Listening to the “Self” in Leader Self-development

Contextualizing self-development activities of leaders:
A qualitative study

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Abstract
Leader self-development is promoted as an alternative approach to leadership development within organizations. Fast-growing organizations especially benefit from the self-development activities of leaders. The tech industry is a sector that grows rapidly and thus offers an interesting context for this study. Moreover, practical perspectives on leader self-development are lacking in the current literature. Therefore, the objective of this thesis was to include a perspective on self-development activities from the leader’s standpoint and examine how the organizational setting related to these activities. The related theories were deduced from the literature and empirically examined by 11 semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with managerial leaders in hierarchical organizations from the tech industry in Germany and the Netherlands.

The findings showed that the “self” is limited in self-development activities. Leaders cannot practice self-development in complete isolation from the organizational setting. Instead, leaders are reliant on external factors and are intricately interconnected with their environment whereas the organization drives the intentional self-development activities of the leaders. A dynamic between the individual and the organization was revealed, as leaders are not only influenced by the supportive or hindering factors in their surroundings but also actively contribute to shaping the context. Furthermore, a distinction can be observed within the practice between experienced and less experienced leaders, with the former assuming the organizational responsibility of developing the latter. This thesis, therefore, provides a new perspective on intentional self-development activities and encourages to start a new discussion regarding self-development.

Key Words
Leadership; organizational setting; context; development; leader self-development; managerial leaders; tech industry.
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Introduction

The introduction is divided into different sections. We will start with the contextual background of the thesis, introducing the context and the main topic of this study. The background will be followed by the problem discussion, problematizing the existing literature and concepts. Once the required concepts and assumptions are established, the research questions are introduced. Consequently, the significance and purpose of this thesis are elaborated on. Lastly, we will provide a further detailed structure of this thesis.

1.1 Contextual Background

Increasing one's leadership capacity “is a product of an expansion of one's frame of reference, or perspective, on the self and the surrounding environment” (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004 as cited in Orvis & Ratwani, 2010, p. 657). This quote indicates that different aspects are part of a leader’s development. One of these, the expansion of one's frame of reference, implies the underlying process of learning and development, which can be a complex matter (Boyce et al., 2010; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010).

Although complicated, the importance of learning and skill development lies in the complex nature of leadership, which is widely recognized by various authors and researchers in this field (Alvesson et al., 2017; Bennis, 2009). Scholars argue that continuous learning and development are seen as a crucial part of being a leader, whereby others believe that true leaders are born. However, other scholars claim that it is a balance between personal traits, experiences throughout life, and learning (McDermott et al., 2011; Zisu, 2021). The complex nature of this phenomenon is acknowledged and in the context of this work linked to the idea that leaders, and therefore leadership, can be developed.

As stated in the introductory quote, leadership capacity can be developed in accordance with how leaders see themselves and the environment in which they operate. Leaders operate and exist in different contexts, for example, an organizational setting. Different components like culture, structure, and social constructs can shape such a context (Alvesson et al., 2017;
Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Zisu (2021) claims that leaders are dependent on their organizations because they are present in this context and can develop their role in these constructs. However, leaders also influence organizations since leadership is a highly social phenomenon that influences people, culture, and organizations (Alvesson et al., 2017; Zisu, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that the organizational environment and the individual are interconnected and affect each other. Since the wider environment is ever-changing and therefore, also organizational interactions are getting more complicated, a leader should constantly learn and adapt (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010).

The reaction to the need for learning and adaptation is twofold: On the one hand, leaders develop themselves based on the way they perceive leadership in general. A further reason for development might be that individuals have intrinsic needs for achievement or aim to align self-fulfillment with organizational success (Jiang et al., 2021). In the literature, it is also argued that leaders adapt and use self-awareness (Karp, 2013). Furthermore, leaders are acting in organizations, and these organizations are exposed to changes and trends such as globalization and technologies. Leaders themselves want to anticipate changes and therefore take their own initiatives to learn and develop (Boyce et al., 2010).

