

And in addition, this study will address some important aspects of global leadership, such as cultural differences, and language barriers, and how these issues might influence on virtual leadership. Another essential thing to highlight in this study is, to understand the advantages, and disadvantages of different communication methods, what are the differences between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication, and how different channels of communication can impact on leadership in a modern organization. And, as communication will be an important part of this study, the aim is also to understand, how to avoid misunderstandings and wrong interpretations in virtual environment, and how leaders can ensure that there is shared understanding among the whole team.

1.5 Delimitations

As the concept of leadership in geographically dispersed teams can be quite comprehensive, and widely interpreted, it is essential to make some delimitations for this study. First of all, I will focus on business leaders that are operating preferably in multinational companies, and in a global context. Furthermore, as I want to include the relationship between leaders and followers to this study, I have decided to focus on the followers’ perspective as well. The purpose is to study the relation with followers’ immediate supervisor, meaning that there is no additional managerial steps in between.

Secondly, I would like to concentrate on virtual teams that are working most of their time in geographically dispersed settings, this delimitation will exclude occasional and temporary virtual teams. I believe, that I can gather more relevant insights, and gain deeper understanding of the subject, by studying virtual teams that are together for a longer period of time, meaning that the status of virtual team is permanent rather than short-term project work. Moreover, I would like to study virtual teams that truly rely heavily on virtual communication due to the large geographic distances between team members.
2 Literature Review

"Time and space are modes by which we think and not a condition in which we live."

(Albert Einstein)

In this chapter the purpose is to explore the current scientific literature and research around themes of leadership in geographically dispersed virtual teams, the advantages, and disadvantages of leading a virtual team, the importance of communication, and trust and team building within geographically dispersed teams, and key competencies for global virtual leaders.

2.1 Leadership

What is leadership? There is no clear answer to that question. Eikenberry and Harris (2011, p. 35) highlights that ‘since everyone doesn’t see leadership the same way, everyone doesn’t see the components of leadership the same way’. Therefore, leadership can be understood in many ways, but one thing is clear: there is no leadership without followers. According to Gardner ‘the relationship between the leader and the followers is typically ongoing, active, and dynamic’ (1996, p. 81), and it is essential to understand the relationship between leaders and followers. There is a special transaction between leaders and followers, and without followers, leader would not exist (Bennis & Nanus 2003, p. 44) So, when leader is trying to influence others, it’s more like a negotiation process between leader and followers, to make others to work for the desirable future.

According to Eikenberry and Harris (2011, p. 11) ‘leadership is not something we have or possess; it is something we do’, it’s actions and behaviors. And there is clear difference between leadership and management. Management is more task-oriented, focused on things, results and processes, whereas leadership is focusing on people and development (Eikenberry & Harris 2011, p. 12). Good leaders are able to communicate clear vision, they are passionate, they foster hope, and they inspire people, and in addition, they have integrity which helps to build trust among their followers, and importantly, they know themselves, and through their self-awareness, they achieve authenticity (Bennis 2009, pp. 33-35).
By knowing who they are, and what are their core values, leaders can reach authenticity, and moreover, based on their self-knowledge, authentic leaders act consistently and makes decisions that are aligned with their own values (Gardner et al. 2005). Authentic leaders can create solid relationships with their followers by being transparent and open, by building mutual trust, by providing clear objectives, and by putting emphasis on the development of their followers (Gardner et al. 2005).

### 2.1.1 Transformational Leadership

Leadership is a wide topic, it can be understood differently, and from different perspectives, but some theories distinguishes leadership styles to three different categories; lazzes-faire, transactional and transformational leadership style. Shortly, lazzes-faire leadership style is hands-off approach, in other words, very delegative way of leading people by giving most of the power to followers. Transactional leadership is based on ‘exchanges and agreements with followers’, which simply means by leading through rewards and punishments (Bass & Avolio 1993).

Transformational leadership style on the other hand, is based on ‘influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration’, which means that transformational leaders communicate inspiring vision and empower everyone in their team to actively contribute in order to achieve the common goal. Furthermore, transformational leaders encourage innovative thinking and creativity among their followers, and they challenge the status quo, and they help everyone to grow and develop (Bass & Avolio 1993, p. 112).

There has been lot of discussion how important transformational leadership is, and Purvanova and Bono (2009) also highlight, that especially in virtual teams, transformational leadership style is essential because it focuses on influential leadership. Transformational leaders are often referred as “charismatic” or “inspirational” leaders, because of the way transformational leaders lead others, is to ‘transmit an enthusiastic vision of the future’, foster dedication and loyalty, and provide inspirational motivation (Purvanova & Bono 2009, p. 344). Additionally, transformational leaders are challenging their followers’ intellectual capacity, and encouraging them to think new ideas. These kind of
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leaders can recognize their followers’ potential, they can coach and support them with their personal development, and not forgetting that transformational leaders treat their followers as individuals (Purvanova & Bono 2009).

Nowadays, advanced communication technology is part of a modern business world, and virtuality becomes more common in every social interaction between individual. So, what is the importance of transformational leadership in virtual teams? Purvanova and Bono (2009) argues, that the behaviors of transformational leaders might have even greater impact in virtual teams when compared to face-to-face teams. Furthermore, Kelley and Kelloway (2012, p. 441) states that ‘remote transformational leader can engage in intellectual stimulation by increasing the frequency, level and nature of information exchange’.

One of the reasons, why transformational leadership style is more effective in virtual team setting is, that the virtual environment is slightly impersonal and there is even certain level of anonymity. And if leader is able to develop and maintain rich relationship with the followers, he or she can make them feel appreciated and valuable for the team (Purvanova & Bono 2009). Another reason is, that in virtual environment it’s more challenging to create strong connection with the other team members, and transformational leader can help with the team cohesion, identify team tasks and responsibilities, and develop common goal, and this can strengthen the relations between team members, and they can feel more united (Purvanova & Bono 2009). In other words, transformational leaders can influence their followers in virtual teams by providing clear context to work, which decreases feelings of uncertainty and reduces ambiguities, and by creating stronger social relationships, which increases team cohesion and enhances individuals’ motivation to work together.

2.1.2 Leadership in Geographically Dispersed Teams: In Comparison with Co-located Teams

Organizations are increasingly adopting virtual teams as a part of their everyday operations in order to keep up with the current major trends such as globalization, outsourcing and strategic partnering, and it also allows organizations operate closer to their customers and react faster to the demands of the market (Hill & Bartol 2016).
But what is geographically dispersed virtual team, and how it differentiates from so called co-located team? In virtual team the members of the team are geographically or organizationally dispersed, and they rely heavily on technology-mediated communication (Daim et al 2012; Zigurs 2003), virtual team have a common goal, but the members of these team collaborate and communicate via different technological communication tools, and they see each other rarely face-to-face. And in addition, the more globally dispersed the team is, the more culturally diverse it is usually. There are also many dimensions of geographically dispersed virtual teams. Other teams operate within their national borders, while other teams are spread to different continents and time zones. Other virtual teams meet each other face-to-face several times per year, while other teams might never find the time and the place to meet all together.

With the possibility of regular face-to-face interaction in co-located teams, it might be easier to communicate frequently, and even spontaneously interact with each other, it is also easier to build and maintain rich social relationships, and address problems immediately and effectively (Connaughton & Daly 2004), while in virtual teams, for instance, spontaneous informal communication rarely occurs.

Because of the physical proximity, leaders in co-located teams are able to sense the needs of their team by observing and listening, while leaders in geographically dispersed teams have less access to notice their team needs (Malhitra, Majchrzak & Rose 2007), and because of this, virtual leaders need to be aware of that, and set up structures and figure out creative ways to gain different kinds of information from their team.

To sum up, leadership is not that different in a virtual environment than in a traditional office environment, in both settings leader is able to influence people by providing them a vision of the future, by inspiring and supporting them, and by helping them to grow. The difference is, that without regular face-to-face communication, leaders might face some difficulties and challenges, and by being aware of them, leaders can still successfully lead geographically dispersed team. Leadership with physical distance requires time and planning. Leader will most probably spend more time with some activities, like; providing coaching and mentoring, creating effective structures for regular communication,
establishing clear norms, building trust and deepen the social relationships with followers, and recognizing followers’ successes and areas for development. In the next chapter I will cover the concept of virtual leadership more deeply.

2.2 Virtual Leadership: The Impact on Virtual Teams

The world around us is changing rapidly, location is reducing its importance, distances are smaller, you can reach anyone anywhere via computer-mediated communication tools, you can travel to other side of the world, you can work with people from different backgrounds, and English is the universal language in the business world. Therefore, leadership and management are changing as well; new skills and knowledge are required for effective 21st century leadership (McNutt et al. 2015). Advanced technology makes it possible for leaders and followers interact with each other from any location, which means that traditional ways of working will change in multiple ways and physical presence becomes less important (McNutt et al. 2015). Successful future leaders are those you are able to adapt, remodel institutions, challenging the norms, being multilingual and culturally sensitive, being flexible and internationally mobile (McNutt et al. 2015).

According to Avolio and Kahai (2003, p. 326) virtual leadership, or so called e-leadership, ‘takes place in a context where work is mediated by information technology’. In this virtual environment, not only occurs the interaction between leaders and followers, but as well sharing information and knowledge with different units of the organization. Moreover, leader’s in today’s world are expected to lead people in a complex global context across various time zones, cultures and national borders (Avolio & Kahai 2003). And, the workforce itself is experienced in advanced information technology, new communication tools, and usage of various social media channels, and integrating technological solutions to be part of their everyday lives, and in addition to that, the workforce is expecting more flexibility to work from different locations (Avolio & Kahai 2003).

Zigurs (2003, p. 347) believes that ‘virtual teams provide a unique opportunity for redefining the concept of leadership’, because we need to re-think many traditional leadership aspects in a new way. For instance, how to provide feedback, rewards, encouragement and motivation via computer-mediated communication, how to develop meaningful relations with people virtually and
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so on. Furthermore, Zigurs (2003) states, that effective leadership can have certainly positive impact in virtual teams, but it requires more effort from leader and team members to build rich relationships, and to cover the essential leadership aspects such as coaching, being inspirational and communicating effectively.

As new technology allows workforce to become more flexible with their location, it also reduces the need for fixed physical offices, it allows companies to attract and retain top talents around the world, it provides better opportunities to respond to market demands, and due to the wider geographic dispersion in teams and in organizations, leadership will be also ‘stretched across physical space’ and managers will operate in a global interconnected world (McNutt et al. 2015, p. 128).

As mentioned before, leadership itself is not changing dramatically, the same aspects are relevant in traditional leadership, than in virtual leadership, therefore, what are the main points in the concept of virtual leadership that we should be aware of? First of all, the accessibility of information; in the modern world leaders and followers have similar access to information, and this is changing the way they interact with each other (Avolio & Kahai 2003). Secondly, hierarchies are getting more flat, and followers are part of the decision making in earlier stages than before. And thirdly, even senior managers have more time and possibilities to connect with their followers in all levels via virtual encounters (Avolio & Kahai 2003). On the other hand, while we have more access to information, and it’s easier to catch errors, resolve conflicts at early stage, and make informed decisions, we are also working in a business world that never stops, where we are available all the time around the clock, and at the same time businesses are becoming less predictable, and uncertainty is part of our lives (McNutt at al. 2015).

However, Zigurs (2003, p. 329) highlights, that ‘leadership can and should be expressed in virtual teams’, and we can learn how to make the best out of virtual leadership by learning things like; how to communicate effectively, how to encourage creativity, how to collaborate and build strong relationships with each other through computer-mediated communication. In a traditional leadership settings, leader makes their presence known in a multiple ways by using non-verbal cues, such as body language and voice tone, expressing their
style of dress, showing where they sit in the meetings, and all other symbols that can show more of their personality, and how they express their professional status, and as these cues are not apparent in a virtual environment, leaders need to learn to show their “telepresence” in other ways (Zigurs 2003).

2.2.1 Basic Roles & Responsibilities of Virtual Leaders

In addition to many traditional leadership practices, virtual leaders need to make an additional effort and pay attention to some things in order to work effectively in virtual environments. Table 1 on the next page outlines some of the main responsibilities of virtual leaders, which are; the active usage of technology, how to ensure effective communication, how to build team cohesion, how to establish and maintain trust, how to monitor team performance and individuals’ potential for development, and finally, how to become culturally aware and think globally (e.g. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rose 2007; Zaccaro & Bader 2003; Hart & McLeod 2003; Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005). Table 1 has been constructed based on several sources, and the content will be discussed more deeply in the following chapters.

To start with, the ability to use technology (Table 1), certainly is one of the most important points in virtual leadership, as technology itself provides the tool to practice distant leadership, and makes the interaction between leaders and followers possible. The role of successful virtual leader is to set an example for using computer-mediated communication. In other words, a virtual leader must be comfortable using different communication tools on a regular basis, create rich and interactive virtual space for the team, and also simulate team members to use communication tools actively (Bass & Bass 2008, p. 861). It’s also important for leaders to determine different ways of communicating. And according to Hertel, Geister and Konradt (2005), text-based media, like emails, are suitable for task-related communication, but also shorter phone calls are good for that purpose. On the other hand, longer phone calls and video conference calls are better for problem solving. However, face-to-face meetings are better for team building, creative thinking, brainstorming and making comprehensive decisions (Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005). Therefore, these activities might be challenging or inconvenient in geographically dispersed virtual teams, where face-to-face communication is rare.
Table 1: Virtual Leadership Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtual Leadership Practices</th>
<th>How Virtual Leaders can do it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usage of Technology</td>
<td>As a leader setting an example to use technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use variety of different communication tools (emails, telephone, video conference, chat etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make sure everyone has an access and the knowledge of how to use different communication channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stimulate team to use communication tools actively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Communication</td>
<td>Focus on the norms how information is communicated (when, how?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revisit and adjust the communication norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share information equally and at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote active information &amp; knowledge sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure safe environment to express oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage honest and open communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Cohesion: Develop &amp; Maintain social relationships</td>
<td>Promote clear vision of the future and make sure responsibilities &amp; roles are clear for everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make sure everyone feel valuable in the team and that their contribution to the team matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create and developing rich social relationships with team members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Care about individuals and building personal relation with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish &amp; Maintain Trust</td>
<td>Foster shared values and expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicate enthusiasm and energizing team members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish collective team identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitate supportive interactions to repair broken trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Performance &amp; Individuals’ Development</td>
<td>Monitor team performance and guiding with the right direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be supportive and provide coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrate successes and achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide recognition and rewards – informally and formally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify potential talents and help individuals develop their skills and knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Sensitivity &amp; Global Mindset</td>
<td>Consider time zones, national holidays and cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure that diversity is appreciated and encouraged in the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop actively one's own &amp; team’s cultural knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimise language barriers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: constructed by the author

To continue with the communication, and how virtual leaders can practice it effectively (Table 1). As communication is mainly carried out via virtual encounters, it’s important to set certain norms about communication, for instance, how often virtual meetings will be set up, what information will be
Leadership in Geographically Dispersed teams

shared and so on, and it’s also important to continuously adjust these norms according to the needs of the team (Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rose 2007). According to Hart and McLeod (2003, p. 359) ‘it is the role of the leader to promote task-related interaction by promoting interdependence and reliance on one another for learning and development’, which means that leader should promote active interaction, information sharing and learning from each other. It is also leader’s responsibility to make sure that everyone is heard, and that all team members feel comfortable to express themselves in virtual environment (Avolio & Kahai 2003). All in all, effective communication is critical part of virtual leadership, and therefore, I will take a deeper look into the importance of communication later on.