On the other hand, organizations try to prepare the leaders for this changing milieu, take the responsibility and often support and facilitate learning with formalized leadership development programs. As a result, leadership development takes place in organizations (Day et al., 2014). However, several researchers claim that formalized development programs are often expensive and ineffective (Boyce et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2021). Orvis and Ratwani (2010) explain this ineffectiveness in a way that developing oneself is a personal process and each individual has different needs to align with the broader environment, which is usually hard to tackle by formalized development programs. This lack of individual approach influences the motivation to take part and thus the outcome (Jiang et al., 2021). Hence, individuals and organizations search for complementary or alternative concepts which are introduced in the following. Additionally, the current research is problematized, and the core of this thesis will be discussed.
1.2 Problem Discussion
The search for an individual approach to develop as a leader as explained in the background, is answered by the concept of self-development. The growing body of research and popularity regarding the idea of leader self-development shows that there is a shift in the way scholars think about how to develop leaders in their role and how it is approached. In the recent past, the approach focusing on the leader’s self has been getting more and more attention. Karp (2013) argues that self-development does “not happen as a result of the development promoted in many leadership training programmes or quick-fix self-help books, but when a leader involves himself or herself in deep processes that build the necessary self-awareness, relational strength, and environmental capabilities and qualities needed to act and take leadership in a dynamic organisational environment” (p.136). Hence, we can deduce that the key to effectiveness of the concept relies on leaders engaging in self-initiated behaviors aimed at developing their own leadership capacities. This entails leaders taking ownership of their learning and actively selecting the activities in which they participate (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). While it is established in the literature that leaders bear the responsibility of initiating development opportunities, we contend that organizations can play a supportive role in these endeavors. Thus, the organizational context assumes significance in this study, and its relevance will be further elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

Alvesson et al. (2017) argue that the evaluation of good leadership varies across different cultural contexts. Additionally, according to McDermott et al. (2011), different contexts play a role in leadership principles and development. Significant examples of the different contexts are culture, organizational setting, and the sector in which a business operates. Ren et al. (2014) also emphasize that leader self-development cannot be comprehended in the same way across various contexts. The significance of context has been previously explored in leader self-development research. For instance, Boyce et al. (2010) conducted a crucial study on leader self-development in the military context. Similarly, Ren et al. (2014) studied the concept of leader self-development in China and Vietnam, highlighting the importance of national culture. The concept of self-development was also examined in relation to
professions, such as teaching (Mimbs, 2002). Moreover, the concept was investigated in distinct industries, such as banking, as shown in Antonacopoulou's (2000) study of three retail banks. Future research in the field of self-development was called for by Boyce et al. (2010) to emphasize the importance of the industry.

Altogether, these arguments have motivated us to pay particular attention to the context, and one specific sector: the tech industry, including IT. The tech industry holds immense significance in the business world, having experienced substantial growth in recent years. As such, understanding the nature of leadership within this context is a topic of particular interest to us. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the self-development activities of managerial leaders in hierarchical organizations within the tech industry in Germany and the Netherlands.

The tech industry exhibits a number of noteworthy characteristics that relate to the concept of leadership and leadership development. Predominantly, the industry is ever-changing with constant and quick shifts and allows disruptive organizations to enter the market (Booker & Williams, 2022; Hickman & Akdere, 2018). This feature can be linked to London & Smither (1999) who claim that self-development is important in “rapidly changing organizations” (p.4) specifically in industries that constantly require new skills. This results in the assumption that self-development is of the essence in organizations in the tech sector.

Furthermore, the nature of change within this sector shows in the traits of high-tech organizations. Respective businesses accept uncertainty, easily adapt, anticipate, and tend to be flexible and decentralized. Communication happens via technology platforms and is vertical, horizontal, and informal. Notable is that the companies in this sector require great autonomy and continuous training and development of their employees (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2010). Moreover, Hickman & Akdere (2018) state that leadership development in IT needs mentorship programs, a long-term view, and solid feedback. Projecting effective IT leadership is crucial to the organization, which illustrates that there are specific requirements for leadership development within the context of IT.
In addition to the significance of the context, considerable attention has been given to the intentional nature of leader self-development activities. In their review of 25 years of research, Day et al. (2014) argue that simply participating in development programs and workshops is insufficient for one to become a leader. Rather, development primarily occurs outside of formal programs and often happens unintentionally. However, the authors also underscore the importance of intentional and continuous practice for development. This perspective suggests that designing additional development programs may not be the most effective approach. Thus, it is crucial to take a step back and examine what transpires in the everyday lives of leaders as they engage in development and learning processes (Day et al., 2014).