The other responsibilities of virtual leaders are the same as leaders with regular face-to-face interaction have; building strong team, establishing and maintaining trust, and monitoring team performance and supporting individuals with their development (Table 1; e.g. Daim et al 2012; Hart & McLeod 2003; Zaccaro & Bader 2003). However, it can be more challenging for virtual leaders to practice these responsibilities through virtual encounters, and therefore, virtual leader needs to be aware of their responsibilities, and how effectively carry out their role as a leader. These areas of virtual leader’s responsibilities will be covered in the next chapters.

And finally, as geographically distributed virtual teams are often operating in a global context, and co-workers might be from different backgrounds, one of the important traits for virtual leader is to be culturally sensitive and have a global mindset (Table 1). This means that leader is culturally aware and open minded, and also actively building his or her own cultural knowledge, furthermore, global virtual leader should make sure that diversity in the team is appreciated and encouraged, and understand possible language barriers and different cultural expectations (Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005; Daim et al. 2012).

2.2.2 Building Teams from Distance

As mentioned earlier, one of the main responsibilities of virtual leader is to build team identity, maintain team cohesion, and develop personal relationship with the team members. Clearly, these are important practices for leaders who have the possibility to interact with their followers face-to-face on a regular basis. But
especially in a virtual environment, where team members are geographically dispersed, leader might find it challenging to build strong interpersonal connections between team members (Daim et al. 2012).

In a traditional office environment, leaders are able to build relationships with their team member more easily. According to Gerke (2006), when you work in the same physical environment, you build relationships without even realizing it via spontaneous and informal communication, which might occur by having a coffee or lunch together with your team members. With regular face-to-face interactions bonding with people happens more naturally, you learn about them and their lives without even noticing it, but in the virtual environment leader needs to make an effort to build rich social relationships, and not only leader-follower relationships, but as well connections between the team members (Gerke 2006).

According to Joshi, Lazarova and Hui (2009, p. 243) psychological relationships in virtual teams can help ‘to overcome the physical distance that otherwise separates them’, and strong team identity makes it easier to understand the shared team goals, and consider the common good for the team. If virtual leader is able to develop team identity, virtual team members shifts from individualistic thinking to collective thinking, and this supports overall the team performance and effectiveness (Joshi, Lazarova & Hui 2009).

How can distant virtual leaders develop meaningful social relationships and strengthen the team cohesion? Undoubtedly, virtual leader relies on virtual encounters as face-to-face interaction is minimal. Hart and McLeod (2003, p. 359) states that ‘encouraging a variety of task-related communications will foster closer personal relationships in geographically dispersed teams’, because frequent communication helps to develop relationships, and at the same time leader should take into consideration that team members have the time for frequent communication. Another way to support the development of relationship is to organize the work in a way that team members have assignments where they need one another for mentoring or asking help from each other (Hart & McLeod 2003). Virtual leader should also ensure that the team mission is clear for everyone, and that the whole team can work effectively together (Daim et al. 2012).
Furthermore, leaders should also observe the team behaviors during the virtual meetings, because it can reveal important things about the relationship between team members (Hart & McLeod 2003). Leader can pay attention who is participating, how frequently, and what type information is being exchanged, also noticing how possible misunderstanding are solved, and if anyone is expressing any feelings of frustration, and so on (Hart & McLeod 2003). There are many social cues that leader can try to notice, and based on those cues, develop better understanding about the general status of the team, and try to direct the team to the right direction, or solve possible conflict situations immediately. Hart and McLeod (2003) suggests, that the best way to build strong team cohesion is to start promoting frequent task-related communication, and after that trying to examine possibilities for occasional face-to-face interactions for team building activities.

In comparison with co-located teams, virtual teams have less opportunities for spontaneous communication and informal social interaction, therefore, it is challenging to build strong relationships and team cohesion, and weak team cohesion might have negative impact on knowledge sharing and mutual trust (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014).

2.2.3 Establishing Trust in Virtual Team

Trust is essential thing in leader-follower relationship, according to Bennis and Nanus (2003, p. 157), ‘trust is the emotional glue that binds followers and leaders together’. Also Kelley and Kelloway (2012) highlights the importance of reciprocal trust in leader-follower relationships. Trust is something that can only be earned, and leaders can achieve trust by their actions and behaviors, by showing their true self, by acting consistently, and by providing clear and attractive vision of the future (Bennis & Nanus 2003). Trust is important part of the concept of leadership, therefore, it is necessary in virtual leadership as well. One of the main reasons, why virtual teams fail, is related on trust building (Daim et al. 2012).

In co-located teams building trust is easier because of the frequent social interaction, shared experiences, and common social norms, but in virtual teams developing trust is more challenging (Daim et al. 2012; Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999). However, establishing trust is important, because it also supports the
team cohesion and team confidence (Zaccaro & Bader 2003). According to Joshi, Lazarova and Hui (2009, p. 242), ‘trust consists of both cognitive and affective components’, but in virtual teams cognitive trust is more essential, and furthermore, trust in geographically dispersed teams is more relevant on task-related issues than on feelings. Cognitive trust can be perceived in qualities such as; reliability and integrity (Joshi, Lazarova & Hui 2009). Virtual leaders can foster trust by increasing general awareness of other team members’ abilities, but it has been also noticed, that by promoting enthusiasm and optimism in virtual teams, have a great importance in trust building, and in addition, by establishing communication norms, leaders can strengthen the trust (Joshi, Lazarova & Hui 2009).

Figure 1: E-Leadership and Fostering E-team Trust

Source: Zaccaro & Bader 2003, p. 384

Zaccaro and Bader (2003) have presented a three-stage model of how trust is developed in virtual teams (Figure 1). On the first step, there is “calculative trust”, where team members trust that the co-workers will behave similarly in all team occasions. On the next step, there is “knowledge-based trust”, where team members start to know each other, and they are able to predict their co-workers’ behavior more easily. Knowledge-based trust develops through
repeated interactions and frequent communication. On the third step, there is “identification-based trust”, where team members understand each other well enough, and they share similar values, needs, expectations and preferences (Zaccaro & Bader 2003).

Calculative trust is the first level of trust in newly formed teams, and this level of trust can be achieved by making sure that everyone has a clear idea of their role in the team, and how they can contribute. Only when team members start to interact with each other, and observe how team tasks are carried out and problems solved, they start to learn about each other, and how everyone works, and what to expect from them, they start to form knowledge-based trust (Zaccaro & Bader 2003). However, the deepest level of trust is identification-based trust, when team have shared and they share similar values with each other, and they agree on things as a team, building this level of trust is essential for virtual team leaders (Zaccaro & Bader 2003).

According to Zaccaro and Bader (2003), it takes time to develop the highest level of trust in virtual settings, because establishing trust means that team members know each other at least in some level, and unfortunately, virtual teams share less information about themselves via computer-mediated communication than co-located teams do when they interact face-to-face. High level of trust in teams is strongly connected with the personal interactions between team members, and the role of virtual leader is to promote frequent communication and encourage personal interactions (Zaccaro & Bader 2003).

### 2.2.4 Virtual Team Effectiveness & Performance

According to DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010, p.24), ‘leadership plays a major role in virtual team performance’. Virtual team leaders can influence on team performance in many ways. While developing the team cohesion, virtual leader should make team members work together by creating highly interdependent tasks that requires effective positive interaction between team members (Hambley, O’Neill & Kline 2007). Effective interaction in virtual teams is characterized by collaboration, balanced ratio of personal and group concerns, effective information sharing, creativity, and respect towards other team members’ perspectives.
While in the other hand, negative signs in the team interaction are characterized by passive and aggressive behaviors. Passive elements in interaction processes are; limited information sharing, lack of creative thinking, lack of questioning, and solely fulfilling goals without further ambition (Hambley, O’Neill & Kline 2007). Moreover, aggressive elements while interacting with others include; placing greater emphasis on personal interests rather than for the common goals of the team, being highly competitive, interrupting, showing impatience towards others and being overly critical (Hambley, O’Neill & Kline 2007). It is essential for virtual leader to notice different behaviors and interaction styles in the team and act according to them. Passive behaviors are more common in virtual team setting, because it’s easier to ignore other team members when face-to-face meetings occurs rarely (Hambley, O’Neill & Kline 2007).

One important aspect, that can enhance team performance, is to create safe communication environment for the team, and promote open and honest discussion between team members (Daim et al. 2012). Often virtual teams are formed by individuals who are from different educational, professional and cultural backgrounds, and therefore, diverse opinions and viewpoints likely occur. Effective virtual leader is able to encourage team members to stay open-minded for controversy viewpoints, which can lead to better understanding and more effective problem solving in teams (Daim et al. 2012). In other words, to increase the effectiveness of the virtual team, leader should foster open communication where everyone can safely express themselves without being afraid of rejection, disagreements or criticism.

On the next page, Figure 2, shows how virtual team work is organized, and what tasks are required from leaders and team members in different steps of the work task or project. On the initial step, “the welcoming phase”, it’s important to align the goals, define the tasks and roles, and start the relationship building (Zander, Zettinig & Mäkelä 2013). Leader have the key role to foster team cohesion and trust building among team members, and provide clear understanding tasks and goals. On the next step, “the working phase”, virtual leader has to identify the capabilities and knowledge of the team, and coordinate the tasks accordingly, but also make sure that communication works effectively, and support the interactions within the team (Zander, Zettinig & Mäkelä 2013).
On the final step, “the wrapping-up phase”, virtual leader and team members review and analyze the outcome of their work, and reflect on their learning outcomes (Zander, Zettinig & Mäkelä 2013). It is essential for leader to monitor the performance of the team, provide feedback and recognition, and map out the competence development for each individual.

Figure 2: Leading Global Virtual Teams: Work Process, Action, and Feedback

Source: Zander, Zettinig & Mäkelä 2013, p. 233
Performance and talent management are challenging aspects in virtual environments, because virtual leaders are not able to see their employees physically, and therefore, they are not fully aware of how team members are working (Cascio 1999). And it’s critical, that virtual leaders should practice performance management on regular basis, and not only formally on annual performance meetings which are common in many organizations (Cascio 1999). According to Cascio (1999) there are three principles in performance management: to define performance, to facilitate performance, and to encourage performance.

Firstly, leader should define the performance by ensuring that roles and responsibilities are clear for everyone, and secondly, leaders should facilitate performance by eliminating possible obstacles, and make sure that team have all the necessary tools and resources to work effectively (Cascio 1999). And lastly, virtual leaders should encourage performance by motivating teams, and by providing rewards and recognition in a fair manner (Cascio 1999).

2.2.5 Challenges of Virtual Leadership

Virtual leadership might be more challenging than leadership in co-located teams due to the lack of face-to-face communication. Apart from the virtual leadership challenges that has been mentioned already, such as; establishing trust, creating team cohesion and building relationships, there are other leadership challenges as well. According to Zander, Zettinig and Mäkelä (2013) there are three critical challenges in virtual leadership, and those are; goal alignment, knowledge transfer, and motivation. If these three aspects are working successfully, the outcome of the team is most probably positive (Zander, Zettinig & Mäkelä 2013). In addition, DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010, p. 83) states, that the most significant barriers in virtual leadership are; infrequent face-to-face interaction, lack of resources, the challenge of building collaborative atmosphere virtually, not enough time to focus on leading people, and the difficulties to manage poor performers.

However, one of the biggest challenges when leading remotely, is the ability to create and develop strong interpersonal relationships with distant team members (Daim et al. 2012). Computer-mediated communication can easily lead to misunderstandings, which have an impact on the productivity of the
team, and it can slow down the relationship building and reduce social interaction. In face-to-face interaction we can interpret the accurate information based on non-verbal communication cues such as voice tone and body language, and we are able to understand information that is not been said verbally, in other words, we can read facial expressions in order to understand, how someone is feeling in a certain situation, which then supports our understanding (Daim et al. 2012). With electronic communication, for instance via phone call, we are only able to sense the voice tone, and via email communication we don’t have any non-verbal cues to support more accurate interpretation (Daim et al. 2012).

In addition, virtual leader should be aware of the downsides of being a virtual team member, and try to avoid negative feelings among team members. Virtuality can sometimes lead to feelings of isolation due to the decreased interpersonal contact (Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005). And as mentioned before, virtual encounters might lead to misunderstandings, which can evolve to conflict situations, so it is essential for virtual leaders to avoid misunderstandings, and quickly address the problems and react on possible conflicts (Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005).

And finally, virtual leaders might also face challenges that are related with cultural differences and language barriers if the team is geographically dispersed across the world (Daim et al. 2012). Different cultural expectations and understandings, and language barriers might impact on the team’s performance. Virtual leaders can raise their own and team’s cultural awareness, make sure that diversity is appreciated, and make sure that the virtual environment is psychologically safe place to express oneself. Effective communication is often the key factor to overcome leadership challenges, and therefore, in the next chapter, I will present the importance of communication in virtual leadership more deeply.

2.3 Importance of Communication in Virtual Leadership

Communication is the heart of human interaction, and as a consequence, it is the key factor in successful leadership as well. Without communication leaders are not able to coach others, or foster collaboration, or engage others to achieve common goals, and that is why communication skills are vital for leaders
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(Eikenberry & Harris 2011, p. 107). However, effective communication is not easy task to anyone; leaders have to make sure that the message they are trying to communicate, is understood as it was meant, but ‘even carefully thought out and well-crafted communications can be misunderstood’ (Eikenberry & Harris 2011, p. 110).

According to Fisher-Yoshida and Geller (2009, p. 74) ‘a key purpose of communication is to create shared meaning between the communication partners’, and importantly, communication is not dependent only on the words, but it includes interpersonal factors as well, such as behaviors (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014). To make sure that the message has been received accurately, the sender and receiver can usually exchange rich feedback with each other, which ensures effective communication between participants, but instant feedback is usually possible only in face-to-face interaction, where voice tone and facial expressions can be interpreted instantly (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014). Therefore, the lack of frequent face-to-face communication might lead to miscommunication and misinterpretation as communicating electronically can negatively impact on the receiver’s understanding of the message’ (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014, p. 609).

Communication is not important only for information sharing, but it helps to build trust and relationships, and with effective communication leaders can establish team cohesion, but nonetheless, the communication medium usually has an impact on how effective communication can be (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014). The richest communication medium is face-to-face communication, and therefore, virtual teams, who rely heavily on computer-mediated communication, face unique challenges with developing team cohesion and personal relationships. According to Kelley and Kelloway (2012, p. 438) the reliance on virtual encounters influences significantly on human interaction, because ‘non-verbal cues, which may convey as much as two thirds of message content, are reduced or lost, potentially resulting in misinterpretation, increased role ambiguity, decreased trust, cue substitution, inaccurate perceptions of self and others, lowered leader influence, and reduced group cohesiveness’.
2.3.1 Face-to-face Communication vs. Computer-Mediated Communication

As mentioned earlier, face-to-face communication is the richest communication medium, and it has been even said that ‘face-to-face communication is irreplaceable’ (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014, p. 608). Nevertheless, geographically dispersed teams often don’t have the possibility for frequent face-to-face communication, and computer-mediated communication is not as rich as face-to-face interaction. According to Hambley, O’Neil and Kline (2007), rich communication medium offers four assets, which are; ability to transmit multiple verbal and non-verbal cues, the use of natural language, possibility to provide instant feedback, and chance to express feelings and emotions. Geographically dispersed virtual teams rely on technological solutions, such as telephone calls, videoconferencing, emails, chats and so on, but at the same time, organizations are expecting same performance and effectiveness as co-located teams have (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014).

Hambley, O’Neil and Kline (2007) divides virtual teams’ interaction into two categories; synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous interaction means that team members are communicating in the real time, at the same moment, and this can happen via phone calls, videoconferencing, or chat, and on the other hand, asynchronous interaction occurs when team members are communicating at different times, often via email communication (Hambley, O’Neil & Kline 2007). The advantage of synchronous interaction is that team is able to work on the same task, at the same time and with the same information. Furthermore, synchronous interaction has been found more effective because it allows reciprocal communication and feedback within the teams, it requires more interdependence and team is able to handle more complex tasks (Hambley, O’Neil & Kline 2007).

There are variety of different computer-mediated communication tools, and videoconferencing is the closest to face-to-face communication by being able to include many non-verbal cues, but it’s still not the same as face-to-face communication (Bass & Bass 2008). While communicating via emails, all face-to-face communication cues are missing, like for instance; eye contact, facial expressions, voice tone and physical gestures (Bass & Bass 2008). Emails are often used for task-related communication, phone calls and videoconferencing
on the other hand is used for problem-solving, and face-to-face meetings for team building activities (Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005). Videoconferencing is becoming more popularly used in a business world because it is still relatively rich communication medium, but also very cost-effective option for interaction between geographically dispersed participants (Hambley, O’Neil & Kline 2007).

Nowadays many organizations are using also chat communication to support their virtual communication. The benefit of chat is that it is a quick text-based interaction tool which ‘allows more reflection and the ability to choose one’s words more carefully’ when compared to face-to-face interaction or telephone communication (Hambley, O’Neil & Kline 2007, p. 4). Via chat communication, teams are able to share ideas in situations which require brainstorming because everyone is able to participate in a group chat discussion at the same time (Hambley, O’Neil & Kline 2007).

Furthermore, ‘electronic communications are perceived as less “warm”’ (Kelley & Kelloway 2012, p. 438), but even if virtual teams have to rely on computer-mediated communication, which is clearly not as rich as face-to-face communication, leaders should promote frequent communication, because that is the key factor in virtual teams’ success. On the controversial viewpoint, Hertel, Geister and Konradt (2005) argue that by using frequently and effectively different electronic communication tools in virtual teams, there might be occasions where computer-mediated communication can even overcome the face-to-face communication.

2.3.2 Establishing Communication Norms

Communication is certainly vital part of leadership, and moreover, with effective communication leaders are able to build trust and develop personal relationships with their followers. The key factor for successful virtual leadership is developing communication routines and norms, and staying consistent with them (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014). The frequency of communication is more important in virtual teams than which computer-mediated communication method is being used, because frequent communication can strengthen the personal relationships, increase trust levels, and improve overall job satisfaction among team members (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014; Kelley & Kelloway 2012).
Furthermore, it is the role of virtual leader to promote frequent communication and interaction, and leaders should put emphasis on developing norms for communication (Daim et al. 2012). What are these communication norms, and how virtual leaders can establish them? According to Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rose (2007, p. 62), these communication norms ‘describe how communication technology will be used’, and how often and when team members should communicate, what information should be shared, and generally what is the ‘etiquette for electronic communication’. In addition, Connaughton and Daly (2004, p. 92) states that it is ‘critical to establish specific interaction times with distanced employees’, and moreover, leaders should ensure that all team members receives the same messages, at the same time.

Although, face-to-face meetings are extremely rare, or sometimes even impossible, in virtual team settings, but it definitely can make a difference if team is able to meet from time to time in face-to-face occasions. Moreover, it would be a strong start for newly formed team to meet each in the beginning (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014). And for that reason, virtual leaders should try to establish, if possible, also some face-to-face meetings with their team, because it helps with the virtual interaction later on. But as said before, one critical responsibility for virtual leader is to ensure that communication norms exists and are clear for everyone, and that communication routines are followed consistently, this could be, for instance, a pre-scheduled weekly videoconference together with all team members, or one-to-one phone call on regular basis.

2.4 Required Competencies for Effective Virtual Leaders

In the previous chapters I have presented what are the main responsibilities and key roles for virtual leaders when leading virtual teams. Furthermore, I have also highlighted the importance of effective communication in virtual leadership. Now I would like to take a view from a different perspective, and consider what kind of qualities and competencies virtual leadership requires, and especially in a global context. However, as Bass and Bass (2008, p. 860) highlights that: ‘much is the same as for leadership in nonelectronic circumstances, focus is still on people’.
According to Avolio et al. (2014, p. 113) effective virtual leaders have to show behavioral flexibility, which means that ‘they need to display variety of leadership styles such as directive to participative, and transactional to transformational depending on the situation’. However, transformational leadership style might be the most effective in virtual leadership, because while transformational leader is providing support, at the same time this type of leader also challenges followers, which fosters individuals’ learning and motivation (Avolio et al. 2014).

According to Cascio (1999), there are certain characteristics that are important for virtual leaders:

- To have established trust with remote employees, and to have the faith that they are performing their tasks effectively
- To hold positive attitude where the focus is on finding solutions and solving problems
- To be an effective communicator
- To have the ability to delegate, and share responsibilities

Overall, virtual leaders have great impact on the success of virtual team, and according to Hoefling (2012, p. 132) virtual leaders are ‘designing and managing a network of interdependencies, creating and sustaining many relationships, and all the while keeping the team focused on mission accomplishment’.

### 2.4.1 Effective Communicator, Relationship-Builder & Facilitator

As mentioned earlier, effective communication skills are vital for virtual leader, and communication is strongly connected with interpersonal skills. Mobley and McCall Jr. (2001, p. 233) states that interpersonal skills includes all the fundamental skills to build interpersonal relationships, such as listening actively others, talking with people, and as well the ability to make others feel comfortable while interacting with them.

Great interpersonal skills can enhance the relationship building which is important in virtual team. Gerke (2006) suggested some actions for virtual leaders which can foster developing richer social relationships. So, what can leader do in order to build relationships? First, if there is a possibility to have a face-to-face meeting, leader should organize it, because it significantly helps
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with getting to know each other (Gerke 2006). Second, virtual leader should actively use phone calls and videoconferencing, and during those conference calls actively promote relationship building by letting team members to express their feelings, and in addition to this, to organize also regular one-to-one meetings (Gerke 2006). Third, leaders should show that they care, this can be shown by remembering team members’ special occasions, and lastly, leader should keep the promises they make to their team members, because this supports trust building (Gerke 2006).

Virtual leader can be effective communicator by over-communicating, and by practicing effective follow-up, other critical elements for effective communication style are; responsiveness, effective information sharing and timely feedback (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010). Moreover, virtual leaders should aim for creating a two-way dialogue where team members feel comfortable to come up with any issues (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010).

Furthermore, virtual leaders should provide coaching and take a facilitator’s role in a virtual environment. By acting as a facilitator, virtual leader provides guidance, encourages creative thinking, keeps the team on track, creates positive atmosphere, and anticipates pitfalls (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010, p. 132). During virtual meetings, facilitator should ensure active participation and try to include each team member to contribute, and to achieve this, virtual leader need to remain patient and actively listen team members, and let them express their thoughts freely, virtual leader can also organize the virtual meetings in a way that everyone have to take a lead on a certain part, or rotate the responsibilities of team members (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010).

On the other hand, ongoing coaching and frequent feedback are important when leading virtual teams, and should be practiced through one-to-one communication. According to DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010), there are two ways to provide coaching; on-the-spot coaching and coaching which focuses on the overall performance. On-the-spot coaching is more challenging for virtual leaders due to the lack of spontaneous face-to-face interaction, and therefore, frequent virtual communication is essential in order to provide timely feedback. The other type of coaching requires that virtual leader has a deep understanding of each team member and their performance, so leader can then examine if goals are suitable, what obstacles team members have, and how to develop team
members’ know-how and talent in a long-term (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010, p.114).

DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010, p. 115), introduces two interaction styles for leaders; directive and coaching. (Table 2). Leaders, whose interaction style is directive, are more likely authoritative and rely on one-way communication, where leaders with coaching style are more collaborative, supportive, and inclusive (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010). The Table 2 below demonstrates the difference between directive and coaching approach. Leaders with coaching style are not providing answers to their team members, but rather encourages the team to find the solutions by themselves, by being supportive, by sharing information, by promoting autonomy and by creating collaborative environment (DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directing</th>
<th>Coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competes</td>
<td>Collaborates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is directive</td>
<td>Is development-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforces authority</td>
<td>Reinforces networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holds back information</td>
<td>Shares information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages dependency</td>
<td>Encourages self-management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictates</td>
<td>Problem solves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows less autonomy</td>
<td>Allows more autonomy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Virtual Leadership Continuum

Source: DeRosa & Lepsinger 2010, p. 115

2.4.2 Developing Global Mindset: Cross-Cultural Leadership & Cultural Intelligence

Often virtual teams are geographically and culturally dispersed across the world (e.g. Wakefield, Leidner & Garrison 2008; Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005), and due to the wide dispersion, the team members are from different time zones, countries, and cultures, which might create some additional leadership challenges for virtual leaders (Avolio & Kahai 2003). Therefore virtual leaders should be aware of cultural difference, time zones, national holidays, and local needs (Bass & Bass 2008).
At the surface level, cultural differences can cause general misunderstandings, and in a deeper level there might be some ‘invisible and unspoken cultural aspects with the taking-for-granted assumptions’, which can lead to complex problems (Zander, Zettinig & Mäkelä 2013, p. 229). In addition, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) states, that team members with different cultural backgrounds might have different communication style and group behavior, which might impact on the effectiveness of virtual team.

Virtual leaders should also have the ability to resolve conflicts, because in a diverse geographically dispersed team, conflicts might occur easily due to general misunderstanding, frustration with different time zones or cultural expectations and so on (Avolio et al. 2014).

One important factor is also language. In a global world, the universal business language is English, but it doesn’t mean that we are able to understand each other perfectly, and we still might use slightly different vocabulary (Mobley & McCall Jr. 2001). In order to overcome possible language barriers, virtual leaders should ensure that their message is understood by the team members by articulating clearly, avoiding ambiguity, and ask constant feedback to check that the message was clear (Mobley & McCall Jr. 2001).

However, global virtual leaders can try to overcome cultural challenges by improving their own and team’s intercultural competence. In other words, ‘previous cultural exposure is an important factor influencing communication behavior’, because people who have better knowledge of other cultures are usually also interested and curious to know more about different cultural aspects (Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999). Cultural awareness and exposure can especially be beneficial for global virtual leaders, because it helps them to understand cultural expectations, and different behaviors and attitudes.

According to Hertel, Geister and Konradt (2005, p. 75), ‘cultural diversity is often not something a manager can choose’, however, diversity can also have many advantages in virtual team work. Different knowledge, controversial viewpoints, various opinions and perspectives can actually improve the effectiveness of the team, and even support with complex problem-solving tasks which require creativity and highly-skilled professionals (Hertel, Geister, Konradt 2005).
3 Methodology

“I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?”

(James P. Spradley 1979)

In this chapter the purpose is to introduce the research method of this study, what are the adopted presumptions of reality, and how knowledge is created for this study. Furthermore, I will discuss why I have decided to use the system’s approach to conduct this research. The selection of participants and general practicalities will be described as well, and finally, a short description how the data collection process is executed.

3.1 Methodological Approach

The way researcher attempts to explain the world, or a specific phenomenon is based on his or hers ultimate presumptions. According to Arbnor & Bjerke (2009) the purpose of conducting research is either to create knowledge in order to explain a phenomenon, or to create knowledge in order to understand a certain phenomenon. Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 8) states, that world is complex, and ‘there are no simple explanations for things’, we cannot look at things simply black and white, but we have to consider the wide range of different perspectives, and acknowledge that multiple factors can influence situations. The world can be perceived, interpreted and understood from different perspectives depending on how we see and understand things, and how we describe things (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009).

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge, that different methodological views will most likely provide different perspectives for us when we are developing, constructing and creating knowledge (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). Furthermore, the right methodological view to be used in the research, is selected by considering the nature of research topic, but ultimately researcher’s own opinion and knowledge will direct with the decision of which methodological approach will be chosen. Despite of which approach will be used, the presumptions of researcher will effect on how certain phenomenon will be interpreted, understood, and explained (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009).
Arbnor and Bjerke (2009) introduces three different methodological views that should be considered when choosing the most suitable methodological approach: analytical view, systems view and actor’s view.

**Analytical View**
Analytical view is trying to explain things from general point of view, it describes what is common in certain phenomenon by looking for similarities (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). In the analytical approach ‘the reality is filled with facts’, both subjective and objective ones; objective facts are non-questionable facts, such as age, gender and so on, and subjective facts are based on people’s opinions (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 47 & p. 86). Analytical approach starts by creating hypotheses, possible cause and effect relations, and it is important to remember that analytical approach has tendency to be more a quantitative type of research (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 87).

**Systems View**
The idea behind systems approach is to describe, explain or provide an understanding of the reality. In the system view we look at the reality as it contains ‘fact-filled systems structures’ and as these systems usually exists before we study them, it is also important to explain and understand the historical aspect and background of the systems, so we are able to explain what they are now (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 50 & p. 187). In the systems approach it is common to work with case studies because of the practical approach for a complex issue. From academic point of view, case studies are often more theoretical, objective, impartial and being more descriptive and trying to find an understanding (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 189).