A crucial aspect of self-development is the ability to get in touch with inner dimensions, which is also referred to as consciousness (Karp, 2013). For example, when a leader undergoes a significant and transformative experience in the realm of human interaction, it can trigger reflections that facilitate self-development. Being aware of past experiences is essential as it fosters learning and can be described as a state of consciousness regarding one’s own lived encounters (Karp, 2013). Nevertheless, Ashford & DeRue (2012) claim “to maximize the developmental value of any experience, individuals must approach and go through their experiences mindfully” (p.149). Hence, active engagement, also known as mindful engagement (Ashford & DeRue, 2012), is essential for learning from defining experiences. Such engagement can be described as intentional. The authors include “action” in their mindful engagement circle, which depicts one requirement for learning from experiences. In short, consciousness means that one is aware of what has happened. Nevertheless, it is important to put this awareness into context and reflect to be able to learn from this experience and to develop oneself accordingly. Furthermore, Ren et al. (2014) describe self-development as a “deliberate development of leadership skills” (p.47). They also state that the process of self-development is goal-directed and purposive. Boyce et al. (2010) claim that individuals who intentionally engage in activities aimed at expanding personal leadership skills or frames of reference, develop themselves. Olivares (2008)
suggests that self-efficacy is the driving force of intentions. Additionally, Walker & Reichard (2020) propose the concept of “purposeful engagement” to describe leaders’ intentional aspirations for personal growth (p.31). Karp (2013) highlights the presence of these intentions in leadership actions. Therefore, we can conclude that intentional practices, manifested through tangible actions, are essential for development and also for self-development. As a result, we presume that leaders can intentionally develop themselves.

In general, several scholars are aligned that leaders are responsible for their personal growth and the importance of leaders driving their own development. For example, Walker & Reichard (2020) state that a leader can grow from experience when actively participating in an independent, self-managed process. Furthermore, Boyce et al. (2010) define leader self-development as “a process in which leaders take personal responsibility for initiating, sustaining, and evaluating growth in their own leadership capacities and in their conceptual frames about the conduct of leadership” (p.162).

Nevertheless, we consider that the organization, even though it is self-initiated, still plays an important role because the leader is effective in an organizational context. The organizational context encompasses various elements, including both supportive and constraining factors. Supportive factors may include organizational guidance regarding feedback and connections while constraining factors could involve resource limitations. In the forthcoming chapters, our aim is to explore these factors as documented in the literature. Orvis & Ratwani (2010) claim that self-development cannot be formalized, but it is important that certain organizational efforts foster and support the initiatives taken by a leader. The authors furthermore argue that organizations that prioritize, systematically evaluate, identify, and provide guidance regarding their leaders’ self-development, may strengthen the motivation to take part in future self-development. Harris & Kuhnert (2008) emphasize the significance of considering the organizational level in leader development efforts. They argue that organizations should establish specific approaches for leader development to effectively support leaders who are tasked with managing high levels of complexity. Reichard & Johnson (2011) introduce self-development even as an organizational strategy of leadership
development. Moreover, a recent article claims that certain tools such as self-tracking sensors and systems for feedback provide options for acquiring related skills (Ruderman & Clerkin, 2020). That being said, we assume that organizations play an important role in the process of self-development and can strengthen the efforts of a leader. However, it is important to bear in mind, as we delve into these articles, that the needs for development are individualized. Boyce et al. (2010) further assert that self-development is an unstructured endeavor aimed at learning and growth.