**Actor’s View**
In the actor’s view ‘the reality is a social construction’ and the creators of knowledge are part of creating a new meaning for the reality and acting as actors, not standing outside as an observer (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 52 & p. 132). In this approach dialogue is usually applied when conducting the research, this means that people can reflect their opinions but also, as a creator of knowledge, researcher can enter to the dialogue as a participant. In dialogue, it is normal to use so called “honest questions” and the purpose of dialogue is to create an ‘intensive interaction’ between the participants, and dialogue continues until new “social reality” has been reached, which means that new
shared understanding has been developed (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 135). In
dialogue, participants, including the creator of knowledge, can develop their
understanding interactively.

### 3.1.1 Qualitative Research

I have decided to use qualitative approach for this study, because I believe it
gives better understanding of social sciences and human behavior, rather than
quantitative approach which focuses more on numbers, statistics, and
generalization. After all, the main idea of this study is to gain knowledge of
leadership in geographically dispersed settings, and to understand the leader-
follower relationship in such cases, and therefore I believe qualitative approach
is more suitable for this type of research.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 13) there are ‘endless possibilities to
learn’ in a qualitative research, because researcher is able to connect, and
interact with participants at a human level, and get better access to their
participants’ stories, observations, and explanations of the phenomenon.
Qualitative research can more effectively capture the richness of people’s
experience of certain situations and events (Klenke, Wallace & Martin 2015). By
conducting qualitative research, I can gain information from the participants’
perspectives, and let them express their authentic experiences. Klenke, Wallace
and Martin (2015, p.10) highlights, that in qualitative research ‘participants and
researchers collaborate in the data collection, and interpretation to arrive at a
“story” that reflects the voice of participants’.

I believe that especially when studying in the field of leadership, qualitative
approach adds important value to the study, by providing rich and extensive
explanation of phenomenon. For me, as a researcher, it makes more sense to
capture multiple perspectives from wide range of people with different
experiences, from leaders and followers. For this specific research topic,
leadership in geographically dispersed teams, I have the opportunity to collect
data from wide range of professionals, as long as I keep the focus on this
particular phenomenon.
3.1.2 Systems View

Considering the nature of the topic and the research questions, I have chosen to conduct this study based on the systems view. In the systems approach the idea is to describe, explain or provide an understanding of certain reality (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 50). The reason I have chosen the systems approach is, that I would like to explain the phenomenon of leadership in geographically teams as a system. According to Arbnor and Bjerke (2009, p. 72) system is filled with components that are ‘mutually dependent on each other’, which means that we could consider leaders and followers as individual components of the system, where they create an interactive relation with each other, and by studying both sides, leaders’ and followers’ point of view, researcher can reach better explanation of the total picture of certain phenomenon.

One of the key concepts in systems approach is to understand the systems language. When looking from the perspective of leadership in geographically dispersed teams, as a researcher, I understand that the system is open in this study. According to Arbnor and Bjerke (2009, p. 265), ‘the units of the business reality are seen as open systems’. Open systems are in constant interaction with the different components and subsystems, as well being influenced by its external and internal environment. Based on this constant interaction between the different units in the system, it’s also important to acknowledge the systems relations. Researcher must have a clear focus which aspects will be studied, and decide the magnifying level for the study (Arbnor & Bjerke 2009, p. 265)

3.2 Research Method – Multiple Case Study

When research is planned according to the systems approach, it is common to work with the case studies because of the practical approach for a complex issue. From academic point of view, case studies are often more theoretical, objective, impartial and being more descriptive and trying to find an understanding (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 189). Case study approach can be used in many situations, and allows researcher to explore leadership as a social process in its organizational environment. But it is also important to have a clear focus and limitations in case studies. In this research, I have decided to gather information from multiple sources, although keeping in mind the initial focus of geographic dispersion, which is guiding my research.
As I have decided to design my research based on systems view, and my purpose is to collect information from various sources, I have decided to follow the case study approach. According to Adams, Raeside and Khan (2014, p. 98), ‘case study is an in-depth study which explores issues, present and past’, and it can study organization, department, group or individual person. Moreover, Klenke, Wallace and Martin (2015, p. 61) state, that case study method allows researcher ‘to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events such as leadership processes’. Case study is either a single case study, or a multiple case study, depending on which approach researcher decides to be more suitable for the research topic. The purpose of case studies is to understand the case from unique point of view, and often the questions are asking “how?” and “why”, rather than “what?” (Adams, Raeside & Khan 2014, p. 98; Klenke, Wallace, & Martin 2015, p. 65).

In order to achieve better understanding of the phenomenon of geographically dispersed leadership, I have decided to use multiple case study approach instead of single case study approach. In multiple case study, the aim is to study cases that have some common characteristics, and that researcher can ask similar questions from participants. Based on the nature of this research method, personal interviews are usually one of the most important data sources in case studies (Klenke, Wallace & Martin 2015, p. 71).

Multiple case studies have become more common in the recent years, because it allows researcher achieve triangulation and better credibility by collecting data from various sources, and even from different aspects. For instance, in leadership studies it is possible to collect data from followers and from other stakeholders, and not only from leaders (Klenke, Wallace & Martin 2015, p. 71). Therefore, this is an important factor for my study, as I want to gain better understanding of the relation between leaders and followers in geographically dispersed settings, and multiple case study method allows me to conduct in-depth study where I can collect data from multiple sources.

3.3 Data Collection

In qualitative research there are many alternatives for data collection, and therefore data can be collected by interviews, observations, reports, articles, videos, biographies, and many other documents or data sources (Corbin &
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Strauss 2008, p. 27). According to Arbnor and Bjerke (2009) there are two categories to collect data: secondary and primary information. And as I have selected systems approach, I will use both, secondary and primary information for my study. Primary data is new data collected by the researcher, and secondary data is existing information that has been collected previously by other researchers.

3.3.1 Secondary Data

Secondary data is any kind of data which is already collected by other researchers. It can be data from reports, statistics, business journals and so on. But there are some issues with secondary data which researcher should be aware of. Previously collected data might have been collected for another purpose, and therefore data might not be compatible for the study. And another factor to acknowledge is the trustworthiness of secondary data (Arbnor & Bjerke 2009, p. 177).

For this study I have explored various secondary data sources, and presented the theoretical framework in the literature review. Secondary data collection has also guided me in the primary data collection process by providing me better understanding of the phenomenon, and based on that I could design my primary data collection.

3.3.2 Primary Data

Primary data is new data collected by the researcher, and it can be collected in three ways: interviews, direct observations and experiments (Arbnor & Bjerke 2009, p. 176). For this study I have decided to collect data through personal interviews. Interview as a data collection method is an effective way to get the story behind participant’s experience, and researcher has an opportunity to gather in-depth information about the research topic.

The level of structure can vary in interviews, researcher can decide between structured and non-structured interview, but commonly interviews are semi-structured. I have chosen the semi-structured interview model, and the aim is to have guided but at the same time flexible conversation with participants. For this purpose, I have created interview guideline (Appendix A), which gives me,
as an interviewer, the flexibility to add questions, ask details or expand some points, and this flexibility also increases the freedom to adapt to the development of the conversation. My aim is to ask open questions, and give space for stories and examples that might come to the participant’s mind, and the purpose is also to encourage the story telling by asking if participant have any example to demonstrate their response.

**Selection Process**

When I formed my research questions, it was clear for me since the beginning, that I want to include the followers’ experience to my study. Therefore, already at the early stage, I started to think about possible interviewees from my own network, both leaders and followers. The first clear criteria for the interview participants was, that they are working in geographically dispersed team - as a member (follower), or as a manager (leader). Another important criteria was, that I wanted to focus on a business field, and therefore, for instance political leaders were out of scope.

I decided to include many professionals from various business areas to my study, and because of the uniqueness of the phenomenon which I’m studying, it was possible and reasonable to collect data from various sources and from different perspectives. Unfortunately, it was not as easy as I initially thought, to find suitable interviewee candidates for my primary data collection. Therefore, I realized that I need to expand my search of interviewees outside my personal network. This was a valuable step in my research process, because I could reach out to people from wide range of nationalities, generations and professional orientations. And importantly, I could gather information from different business areas and industries, which I consider as a relevant point for my study in order to understand in which sectors geographically dispersed leadership is possible.

Fortunately, I was able to find suitable interview candidates; some of them are directly from my own personal network, some of them I have found through my connections. The interview participants are from my own personal and professional connections, parents of my friends, and friends of my friends. I also used social media as a channel to reach out people outside my direct network.
Interviews

For practical reasons, most of the interviews were conducted via video call. Face-to-face interview is usually the best form for personal interviews because it gives rich input of body language and non-verbal communication. By having a video call, some level of non-verbal communication is still involved, as interviewer can observe the facial expressions and some parts of body language. However, this interview method fits with the nature of the study topic, and all participants are comfortable with using video calls as a communication method.

The duration of interviews varied slightly, but the time spent for audio recording was from 29 minutes to 50 minutes (Table 3). The interview questions were nearly the same for both; for leaders and followers, but the perspective was slightly different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Professional Role</th>
<th>Sector / Industry</th>
<th>Leader / Follower</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Duration of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Strategic Purchaser</td>
<td>Railway Industry</td>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>17.03.2017</td>
<td>38 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Business Development Manager</td>
<td>Media (Licences: Images &amp; Videos)</td>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>18.03.2017</td>
<td>37 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
<td>Food Production</td>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>22.03.2017</td>
<td>35 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toufik</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Strategic Planner</td>
<td>Non-Profit Organization</td>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>22.03.2017</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Partner &amp; Consultant</td>
<td>Business &amp; Management Consultancy</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>25.03.2017</td>
<td>48 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Area Sales Manager</td>
<td>Electrical/Electronic Manufacturing</td>
<td>Follower / Leader</td>
<td>26.03.2017</td>
<td>32 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dany</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Director in Global Supply Chain Project Management</td>
<td>Healthcare Industry</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>29.03.2017</td>
<td>35 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vytaute</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Senior Specialist of Supply Chain Management</td>
<td>Electrical/Electronic Manufacturing</td>
<td>Follower / Leader</td>
<td>03.04.2017</td>
<td>29 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luís</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Product Designer</td>
<td>Start-up; Online portfolio site</td>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>05.04.2017</td>
<td>35 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sissy</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>HR Business Partner</td>
<td>Sales &amp; Service organization, Automation industry</td>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>17.04.2017</td>
<td>46 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Interview participants

Source: constructed by the author

Participants

The Table 3 below summarizes the basic information of interviewees, where they are from or mainly located, what is their current role, and in which industry
they work. Some of the participants were also fulfilling both perspectives of virtual leadership; being a virtual leader, but as well experiencing the role of virtual follower, in those cases questions could have been answered from either perspective.

3.4 Data Analysis Process

Qualitative data is rich and researcher has many possible ways of analyzing it. It depends how researcher interprets the data, what information is important, what meanings are identified, and in general, what is the focus researcher has for the data analysis. Even with the same data, different data analysis can occur depending on who is analyzing data (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 48). In data analysis procedure, researcher is defining how data is going to be categorized and presented (Gillham 2010, p. 25).

Case study report can be constructed in many ways, or even combined by several approaches, and it can also ‘vary in length and emphasis’ (Gillham 2010). I have decided to start my data analysis process with so called “explanation building”, which means that I will start by examining each case separately, and create a narrative story around them (Klenke, Wallace & Martin 2015). I decided to do this as my first step in the data analysis, because each case is somehow unique and slightly different. In this step, I can present the reality as it is. And therefore, each case study is chronologically presented as a story in chapter 4.

After this initial step in my data analysis, I will continue to analyze primary data by categorizing, by finding similarities and differences, and by emerging themes that can be reflected in the presented theory. Therefore, in chapter 5, I will go more in details by combining collected data with existing literature. With this approach, I can outline different factors in the conducted case studies, compare information between cases, seek explanations, try to make sense out of the data, and achieve greater understanding of the phenomenon (Klenke, Wallace & Martin 2015, p. 72).

3.5 Credibility of the Research

In the systems approach, to achieve higher level of credibility for the research, researcher should study the phenomenon ‘from as many angles as possible’
(Arbnor & Bjerke 2009, p. 184). In qualitative research it means, that researcher should conduct as many interviews or observations as possible with different people, and also study a lot of secondary information which can support the empirical findings. According to Klenke, Wallace and Martin (2015, p. 69), researcher can achieve triangulation by using different data sources, and therefore enhance the credibility of the research. Yin (2014, 121) adds, that ‘data triangulation helps to strengthen the construct validity of your case study’, so in other words multiple case studies of the same phenomenon increases the credibility of the research.

As I have conducted ten interviews with people from different professional and cultural backgrounds, I would say that I have achieved a good level of triangulation by getting wide perspective of the phenomenon of leadership in geographically dispersed teams. I have studied the phenomenon from leaders’ and followers’ point of view, and the participants of my research are working in wide range of different professional roles and industries, however, the important factor has been that each participant is, or has been, actively member of a virtual team.
4 The Stories - Empirical Data Review

“We all live under the same sky, but we don’t all have the same horizon.”

(Tom Asacker 2013)

In this chapter I will review the data that has been collected from the conducted case studies. The interviews with ten professionals, who come from different professional and cultural backgrounds, who hold various roles in different industries, have provided me wide scale of information to review and analyze. I will start by reviewing each individual case as a story, and in the next chapter I will analyze the findings in a deeper level by emerging themes that are compatible with the theoretical framework.

4.1 Location is not that Relevant

Martin is responsible for purchasing and procurement processes, and as well for project management, in a railway company, and his team is split into two different cities, he is located with two other team members in Binden, in Germany, while his manager and two other team members are based in Munich. They meet each other face-to-face roughly in every one or two months. However, they have scheduled teleconference every Friday.

Advantage of Increased Flexibility

For Martin, the best part of working as a part of virtual team, is the increased level of freedom and flexibility. He really enjoys that he is able to work from anywhere, for example during the interview he is working from a hotel room in Berlin. If Martin feels the need for social interaction, he is able to work in the same place than his colleagues, so he can choose freely where he works, and his manager is also not controlling where he is physically, as long as the work is done, and customers are able to reach Martin.

Overall, Martin experiences positively to be part of a virtual team, he mentions that it is a new kind of situation for him, something he never experienced before, but he enjoys it. He also adds that it might be due to his manager who is very reachable, and gives a lot of freedom for the team to do the work. Due to the nature of his work tasks, location is not very relevant for him or for his team,
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because they would spend anyway at least 60% of their working time with their customers, outside the office, so location does not matter.

**Supportive Virtual Leadership**

Throughout the interview Martin tells that his manager is very supportive. She is not only providing the autonomy, but she cares about her team and tries to look after the team, for example by making sure that her team does not have to work until very late. Also, during the integration process, Martin told that his manager was very supportive by asking if everything is alright, and by being there for every question Martin might had.

Martin also says that apart from the formal feedback meetings in the company, his manager is providing feedback on more regular basis, at least every time when they meet each other, mostly the feedback is positive. According to Martin, his manager is more providing a direction than saying how to do things, and moreover, his manager encourages the team to be creative and innovative. However, Martin admits that sometimes face-to-face communication is better, and he might leave some sensitive topics for later to talk about those in person, so he can know his manager’s immediate reaction and face expressions.

Martin mentions that his manager is very competent leading geographically dispersed teams due to her previous experiences, so for him there are no problems of working in different location than his manager. It’s about having the right people in the team, and the right manager, but also the clear work arrangements and some pre-defined rules that foster the virtual teamwork.

**4.2 Lack of Social Interaction**

Denise is working as a Business Development Manager in a multinational media company. She is located in Berlin with one other team member, while her manager and the rest of her team members are in Munich, in Germany. Denise have face-to-face meeting with her manager approximately 6-8 times per year.

For Denise this is the first real full-time job, so since the beginning she has been working as a part of virtual team, and being led with the physical distance. However, in general Denise is fine with the current situation, because she feels that she has more freedom, and for her it’s important to work from her home.
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town, the disadvantages for her are that communicating is sometimes more difficult, and that the Berlin office is relatively small, containing only four people. Nevertheless, the pros are balancing the cons, and for Denise the benefits are greater than the disadvantages.

**Difficulties to Reach Manager**

One of the main challenges for Denise is, that it’s not always very easy to reach her manager, because her manager is often busy with meetings and other things, and every time Denise would need to ask something, she needs to send an email or try to call, when in some occasions it would be just better to work in the same location, and then Denise could catch her manager more spontaneously for quick questions.

Furthermore, the only difficulty is not that Denise’s manager is sometimes unreachable, but he is also non-responsive. For instance, if Denise leaves a call request, or sends an email with a question, her manager might never get back to her. Therefore, Denise underlines that even when we have all the modern communication tools; emails and phones, the communication is still the major challenge in many organizations.

**Lack of Feedback**

According to Denise, the company that she works for organizes official feedback meetings twice a year, and in general Denise is satisfied with that. However, she feels a bit under-valued as a team member, and she thinks that it’s partly because she rarely receives positive feedback, most of the time her manager is giving negative feedback for her. She has addressed this issue with her manager, and now she hopes that the situation will improve.

On the other hand, Denise says that she has very good relationship with her manager in the sense, that she does not have to hold back information or personal feelings, or she is not afraid to also give feedback to her manager. Furthermore, it seems that Denise’s manager is quite open for suggestions and improvement ideas.

**Challenge of Building Personal Relationships**

Another downside for Denise is, that it’s extremely difficult to create personal level relationship with her manager. Denise says that she has much better
connection with another director who is working in the same location as she is, when compared to the connection she has with her direct manager. This is due to the lack of time for personal level interaction, Denise also mentions that she feels more comfortable with her colleagues who are sharing the same office space with her, because she knows them personally. Denise thinks that it would be important that she would know more about her direct manager and his personality.

In the future, Denise wishes to work at least in the same location than rest of her team, however, she does not feel the need for having a manager in the same physical location. In the current situation, in the small side office, Denise misses daily social interaction with multiple colleagues, and having the possibility to know her team more deeply. Denise believes that having the team in the same location increases the effectiveness of collaborative teamwork.

4.3 Showing the Direction to Find Solutions

Laura is working as a HR Manager in a food production industry. She is located in Finland, her manager is located in Sweden, and she also have other team members in Denmark and Norway, and one from Ukraine. Laura meets with her manager approximately 8 times per year, this is a new target, because before face-to-face meetings occurred more rarely, perhaps every 2-3 months.

Company Acquisition & Adjusting to the New Situation

Laura has been part of geographically dispersed team over a year now, this arrangement was caused due to the company acquisition when two companies merged into one. In the beginning everything was more confusing, tasks and roles were not exactly clear, her new manager was not participating that much in the beginning, and Laura felt that she was alone with some of her old tasks while trying to take care of her new role and responsibilities.

Overall, the experience has been rather positive than negative, and after some time, things started to work more smoothly. The most important action that Laura’s manager did, was to make sure that she can focus only for her new tasks, and that she can delegate her old tasks to other people. Nevertheless, since the beginning, Laura have been working very independently, and she can decide most of the things on her own. Because Laura is able to work
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independently, and have the freedom to do so, she does not feel the necessity to be in the same location than her manager, but of course, sharing the same physical space would probably make things easier, and spontaneous interaction would bring more in-depth discussion to everyday work-life.

**Virtual Leader as a Coach**

Laura admits that there are certain difficulties to be led with a distance. However, for her personally it works fine, even though it requires additional effort from both parts, from her manager and from her. One of the negative aspects, or improvement points, is the lack of videoconferencing in Laura’s team. According to Laura they use mostly audio calls when they have their meetings, but Laura would like to use more videoconference calls because it would be nice to see the people she is working with.

So far Laura have had good experience with her current manager, Laura says that her manager is more like a coach, supporting always in the background, and showing the right direction without giving the answers or solutions. Laura have one-to-one conversations with her manager every week, and during that phone call they exchange feedback, recent news, and upcoming issues. Laura’s manager also asks if everything is ok, and if he can help with anything.

In addition, Laura says that see feels that she is able to come up with any issues with her manager, and that they have surprisingly open relationship between each other considering that the main communication tool is audio phone call. Laura also thinks that there is strong mutual trust between her and her manager. And this can be shown, for instance, that Laura’s manager shares confidential information with her, and trusts that it will stay with Laura

**4.4 With Good Leader it’s Easy to Work from Anywhere**

Toufik has worked for two different non-profit organizations in Morocco, in both organizations he experienced virtual leadership, as the main communication methods were based on emails and social media. In the first non-profit organization, at AIESEC International, Toufik did not have very good leadership experience, he was working there as an Exchange Participant Manager. But on the contrary, at Leadership Development Institute, where Toufik was on charge of the Strategic Planning, the distant leadership experience was much better.
Important to Learn more about Virtual Communication

Based on his experiences, Toufik underlines that it's important to learn more about effective virtual communication, because it is more challenging to interact with people via computer-mediated communication tools, and especially if team members are widely dispersed geographically, and therefore face also challenges with cultural differences and time zones.

Furthermore, Toufik thinks that it’s important that in a virtual environment there is someone who is organizing the communication flow, and setting some communication norms. However, Toufik admits that he misses face-to-face interaction, and he thinks that it’s more effective, it also increases the credibility of the message, and decreases the possible misunderstanding between two parts.

To be Aware of Cultural Differences

Cultural differences are something that you can overcome by becoming more interculturally aware, for example, Toufik mentions that it would be good to make some research of the countries and cultures that you are working with. By learning how other cultures work, Toufik is able to deliver his thoughts better.

Another issue is the language to be used, which usually is English. However, it is important to remember, that English is not always the first language of the people you interact with, and for instance for Toufik, it’s the third language after Arabic and French, and he admits that he has sometimes challenges to communicate with native speakers and to be understood in the right way.

Management vs. Leadership in Virtual Environment

As Toufik have had two different experienced of being led virtually, he could also say that there is clearly difference between virtual management and virtual leadership, Toufik highlights that if there is a good leader, you can work from anywhere, from a different location than where you leader is. In the other organization where Toufik worked, it was more a managerial approach, the decisions were made in the management level, and it was top-down approach, where information was sometimes kept from employees, new ideas were not appreciated, and in general Toufik felt just as a “subordinate”.
By the contrast, Toufik had very positive experience with the other non-profit organization he worked for, where his manager was supportive and helpful. Toufik was able to come up with new ideas, and his ideas were always appreciated, also because his manager was from United States, and Toufik was located at his home country, in Morocco, where they operated, and therefore Toufik had better understanding of the local customs and ways of working. Toufik also mentioned that his manager was proactively asking his feedback and thoughts, and relying on him while giving his full support. In general, Toufik felt that his manager was very competent, they had a good personal relationship, and it was easy to communicate with him.

4.5 Future is Now - Connected World

Francisco is a partner and co-founder of consultancy company in Portugal, however he is leading team members across international and national borders, and furthermore, his role requires him to stay a lot of time off-site where the clients are, so the possibility for face-to-face communication with his team members is not possible on the daily basis. Currently his team members are located in Mexico, in Portugal, in Germany, and in Brazil, and he meets them face-to-face roughly once in a month depending on their roles and responsibilities, and the projects they are working with. In the beginning of the project, he is more closely with the team, but once the project starts properly, he tries to meet the team members every month.

Getting the Message Through in the Right Way

The biggest challenge, in virtual leadership, for Francisco is that virtual communication is not as effective as face-to-face communication, and with distance, it’s sometimes difficult to make sure that the team is getting the message in a way it was meant to. In that sense, virtual leader needs to be very careful with his or her communication, and it also requires patience from a leader. The key factor in communication is, to make sure that everyone understand, Francisco ends each conversation by asking if everything is clear, and he tries to give all the important information he possibly can, to help the team to understand.

In Francisco’s opinion, face-to-face communication really adds value, and he always prefers face-to-face interaction over anything else. Because with virtual
meetings and phone calls, there is always the risk that the message is not kept 100% by the team, and there can be misunderstandings, which can lead to frustration. However, Francisco cannot imagine business without virtual encounters, because in today’s world everything is remote, and the world is very connected.

**Provide One-to-One Support**

Francisco prefers phone calls, audio and video, over emails, because email communication does not provide the same effectiveness. Furthermore, he tries to talk with his team members every two days in one-to-one conversations, where he can provide his support and coaching. He does not want to intervene to anyone’s work, but he is there for the support if his team needs it.

Other than that, Francisco really encourages his team to be more creative and come up with new ideas. He thinks that is necessary, as a team, to chase new things. He always promotes creativeness, to improve things, to make things better, and Francisco is ok even with the most absurd ideas. He has an approach: ‘let’s try to make new things, if we fail, that’s good, it means we are improving, if we don’t fail, we are not improving enough’ (25.3.2017).

And finally, Francisco always emphasize the importance of saying the truth: ‘don’t hide the problems, we are here together to solve the problems’ (25.3.2017). He says that there are some team members, that he doesn’t trust fully, because there has been situations where his team members are not telling him the whole truth, and it makes it more difficult to build the trust. However, Francisco admits that sometimes he might be too tough leader with his team members, which leads to situations where his team members might be afraid to tell the truth, or hide some information. Nevertheless, he tries to emphasize the importance of telling the truth, and then to solve problems together.

**4.6 Best Way to be Near our Customers**

Jesus is working as an Area Sales Manager in Northwest Spain, his manager is located in Madrid, but he is also responsible of a team, with 11 people, which is dispersed across different areas in the Northwest Spain, therefore, he has good experience of being a leader, as well as a follower in dispersed team settings. Jesus meets his own manager every two months, and he tries to meet his own
team members once in a month. Jesus is working as a part of geographically dispersed teams because they need to be near the customers, however, he admits that being at the same location would be better for information exchange and to prepare strategies and so on.

**Puzzle of Ineffective Communication**

The challenges of being part of geographically dispersed team is, to exchange information, and sometimes people are not receiving the information at the same time, and this might create problems and misunderstandings sometimes. Another big issue in the dispersed team setting is, that it increases the bureaucratic work because each team member needs to write additional reports which would not be necessary if they would work at the headquarters.

Jesus says that the internal communication takes a lot of his work time because he is trying to share proper information between the headquarters and with his team members. And also the additional internal reports, which are required, are time consuming, not only for him, but for his whole team, and Jesus thinks that it would be necessary to spend that time with their customers.

**Established Trust & Autonomy to Work**

For Jesus it’s important that his team members are able to work independently, he also don’t want intervene anyone’s work, he prefers that they have the autonomy to do what is necessary. The role of Jesus, as a manager, is more to coordinating things, and in case his team needs any support, they can always contact him. Jesus also says that he meet with all team members together twice a year, and in those face-to-face meetings, they interchange opinions, brainstorm new ideas, and explore best practices from other team members.

On the final note, Jesus believes that trust is the key factor in geographically dispersed teams, because without trust, it’s very difficult to work with people. Manager is not able to see what his team is doing, so he or she must have the trust that the team is doing the best they can for the company. In cases, where the trust is in low level, manager should have a discussion with the person, and try to find better solution for the situation. It’s is important that manager is not controlling and examining what each team member is doing, but trust that they are doing their work properly.
4.7 Global off-site Leadership

Dany’s current role is a Director in Global Supply Chain Project Management in healthcare industry. She has many years’ experience of being a leader in a global context. Dany is based in Belgium, but she had one team member located in Portugal, and three team members in United States. She was, in general, meeting her team members face-to-face every 6 weeks.

**Importance of Frequent Communication**

Dany highlight that the frequent communication is very critical in off-site leadership. During the interview she even says that “I would say that my recipe is regularity”. She also admits that she did not experienced any great challenges with remote leadership, and she thinks that it might be because she made sure that there was regular contact between her and her team members, because it’s important to not forget the employee.

She had an approach that she scheduled individual weekly calls with each team member, and moreover, she asked the employees to prepare the topics they wanted to share with her, in order to make sure that the communication was as effective as it could be. And in addition to these individual meetings, she also gathered the team once in a month to discuss over a conference call. In this monthly meeting Dany prepared the important topics, and created an agenda, but Dany also emphasized the importance that team members should share some parts of their progress, their successes, or possible challenges that they are facing. With this approach Dany was able to mix each team members’ contribution, and also share things that are concerning the whole team.

One of the main differences in on-site and off-site leadership, is that the communication is more structured, manager has the responsibility to structure the virtual encounters. According to Dany, her team also used chat as a communication tool for more spontaneous communication, but mostly interactions in her dispersed team were scheduled. However, there are also good sides of being more structured, because Dany was documenting more things with off-site employees, it made it easier to follow-up the progress, but also to make the followers get the feeling that their manager is involved and interested in what they are doing.
Leadership in Geographically Dispersed teams

Riia Hyppönen

Requires Good Leadership, but also Good Followership
Leading dispersed team requires certainly great leadership skills, but Dany also underlines that off-site leadership requires certain level of maturity, not only from the leader, but also from the follower. Furthermore, Dany explains that it is extremely difficult to create a relationship between off-site leader and follower, when there is no possibility for spontaneous interaction.

Based on her experience, Dany mentions that leaders should be empathetic, have good listening skills, and be able to detect when something is wrong. And at the same time being a good directive leader, and providing the tools for followers to do their work as best as they can. The challenge in remote leadership is to create deep interpersonal relationships with off-site employees.

Dany also says that leader must be able to trust in his or her team, and provide them the freedom and autonomy they need. When leading people with distance, it's not possible to go much in details of their daily work, leader is only able to catch what is going really good, and what issues needs more support. And because employees need to be able to work independently, it requires certain level of maturity also from them.

Encouraging Team to Participate
One thing that Dany always emphasized was to make sure that everyone has the time to speak up during the monthly meetings. Already when she created the agenda for the meeting, she made sure that there would be time for her team members to talk as well. However, she thinks that it's much more challenging to create this kind of meeting set-up when leading larger amount of people, luckily her team was only 5-6 members, so it was possible to let them to participate during the meetings. This way she could make them feel more as a team, because if she would rely on building team only once in a year, when everyone in her team met each other face-to-face, it wouldn’t be enough to create a team spirit.

Dany admits that when team is spread around the world, it’s challenging to make everyone to work towards the same goal, and to make them understand what is the contribution of each team member. It’s important that leader show that he or she values employees as individuals, but at the same time creates and maintains a team spirit.
4.8 In the Middle of Virtual Teams

Vytaute is working in a big multinational corporation as an Senior Specialist of Supply Chain Management, and at the same time, she is also in the role of team leader. She is located in Lithuania, her superior is located in Finland, and apart from that she is also part of multiple virtual teams and projects around the world, mainly in Europe and Asia.

Today’s World of International Business

Currently Vytaute can’t even imagine working in face-to-face interaction on daily basis, for her being part of multiple virtual teams is very natural, and she doesn’t see big difference to work in a virtual team or local team. Today’s world is so internationalized and connected, that there is not that much difference. Vytaute also thinks that this is a phenomenon that will become more common in the future, because it really helps with cost savings, and retaining talents, knowledge and know-hows. For her there are more positive than negative factors in virtual business world, because without the current dispersed team settings that she is actively part of, she would not have had the possibility to get to know all the people in her professional network.

Nevertheless, one of the biggest challenges in the current business world in her opinion is, the continuous information overflow, which requires the ability to understand what information is important, and also to analyze the information critically. Vytaute thinks that it’s critical to learn how to find, how to analyze, and how to look critically the information that you are receiving, and therefore, targeted information sharing is something that every manager should aim for.

Promoting Relationship Building

Vytaute admits that it is extremely difficult to get to know people in remote settings. In principle, it is possible to create interpersonal relationships, but it also depends from both parts. Some people are more open to share things about themselves, and then it’s easier to establish good personal relationship, but it’s not easy with everyone. As a leader, Vytaute prefers to meet the team initially face-to-face, because it helps to understand who they are, to clarify their responsibilities, and to discuss their future roles.
Vytaute tries always to build personal relationship with the people she is working with, because it helps to understand the person, and personal factors should not be ignored, however, she highlights that it’s good to keep it in professional manners. In general, she enjoys working with people from different backgrounds, and get to know them beyond the professional level.

**Key to Success in Virtual Teams - Establishing Trust**

Apart from being a good leader with great communication skills, in geographically dispersed virtual teams, leader must have trust in his or her team. Vytaute thinks, that the only way to work successfully with geographically dispersed teams is, to trust the people. If manager is not trusting the team, he or she would try to take over their responsibility, while it’s not possible to do everything by yourself, which leads to a situation that is impossible to maintain.

As a leader, Vytaute tries to build trust by fostering her team members to find solutions to problems by themselves, she tries to help them to understand the whole picture of the processes, what is behind certain processes, why things are done the way they are done, and overall providing the understanding of what is going on. Vytaute also promotes that they are allowed and able to make decisions by themselves, but at the same time being there as a support if her team members need her advice.

Apart from establishing trust, distant manager should also provide regular feedback, give support, and at the same time leave certain freedom. According to Vytaute the most important thing is they day-to-day communication with team members, to understand what is going on, and not only narrowly look from one’s own perspective, but as well to understand what other people are doing, and how they are doing.

**4.9 Working from Home**

Luis is working full-time remotely for Canadian start-up company as a product designer. He is located in Portugal, while his manager is in the headquarters in Canada. From the interview participants, he is the only one who is exclusively working from home or other preferred off-site location, and he rely fully on computer-mediated communication with his manager, and as well with other team members. Currently there are 40 people in total, and most of them are
located in Canada, while 10 people are working remotely. Luis has team members in Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and Poland. Luis have met his direct manager once, in last December, when he visited the office in Canada.

**Taking the Step from Traditional Office Environment to Work Completely Remotely**

Luis started to work full-time remotely one year ago, in April. He has rather positive than negative experience of working remotely, he does not feel the need to be in the same location than his team, because they have regular meetings, and the distance is just one button away. And because it is easy to communicate with his manager and with other team members, he feels strongly as a part of the team.

Before this experience Luis was working also in a start-up company, but there he was working in a traditional office setting. When he got the job offer to work full-time remotely, he was afraid to take the step towards unknown, he didn’t know anyone from the new company, and he never worked remotely to this extend. However, he enjoys that he is able to work from anywhere, and that he has flexible schedule for his work days. Luis can decide when he starts his work day, and the only “rule” which the company has set for their remote employees is that they should work minimum three hours during the Canadian working hours.

**Predetermined Guidelines to Ensure Effective Teamwork**

Luis has a scheduled weekly meeting on every Monday together with his direct manager, and with other designers, in that meeting the discuss about the things that have been done. In addition to the weekly meetings, he has once in a month deeper one-to-one meeting with his manager, where they can talk about possible frustrations and other feelings in more personal level. And, for more formal communication, there is a meeting, on monthly basis, including all the employees of the company.

Luis says that the company has some predetermined rules, or guidelines, which helps his manager, and his team to organize their work better, like for instance they have at least 3 hours every day common work time, and in addition to that, they have regularly scheduled meetings with each other, one-to-one meetings with manager, and also together with the whole team.
Importance of Being Involved and Integrated

During this first year that Luis have been working for this company, has shown that they really value his contribution, so far Luis has been responsible for two big design projects, and he feels that everyone in the company really have trust in him, and he also feels very connected with his team. Trust is important especially with remote workers, because with mutual trust, people also respects each other. Other important factor, when working remotely, is that every employee feel fully integrated with the company, because otherwise remote worker can start to feel lonely.

Luis admits that he misses the spontaneous daily interaction with colleagues, because he feels that only with physical presence you can have the casual small talks with your manager and with other colleagues. However, the company has good tools to keep everyone informed and involved, for instance they have a chat tool where everyone in the team can write things, and stay informed. And due to the regular meetings and daily virtual encounters, he doesn’t feel isolated or lonely, because he is connected via video calls on daily basis.

4.10 To Express Genuine Interest in People

Sissy is currently working as a HR Business Partner in a multinational company, but she has experience being led virtually in her previous position, in another company, where she was located in Germany, while her manager was based in Sweden, in Gothenburg. However, Sissy is also familiar of being part of virtual team in her current role, as the EMEA team is dispersed across the Europe, and in the near future also her new manager will be working in Barcelona, Spain, while Sissy will continue to work from Stuttgart, Germany. Sissy meets her current colleagues, who are dispersed around the Europe, three times per year face-to-face in their EMEA and global meetings.

Approachable Manager

Based on Sissy’s experience, it’s ok to work in different location than your manager as long as you are able to reach each other, and get instant feedback. Remote manager should be reachable, and also approachable, because sometimes you need fast response, and immediate feedback. Another important thing is to set up some routines, like for instance, having a weekly call where leader and follower can interact with each other.
In her previous role, she was working apart from the rest of the team, and more independently, and she felt that during the integration process, she was thrown into the water, which was still ok, as she is a person who can manage her way through challenges. However, the positive thing for her in this experience was that her manager was not controlling what she was doing, and wasn’t afraid to delegate tasks to her, but it was hard to receive feedback. Sissy also adds that it might be difficult to receive regular feedback the further you go with your career, and the more senior you become, because people often assume that your work well.

In her current role, she doesn’t see it as a very realistic option that her team would work in the same location, but she thinks that there could be a better plan how to meet each other virtually. The routines for the virtual encounters should be somehow implemented in the DNA of the company, and also in the management style, so it would become more natural.

**Value of Interpersonal Relationships**

Personally for Sissy it is critical that her manager is interested in her, how she is doing, and what kind of issues she is working with. Often managers are only interested that the business is running well, and that there are no problems, but they are not fully interested how the person is doing overall. Sissy values that there is also some small talk, that the manager shows some personal interest towards her.

Sissy thinks, that knowing in some extend your manager and closest colleagues in personal level, gives a good insights about the people you are working with. With some small talk manager can reach better understanding of his or her employees, and notice if employees are not feeling very good, and to get some idea if something is going on.

Overall, the greatest challenges for remote leaders are to create and maintain good team spirit, and also ensure that ideas and thoughts can be shared, and that each team member feels valued. Sissy believes that the interest in person itself is lacking nowadays, everyone is focusing to get things done, but apart from that not being sincerely interested in their people, and building interpersonal relationships with them.
5 Data Analysis & Findings

“Researchers are translators of other persons’ words and actions.”

( Corbin & Strauss 2008)

In this chapter I will analyze the data that has been collected from the conducted case studies. I have allowed several themes to emerge, and I will present the essence of these themes. I will examine and discuss the findings based on the main aspects of the outlined theory.

5.1 Virtual Manager or Virtual Leader?

Existing literature presents clear classification between management and leadership, where management focuses more on processes, and leadership on people (Eikenberry & Harris 2011, p. 12). And this separation was apparent in many responses among the participants, for others their direct manager was behaving more as a leader, while for others their direct manager was seen as a socially distant person, who is managing the necessities that are required in his or her role.

For instance for Laura, her direct manager has been a great support, and she sees her manager more like a coach, who supports and gives direction. While on the other hand, Sissy has experienced more the management approach, where interpersonal skills were not seen as an critical asset, the focus was on ensuring that business is running as expected, and the rest was secondary. From the participants, Toufik have experienced both aspects, being managed virtually, and being led virtually, and based on his responses, it was clear that top-down management style decreased his motivation and dedication, while supportive and inspiring leader can foster enthusiasm and increase team effectiveness.

Only one participant was aware that there is possibility for companies to offer training for virtual leadership, while for others it was something unheard of. Nevertheless, many participants thought that providing such a training for managers, would help them to understand the concept of virtual leadership, and what it requires. However, Dany and Vytaute, who have extensive experience of leading both; co-located and virtual teams, mentioned that the
critical skills for virtual leadership can be developed through years of experience, step by step.

What qualities are valued in virtual leadership? Of course many aspects of leadership are also important in virtual leadership, and according to the respondents, excellent communication skills are vital for virtual leaders, especially listening skills. By listening, leaders can reach better understanding, they are able to detect if something is wrong, and they can demonstrate genuine interest in people. Some respondents also mentioned that it’s important that leader is approachable even virtually, and also that it’s easy to reach their leader. Often respondents also highlighted that virtual leader should be able to trust their employees by providing autonomy, and not control what they are doing. Virtual leader should also be someone who supports, but does not provide the answers but rather shows the right direction. Few respondents also mentioned the importance of being empathetic.

In any case, to be identified as a virtual leader or virtual manager, is based on same aspects as in traditional leadership settings. But based on respondents, it seems that in virtual environment manager is more often seen as a manager, instead of a leader, and it might be like this because it’s more challenging to create a meaningful and influential relationship between leader and follower.

5.2 Interpersonal Relationships & Team Cohesion

One of the greatest challenges in leadership, is to create strong interpersonal relationships, and strengthen the team cohesion which makes the people to work towards the same goal. Often in co-located teams, the interpersonal relationships are created naturally via informal encounters, while in virtual teams it might be more challenging to build deep relationships (Gerke 2006, Daim et al. 2012).

Some respondents clearly stated that they find it challenging to build social relationships between their geographically distant leader or follower, some respondents even wished to have more opportunities for casual interactions, such as lunch together with colleagues, which would help to create meaningful relationship with one another, and as well help with the feelings of isolation. And based on the existing literature, it’s more challenging to build relationships
without spontaneous and informal face-to-face interaction, and this effects in overall for the team cohesion (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014).

It has been said, that frequent task-related communication, and occasional possibilities for face-to-face communication, supports creating interpersonal relationships (Hart & McLeod 2003). Most of the respondents actually had the opportunity for occasional face-to-face interaction few times per year, which seemed to have an positive impact with the team cohesion.

Often geographically dispersed teams don’t have the same opportunities for informal and spontaneous interaction which often strengthens interpersonal relationships (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014), for instance, Luis who exclusively works from home, said that he misses casual conversations over lunch or coffee, which is often part of a traditional office life. However, Luis was feeling as a strong part of the team because of the frequent daily connection through many different channels, so even without the spontaneous face-to-face interaction with his colleagues, his overall experience about the team cohesion was very positive. Related to this, Dany highlighted that regular communication is the key factor in successful virtual leadership, because it helps with relationship building.

Vytaute and Sissy noted that creating meaningful interpersonal relationships with manager and team members is more challenging. And in addition, Sissy acknowledged, that creating and maintaining team spirit virtually is maybe the most challenging part of virtual leadership. However, as Vytaute also mentioned, creating strong interpersonal relationships, depends on both sides. It is easier for leader to create social relationships with followers who are open to share things about themselves, and have a small talk even virtually. But both, Vytaute and Sissy acknowledged, that interpersonal relationship between leader and follower, can improve leader’s understanding of followers’ motivation, general feelings, and future plans.

5.3 Required Autonomy & The Necessity of Mutual Trust

Reciprocal trust is a vital in leader-follower relationship (Bennis & Nanus 2003; Kelley & Kelloway 2012), however, establishing trust across geographic dispersion is more challenging than building trust in co-located teams (Daim et
al. 2012). Especially virtual leaders need to establish strong mutual trust, because in the virtual setting, leader is not able to see concretely, what his or her team members are doing, and therefore, leader needs to trust, and also provide the required autonomy to work.

Also participants mentioned the importance of trust in virtual leadership, and as Vytaute stated, trust is the key factor in successful virtual leadership. Related to that, Dany also said that giving autonomy to work and trust people, are integrated in the virtual leadership, because leader is not able to know every detail of their remote employees. According to Dany, leader should know the highlights and successes, and the possible obstacles and challenges their virtual team is facing, everything in the middle is in the employees’ hands, and leader can provide support if needed, but otherwise let their team members work and make decisions quite freely.

Even though all the participants admitted, that trust is important in virtual leadership, there were situations where it was not possible to build mutual trust between leader and follower. This happened due to the lack of transparency; some followers didn’t tell the truth, or they hided information, which then damaged the trust level in both ways. One of the respondents admitted, that he might be sometimes a “tough leader”, which might lead to negative trust building, because followers are afraid to tell everything to their leader. However, this participant always emphasized the importance of telling the truth. No matter the situation, everything can be fixed, but he just needs to know what is going on so he can give his support. Sissy mentioned that if there is no mutual trust, it can lead to conflicts in the future. Mistrust can have a very poisoning effect for the leader-follower relationship. Therefore, mutual trust is vital for long-term success in geographically dispersed teams.

But how to build trust in virtual environment? According to respondents, the first thing is that virtual leader cannot be “a control freak”, because leader needs to provide certain level of autonomy. Dany says, that getting to know people helps with trust building, and for example in her case, her team members knew her and her competence, and in addition to that, her supportive leadership style helped establishing reciprocal trust between her and her team. Furthermore, Vytaute says that her approach is to let people find their own solutions, and her role as a leader is to give full understanding of what is going on; by helping her
team members to understand what is behind certain processes, and what is behind the tasks that they are doing. And based on Vytaute's experience, she really things that explaining and helping people to understand really helps with establishing trust.

5.4 Underlined Need for Regular Communication

Communication is important part of leadership, as leaders have to make sure that their message is understood in the right way (Eikenberry & Harris 2011), however, having an effective communication between leaders and followers, instant feedback is necessary (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014). In virtual leadership, exchanging rich and immediate feedback between participants, is more challenging. One of the respondents, Sissy, actually wished that she would have more access to instant feedback with her manager.

Although, it is more challenging to receive, and to provide, instant feedback through virtual encounters, one way to ensure effective mutual communication is to establish clear communication norms. Some of the participants, especially those who had leadership position in a virtual environment, emphasized the importance of predetermined communication routines. Virtual leaders should make sure that there are certain communication routines, and that everyone remains consistent with them (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014).

For instance, Dany said, that she was able to address problematic situations in early stage due to her consistent way of keeping regular contact with employees; she had pre-scheduled weekly meetings with each distant employee, where both parts could express any issues they had in mind. And because of the regularity in communication, Dany felt that she didn't have any major challenges while leading people virtually, in her opinion, it is important that virtual leader does not forget the distant team members, and this can be expressed by having regular contact, and by being approachable leader.

From the follower point of view, Luis also mentioned that, he felt strongly part of the team due to the regular communication that he had with his manager. They had pre-scheduled individual and team meetings, and in addition to that he could reach out to his manager any time, for him the distance was not a problem, his manager was just “one button away”. Luis had regular daily
communication with his manager and team, which reduced the feelings of isolation in his case. Overall, frequent communication in virtual teams, can strengthen the trust, deepen the personal relationships, and increase employees’ job satisfaction (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres & Wright 2014; Kelley & Kelloway 2012).

One of the participants, Sissy, also mentioned that there might be sometimes a “communication border”, which means that it’s not always convenient to reach out your own manager spontaneously, because you might be interrupting important meeting or otherwise trying to contact in an inappropriate moment. And in addition, Sissy thought, that one option for virtual leaders to overcome any kind of “communication border”, could be fixed time frames when leader would be fully available for his or her distant team members. This could make it easier for employees to make the initiative to contact their managers, to have so-called open-door approach virtually. However, in principle it is leaders responsibility, to emphasize the importance of frequent communication, and to ensure that both parts feel comfortable to exchange information, and to aim for profound interaction (Daim et al. 2012).

5.5 Intercultural Competence in Virtual Leadership

One of the themes in virtual leadership is intercultural competence. In some of the cases, the respondents worked within their own national borders, but most often there were greater geographic dispersion involved. Due to the geographic dispersion, leaders might face additional challenges because team members might be working in different time zones, and have different cultural expectations and norms (Avolio & Kahai 2003), and therefore this might require cultural sensitivity and awareness from virtual leaders (Bass & Bass 2008).

Some of the respondents mentioned, that developing greater understanding of different countries and cultures is essential for leaders. Importantly, cultural differences can occur even when working closely with people from same region. For instance, Laura was initially surprised when she started to work with other Nordic countries. At first, she thought there wouldn’t be many differences, but surprisingly she has noticed that there are some minor differences between Nordic countries. For instance in Sweden, it’s more normal to have “small talk”, and in general talk more around the topics during business meetings, while
based on Laura’s experience, Finnish people are more straightforward and go directly to the current issues and topics in the agenda. However, these cultural differences never caused any major problems in her case.

Leaders can develop their own intercultural competence by predisposing themselves for new cultures, and by staying open minded, and by being constantly curious to learn more about other people and other cultures (Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999). Most of the respondents said that they are used to work with different cultures, and therefore, they have developed their own intercultural competence. For instance, Francisco has been traveling around the world and exploring different cultures since very young age, and he is culturally aware and doesn’t see cultural differences as an issue. Also Vytaute mentions, that when dealing with people from different cultures, leader must have high level of tolerance, and to understand different ways to work. Sometimes, Vytaute has found herself in some challenging situations, where she had to be flexible and understand the other person’s point of view. Her approach in these kind of situations is always to remain very professional, be very precise with the message she wants to express, and to avoid any kind of conflicts and unpleasant relationships.

According to the respondents, by working in an international environment and by being curious about different cultures, you are able to understand different ways to work and different perspectives. Cultural diversity can also be great advantage for virtual teams, as diversity and different viewpoints can improve team effectiveness to solve complex problems, increase the creativeness of the team, and ability to remain open-minded for different ideas (Hertel, Geister, Konradt 2005). Leaders should embrace and promote diversity, and ensure that contradictory opinions and new ideas are equally valued in the team.
6 Discussion

“Much is the same as for leadership in non-electronic circumstances, focus is still on people.”

(Bass & Bass 2008, p. 860)

In this chapter I will go through the research questions which are stated in the introduction part of this thesis. Furthermore, I will evaluate the arguments provided by the literature and compare with the findings of the case studies that I have conducted.

6.1 Perceptions of Virtual Leadership

Before I focus entirely on the research questions in more detailed level, I would first discuss about the general perceptions of the virtual leadership that emerged during the research process. To start with, how participants experienced being led, or to lead, via virtual encounters? Overall, I would say that the empirical data shows mainly positive and optimistic attitudes towards virtual leadership.

None of the participants resisted the idea of virtual leadership, but instead, most of them noticed great potential and many opportunities in the field of geographically dispersed teams and virtual leadership. In a business world, it can provide many advantages to the international companies, and not many leadership obstacles were underlined when comparing virtual leadership with leadership in any occasion. However, some leadership challenges were raised, but in general, the attitude towards virtual leadership was rather positive. Moreover, participants believed that by acknowledging the leadership challenges and by improving one’s and others’ leadership competencies, most of the issues can be addressed.

Furthermore, most of the participants were satisfied with their current situation, the freedom and flexibility that the geographic dispersion offers, is such a great advantage for their work-life balance, that they did not wish to change that. However, some improvement regarding the work arrangements could be done, and also, participants thought that it is necessary to improve the understanding of what virtual working environment requires from both parts; leaders and followers.
And finally, most of the participants noted that geographic dispersion and the concept of virtual leadership, will become more common in the future. Some participants even mentioned that, it is not even future, it is the current reality of international companies. One of the participants also believes that, geographically dispersed leadership has been there for a long time, but in today’s world, there is more interest to understand how to lead people effectively.

6.2 Key Competencies for Global Virtual Leaders

According to Weisband (2008, p. 7), ‘when we move to distant geographically distributed teams, we have to develop new ways of work and new competencies’, meaning that we need to understand better, how to interact with each other through computer-mediated communication, but we also need to develop the leadership competencies in order to respond for the challenges that virtual environment might add.

In the introduction chapter, I stated the research questions, and the first research question aimed to find out, what are the main competencies for global virtual leaders. Throughout this thesis project, I have pointed out, that many leadership qualities and challenges are the same, or at least very similar, in a virtual context than in traditional face-to-face leadership setting. However, based on the theoretical framework, and the findings of the empirical study, I will introduce the leadership qualities which have been pointed out, and have been highlighted as important competencies for virtual leaders. Furthermore, I will present, based on my own understanding as a researcher, what competencies are vital in virtual leadership.

Overall, leadership in virtual context is not that different than leadership in any other context, but based on the findings, I would say that virtuality can have an impact on leadership. For instance, building relationships between followers and leaders happens usually naturally over spontaneous informal interaction, which usually occurs when leader and follower share the same physical location. In the virtual environment, it requires more effort from both parts to get to know each other through virtual encounters, and establish rich personal relationship. Therefore, virtual leader should have strong interpersonal skills, and also expertise on how to build meaningful relationships with their followers across the geographic dispersion.
In addition, virtual leaders need great level of empathy, and also ability to sense how others are feeling, capability to notice when something is wrong beyond the surface level, and furthermore, virtual leaders should express their genuine interest towards their followers, and take them into account. Certainly, these leadership qualities are important when interacting face-to-face, but the importance of these kind of interpersonal abilities are highlighted in the virtual context where non-verbal cues are minimal. Closely linked to these interpersonal qualities, there is a great importance of virtual leaders’ good communication skills, especially listening skills. Due to the lack of non-verbal communication, virtual leader needs to listen carefully, and notice different details during virtual encounters; who is actively participating, what kind of information is shared, is someone more passive, and so on. This kind of information can be useful for virtual leader, in order to sense at early stage if something is not going well.

Due to the nature of the work, being apart from the manager and other team members, there is also great level of independency and autonomy involved. Therefore, it is vital for virtual leaders to act more like a coach. Manager who would rather try to control his or her followers, would not succeed. Virtual leader needs to ensure high level of trust, and provide the freedom to work and make decision. Virtual leader should be the person showing the direction without giving answers, being supportive in the background, but let followers work independently. Of course, working in a virtual environment requires good followership as well, followers should feel confident working in a different location than their direct manager. However, virtual leader should lead by showing example, providing the tools and resources, and encourage followers to take the ownership for their daily work.

And finally, as geographic dispersion can be very wide in virtual context, virtual leaders should develop their own intercultural competence. Virtual leaders need to be aware of the local needs, such as public transport strike, natural catastrophe, or anything that might effect on their daily lives. Also, virtual leaders should be sensitive with the time zones, and try to organize meetings in the way that each team member is able to join, and also rotate the timings of the meetings that it is not always the same people waking up early, or working until late in the evening. And finally, virtual leaders should be open-minded, curious for new things, constantly explore and widen their perspectives, and
have a high tolerance and understanding for different cultures, and furthermore, ensure that diversity is appreciated among the team and the organization.

6.3 Challenges & Opportunities in Virtual Leadership

The second research question, presented in the introduction chapter, was to identify the main challenges and opportunities in virtual leadership. To start with, what are the opportunities in geographic dispersed teamwork and virtual leadership? Companies are relying on global virtual teams increasingly, because it is often saving costs, and it also helps to attain and retain top talents. Also, workforce is increasingly attracted by the idea that they can work from anywhere at any time, it is “the future of work”. Moreover, it often improves work-life balance, and reduces commuting costs and time.

From leadership perspective, virtual leadership also provides many opportunities, and as mentioned already, the best way of keeping top talents is to increase the flexibility regarding location and working times. And this might also improve the overall job satisfaction level. One opportunity in virtual leadership is, that it requires high level of autonomy from followers, which might influence positively on their ability to work more independently. This could also improve their motivation and creativity, because when manager is not watching over their shoulders and controlling everything that they do, they might become more brave to try new ideas. Of course, virtual leader has an important role to ensure that there is judgement free zone, and when failure occurs, to encourage people to fail forward, learn from their mistakes, and try again. Another opportunity could be shared leadership, meaning that leadership responsibility is distributed to each team member, and there is not assigned leader for the virtual team.

As there are several opportunities in virtual leadership, there are also some challenges as well. And on of the greatest challenges in virtual leadership, is the ability to build rich and meaningful relationships with dispersed team members through virtual encounters. It is challenging because often communication is purely focused on task-related communication, and spontaneous and informal interaction is rare in virtual environment. However, it also depends on people’s personalities, some people are more open to share their thoughts and feelings,
which make it easier for leader to exchange rich information, while others might be more closed, and leader have to make greater effort to create meaningful relationship with the follower. Nonetheless, leader has an important role, to promote rich and frequent communication which supports relationship building. Furthermore, virtual leader should ensure that no one feels isolated or lonely, even when someone is working remotely off-site. Therefore, one virtual leadership challenge is to build good team spirit, to ensure that everyone feels strongly as a part of team, and everyone is “visible”, and their opinions and thoughts are heard in the teamwork.

Furthermore, it can be challenging to establish great level of trust in virtual context, but it’s vital for the virtual team’s success. Without trust, the geographically dispersed team is not able to function successfully. Virtual leader is not able to see everything that is done, and controlling behavior can be very poisoning for the continuity of meaningful virtual teamwork, and therefore, there must have mutual trust between leader and followers.

And finally, one of the challenges is to ensure effective communication. With good communication many leadership challenges can be addressed and even avoided. Based on the theoretical framework and the findings of the empirical study, it is clear, that predetermined communication times are one of the key factors in effective virtual leadership. When the communication norms and routines are clear for everyone, it makes it easier to exchange rich information, share knowledge, express thoughts and feelings, build relationships, and maintain team spirit.

6.4 Followers’ Point of View in Virtual Leadership

One of the leading themes in this thesis has been the followers’ point of view. In the introduction chapter, I stated two research questions that are closely linked to each other; how do followers experience their geographically dispersed leaders, and is it possible to be identified as a leader, rather than a manager, in virtual context?

In the same way than in normal face-to-face managerial settings, where it is difficult to be identified as a leader, it may be even more difficult in a virtual environment. Based on the theoretical framework and the essentials of the
findings, I would say that in virtual context, it is often just management. Leadership requires that the focus is on people, but unfortunately, virtual leadership seems to be rather a rare event. When the team, the followers, are out of “sight”, it turns easily to be just managing people and processes. The distance makes it harder to keep the intensive personal touch in the professional relationships, it is extremely difficult to get to know the people, their personalities and preferences, when communication is relying heavily on computer-mediated communication tools.

One thing to point out is the followers’ difficulty to reach their manager, and followers are not always sure if it’s appropriate to contact him or her at any time. This is an important issue that raised from the followers, and therefore, virtual leaders should ensure that it is easy to contact them, and that they are available and approachable. Moreover, virtual leaders must respond to the questions and concerns that their followers are expressing to them. Virtual leaders, who are rarely available, not easily reachable, and leave questions without answers, can cause poisoning affect for the leader-follower relationship. It can send out a message, that the concerns, which follower is trying to tell, are not enough important or relevant, and it might stop the rich mutual interaction between leader and follower. Therefore, it is vital for leaders in geographically dispersed teams, to make sure that there is open communication space for all participants, and there are low communication barriers for followers to contact their manager in any moment.

Besides the difficulty to reach their manager, followers also stated, that they would like to receive more feedback, positive and constructive one, because sometimes the distance makes it more difficult to celebrate own successes, notice one’s own improvement areas, and learn from other distant team members.

Overall, followers experience virtual leadership more positively than negatively, and for some followers, virtual leader is a neutral supportive function. And in the final note, I would say that to be identified as a leader in virtual context, it requires additional effort from virtual leader to build relationships and maintain good team spirit. Without strong interpersonal skills, virtual leader is not able to influence his or her followers, and without influential relationship, there is no leadership, only management.
7 Conclusion

“Working virtually is fast unfolding and changing our perception of the new economy”

(Hoefling 2012, p. 177)

In the final chapter I will reflect on my thesis journey, sum up the essential findings, and finally present what are the limitations of this study and my recommendations for the future research. I will also present my personal thoughts about this societal phenomenon; the ever-increasing virtuality in our lives.

7.1 Reflective Thoughts

Based on what I have experienced in the modern work-life, and what I have seen people around me experiencing, is the increase of virtuality in our professional lives. Location has lost part of its relevance, people are able to hold meetings across time zones and geographic boundaries due to the ever-developing technology. Moreover, companies are heavily relying on the new possibilities that communication technology is providing. This phenomenon raised my interest to study leadership at a distance, and also to understand how virtual leadership is experienced by its followers. I also felt that this is something that will most probably become even more common in the future, and that the qualities that are critical for virtual leaders, are critical for any potential future leaders, me included.

When I started my research, I was not sure how it would evolve, I was not sure how much relevant secondary data I would gather for my topic, because it has not been studied very widely and deeply, and I did not know what kind of data I would find out during my empirical research. However, at this point, writing my conclusion part, I can say that it has been interesting journey from the beginning to the end, and I believe I have found some essential information about geographically dispersed leadership, and I hope that my academic contribution will raise interest to study this phenomenon more deeply in the future.
7.2 Key Findings

The aim of this thesis was to gain better understanding of virtual leadership, and the relationship between geographically dispersed leaders and followers, and to find out what kind of challenges and opportunities virtual leadership might have when compared to traditional face-to-face communication between leaders and followers. My research indicates that virtual leadership has many similar characteristics than leadership in co-located teams, however, to be an effective virtual leader, it requires some additional effort from leader to ensure that there is good team cohesion, open communication environment, and having the space and the time for relationship building.

My research has shown that communication is one critical part of virtual leadership, with effective and frequent communication, virtual leader is able to overcome many leadership challenges. Virtual leadership also requires ability to sense different kind of cues during virtual encounters, which can provide rich information of the status of the team, attitudes and feelings under the surface, and what are the followers’ needs and desires.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that virtual leadership is here and now, already practiced in majority of international companies, and the trend is certainly becoming bigger in the near future. Therefore, it is necessity that leaders and followers around the globe, raises their awareness of what virtual leadership requires, and how to lead effectively team whose members are dispersed widely across the world when the only communication methods are video and phone calls, emails and chat conversations.

7.3 Limitations & Possibilities for Future Research

First of all, there are clearly some limitations in this study. The participants of this study are clearly representing the phenomenon from their point of view, holding their own opinion, and expressing their own understanding of geographically dispersed leadership, from leader’s or follower’s perspective. Therefore, the results are subjective, which might narrow the overall picture. Instead of interviewing separate individuals from different organizations, it would be interesting to interview both parts, follower and leader, from the same team or organization, in order to achieve better overall understanding of the relationship between leaders and followers.
My recommendation for the future research is to study more the direct relationship between leaders and followers. In my research, I have gathered data from separate individuals, from different organizations, but I could see it useful to study the leader-follower relationship as a single unit, meaning that the participants have actual relation with each other. In this way, the researcher could gain an understanding of the same event from two, or more, perspectives.

Furthermore, as the initial idea was to study the phenomenon from wide perspective, the participants are from different nationalities, generations and industries – and they represent various professional roles. I am aware that this wide selection of participants might produce more generic results, instead of being more detail-oriented by focusing on certain themes, like specific industries or certain generations.

Another viewpoint for the study could be, to gather even wider understanding of people’s attitudes toward virtual leadership. In this research, I have only considered participants who are part of virtual team, but it could be interesting to understand, how someone with not much experience, would see the phenomenon. For instance, by studying those who are about to enter to the workforce, and what are their thoughts about geographically dispersed leadership and teamwork.

Furthermore, it could be interesting to study, what is the importance of spontaneous interaction and informal communication in geographically dispersed leadership. In this research, I have only noticed superficially, that informal communication might be important aspect in virtual leadership, and therefore, have greater impact on leader-follower relationship in virtual environment.

And lastly, I have acknowledged that my study has a clear focus on Western business world; Europe and US. Therefore, one further point to mention is that even though the background of the interview participants varies relatively widely, nearly all of them represent European mindset because of their nationality and extensive working experience in Europe. And because of this, it would be an interesting approach to study virtual leadership in cultures outside Europe and North America. For instance, Asian, African and Latin American
cultures might experience virtual leadership differently due to the different leadership expectations and communication styles.

Many big multinational corporations, which are operating globally, are already practicing virtual leadership to some extent, some organizations maybe more than others. However, often leaders are learning to lead virtually by gaining experience based on their best practices. Therefore, raising awareness, reaching better understanding of the phenomenon, and improving leaders’ capabilities to lead geographically dispersed teams, it’s necessity. By studying the phenomenon of virtual leadership from multiple perspectives, we can gain better understanding of the future challenges and opportunities of geographically dispersed virtual leadership. I hope, that the study I have conducted, is a great contribution for the further research in this topic.

7.4 Beyond the Conclusion – Societal Phenomenon of Living in a Virtual World

Before I write the last sentence to my thesis, I would like to consider some final thoughts of the concept of virtuality, and its effect on the societal level. Clearly, words like virtuality and digitalization are the new trendy words in the modern world. Virtuality has become a societal phenomenon, a post-modern issue, which is becoming more apparent in our everyday lives – not only at our workplace, but everywhere around us.

The virtual world, which we are already part of – in a way or another – is affecting our lives. We have hundreds or even thousands of friends in Facebook, we update the highlights of our lives on Instagram, we create our professional network in LinkedIn, and we communicate through instant messages and real-time video calls. And through all these social media channels and instant communication methods that we use, often in our daily lives, we are constructing our own “virtual identity”.

Sometimes it can be seen, that we somehow hide behind this virtual identity. We are able to show certain parts of ourselves, to give as positive impression as possible, to polish the image we give outside. We are able to carefully consider the messages we exchange with each other, we can modify, rewrite and even delete before we click “send”. One could ask, how authentic our virtual Self is?
And how about being constantly available, to be online almost every hour of the day, how that influences the quality of our lives? Is it good, even healthy, to be constantly near our laptops and smart phones? Where is the clear line between our professional and personal lives? Glassdoor (Jackson 2017) recently published a new study, which argues that 66 % of American workforce are working during their vacations, and the study also shows that Americans have spent only approximately half of their eligible vacation time during last year.

I believe, that having an “offline time”, and being disconnected from time to time, is healthy for human mind and body. If we are not able to distinguish the time we are working and the time we are recharging our batteries while spending time with our families and friends, it might influence the quality of our lives.

Considering the fact that we live more and more in the virtual environment, it might be that "our present Self" is actually more "our distant Self". This means, that we have our main focus on our smart phones or other technological devices, and we communicate constantly with each other in a cyber space, instead of interacting with the people who coexist in the same physical place than us. Computers, video calls and instant messages become more important than the true human connections we have around us. We spend more time looking at our smart phone screen than enjoying the beautiful sunset. We open our laptops to “distract” ourselves instead of having intellectual conversations with people while enjoying our meals. We take pictures of everything, we film everything, we live for the digital world so we can share the important moments of our lives – but what if we forgot to truly enjoy those moments in the real life?

Advanced communication technology is human made, and it certainly makes our lives often easier, but what happens when we live in the digital world most of the time we are awake? How it affects our identity construction? Are we able to keep the intensive human interaction while we communicate across the globe through technological devices? I have no answers to these questions, yet I think it is rather interesting to acknowledge that virtuality might have great impact in our lives.

Despite the skepticism of increased virtuality in our daily lives, advanced communication technologies have also enabled new ways of interacting and creating meaningful relationships. People are able to discuss, share ideas and
have conversations with each other all over the planet. Technology and interactive social media provides a new platform for people to widen their perspectives, and create meaningful human connections that otherwise would not be possible. Taking this point of view into our consideration, there are certainly positive outcomes of ever-developing interactive communication technology.

And finally, I would like to end my thesis with Melinda Gates’ words. She spoke about the importance of deep human communication in the technologically connected world in her commencement speech at Duke University in 2013:

“Technology is just a tool. It's a powerful tool, but it's just a tool. Deep human connection is very different. It's not a tool. It's not a means to an end. It is the end – the purpose and the result of a meaningful life – and it will inspire the most amazing acts of love, generosity, and humanity.”

(Melinda Gates 2013)
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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guideline

Initial Questions – Leaders & Followers:

- Are you familiar with the concept of virtual leadership and virtual team work?
- What is your current role and main tasks at the company?
  - Are you currently leading/being a part of virtual team? Or do you have previous experience of virtual team settings?
  - How often you meet your manager /other team members face-to-face?
  - Are your team members from different countries/nationalities? How geographically dispersed is your team?

Interview Guideline - Leaders:

- How do you perceive to be a part of virtual / geographically dispersed team? How do you experience being a leader in virtual team?
- Do you think virtual leadership will become more common in the future? Is it good or bad thing? Why?
- In your opinion, what leadership qualities/qualifications/skills are the most essential when leading geographically dispersed teams? What makes a good leader?
- Could you please mention some of the positive and negative aspects of virtual leadership?
- What about the integration process in your team? Tell us about your experience. How did you support your team in the beginning? What has been done? What could have be done more?
- What about you being part of the team, are you strongly integrated? Do you feel that you are strong part of the team, and that your contribution is important?
- How do you provide feedback, coaching and support to the team members? Do you celebrate success & achievement with them? How?
- How much autonomy/freedom do team members have in the process of decision-making?
- How about creative thinking in your team? How do you encourage creativity among team members? Is creativity and innovativeness important in virtual team settings? Have you come across situations where your team needed to be innovative? How did you handle the situation?
How do you ensure that your team members receive enough accurate information on time? Is it enough to have virtual encounters, are you happy with that? Do you think that you share and receive enough information? What about your possibilities to express yourself, or is it more difficult? Are you able to come up with any issues with your team?

Is virtual communication enough based on your experience, is it effective? Is the communication only purely on a professional level, or would you like to have more communication on a personal level with your team? How important do you think it is to communicate also in a personal level? Does it help with the communication flow?

Do you think that you know your team good enough? Do you think the communication would be better if you knew them better? Why?

How did you handle the time zone and cultural differences, if any? Were there any situations that affected the way you worked? Did you have to adjust to other cultures? Do you actively build your knowledge of other cultures?

What are the main challenges for you as a leader to lead a team from distance? Do you have an example of challenges in situations? How did you overcome the challenge?

Have you come across conflict situations, general misunderstandings, or challenges with cultural diversity? Do you have an example of situation like this? How did the situation evolve? How did you solve the situation?

Have you received any training on how to lead virtual or geographically dispersed team? Do you believe leaders should have more training on how to lead virtual team?

Do you miss the traditional office environment and the possibility for daily social interaction with your team members?

Do you miss face-to-face communication? How come? How do you experience the lack of face-to-face communication? Do you think that good face-to-face communication between leader and followers is necessary for proper leadership?

How about trust in your team? Can you trust your team members? Do you have an example of situation where you showed that you trust your team? How do you think you can build trust with your team members? Is it easy to build trust? And do you think trust important?

Do you enjoy working in a virtual environment? Do you feel motivated in your current professional situation? Are you feeling satisfied working in a different location than your team members? Why? Do you want to continue like this?
Interview Guideline - Followers:

➤ How do you perceive to be a part of virtual / geographically dispersed team? How do you experience to be led virtually?

➤ Do you think virtual leadership will become more common in the future? Is it good or bad thing? Why?

➤ What makes a great leader for you? What expectations you have for a leader?

➤ Could you please mention some of the positive and negative aspects of working in a virtual team?

➤ What about your integration with your team? Tell us about your experience. Did your manager supported your integration to the team? What he/she did? What could have been done more?

➤ What about you being part of the team, are you strongly integrated? Do you feel that you are strong part of the team, and that your contribution is important?

➤ How do you receive feedback, coaching and support from your team leader? Do you celebrate success & achievements with your team? How?

➤ How much autonomy/freedom you have in the process of decision-making?

➤ How about creative thinking in your team? Are you able to come up with new ideas and actively seek innovative solutions? Is creativity and innovativeness important in virtual team settings? Have you come across situations where your leader encouraged creativity? How did this go? How did you feel?

➤ What about information, is it enough to have virtual encounter? Are you happy with that? Do you think that you share and receive enough information? What about your possibilities to express yourself, or is it more difficult? Are you able to come up with any issues with your manager and your team?

➤ Is virtual communication enough based on your experience, is it effective? Is the communication only purely on a professional level, or would you like to have more communication on a personal level with your manager? Or with other team members? How important you think it is? Does it help with the communication flow?

➤ Do you think that you know your team manager and other team members good enough? Do you think the communication would be better if you knew them better? Why?
➢ How did you handle the time zone and cultural differences, if any? Were there any situations that affected the way you worked? Did you have to adjust to other cultures? Do you actively build your knowledge of other cultures?

➢ What have been the main challenges for you in a virtual team? Do you have an example of challenging situation? Did you need your leader’s support? How did you overcome the challenge?

➢ Have you experienced any conflict situation or any misunderstandings while working in geographically dispersed team? Do you have an example? How the situation evolved? How was it solved?

➢ Have you received any training about virtual / geographically dispersed team settings? Do you believe leaders should have more training on how to lead virtual team?

➢ Do you miss the traditional office environment and the possibility for daily social interaction with your leader and team members?

➢ Do you miss face-to-face communication? How come? How do you experience the lack of face-to-face communication? Do you think that good face-to-face communication between leaders and followers is necessary for proper leadership?

➢ How about trust between you and your manager? Can you trust your manager, and do you feel that he/she has high-level of trust on you? Do you have an example of situation where your manager showed his/her trust, and shared responsibility with you? Do you think trust is important in geographically dispersed team?

➢ Do you enjoy working in a virtual environment? Do you feel motivated in your current professional situation? Are you feeling satisfied working in a different location than your manager and team members? Why? Do you want to continue like this?