According to Orvis & Ratwani (2010), self-development activities provided by an organization should be innovative, demanding, and content-relevant for the learner. Activities in the realm of self-development are highly individual, making it challenging to define specific activities that can be universally prescribed by organizations. This observation supports our argument for adopting a critical stance toward standardized development concepts. Even though organizations can provide the tools needed for individual learning, it is becoming more important for people to take charge of their own growth (London & Smither, 1999). Therefore, it is intriguing to explore how individual efforts can be effectively supported and how self-development activities can be facilitated within the organizational setting.

Even though most of the research focuses on enabling factors for leader self-development, we find it important to also mention that there can be several factors within an organization that depict a barrier to a leader’s self-development. Within leadership, it is vital to stay critical and to not over-idealize (Alvesson, 2017). Hence, we acknowledge the importance of considering a range of constraining factors in our thesis, which we examine. In fact, it is particularly crucial to include these factors, as they tend to be underrepresented in the existing literature. Therefore, we emphasize the significance of incorporating and empirically investigating the constraining factors within the organizations.

To conclude, the literature on leader self-development is vast and continually expanding. It encompasses intentional activities of self-development, as well as the identification of
supportive organizational factors. While there is a smaller body of research on constraining factors, they are also addressed within the literature. Nevertheless, when analyzing different dimensions of these factors, the literature does not sufficiently reflect the individual leader’s position and insights. As the concept of self-development is about the leader’s self, it is our objective to incorporate their voices in the research by empirically examining the theory. Consequently, we aim to identify the specific activities pursued by leaders that contribute to their self-development. Even though we are aware that parts of development processes are not obvious and identifiable, we aim to investigate the intentional practices of a leader. Furthermore, the literature states that organizations should support the efforts of a leader. The literature also provides dimensions on how to do so. We want to empirically examine these suggestions by including leaders’ voices in the literature.

1.3 Research Question
Based on the previously outlined statements we aim to participate in the discussion between scholars by examining the intentional activities of leaders to develop themselves and by examining what organizations are doing to meet the individual needs of a leader. Based on insights from the literature, it is evident that intentional self-development activities involve the active participation of the individual, who plays a crucial role in this process. Simultaneously, the organization also bears a responsibility and can provide support for intentional self-development activities. To investigate this, we adopt a practical perspective by focusing on self-development practices among managerial leaders. Our overarching main research question, therefore, is:

MQ: How does the organizational setting relate to the managerial leader's intentional self-development activities?

To provide structure in answering the main question we propose three sub-questions. First, it is relevant to examine what intentional self-development activities managerial leaders actually engage in. These specific activities are outlined in the Chapter Theoretical Concepts
and Framework. This question primarily centers on the contribution of individuals to the activities. Therefore, our first sub-question (SQ1) is:

**SQ1: What intentional self-development activities do managerial leaders engage in to develop themselves?**

Orvis and Ratwani (2010) claim it is important that organizations foster an individual’s effort and support the initiatives taken by a leader. We are intrigued by these possibilities and want to examine the aspects of organizational settings that are perceived as contributing by managerial leaders. To remain critical and provide a realistic perspective for theoretical and practical usage, we are also looking at the constraining factors within companies. Therefore, the second (SQ2) and third (SQ3) sub-questions are:

**SQ2: What aspects of the organizational setting support the intentional activities of managerial leaders?**

**SQ3: What aspects of the organizational setting constrain the intentional activities of managerial leaders?**

1.4 Research Purpose

1.4.1 Purpose

The primary objective is to offer a practical perspective on self-development activities from the leader’s standpoint and examine how the organizational setting relates to these activities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is threefold. Firstly, we aim to investigate the self-development literature and analyze three key components. Namely, intentional self-development activities by leaders, supportive factors, and constraining factors within the organizational setting. Specific elements within each of these components will be analyzed. Secondly, we will empirically examine these identified factors with their dimensions by interviewing leaders from the tech industry in the Netherlands and Germany. Thirdly, we
will integrate the three above-mentioned components and the empirical findings to address our main research question. The question seeks to explore the relationship between the organizational setting and the individual self-development activities of managerial leaders in the tech industry in Germany and the Netherlands. To generate novel insights into the self-development concept, we will conduct empirical research informed by the existing literature, and critically evaluate the concept based on our findings. By incorporating the perspectives of leaders in our research, our aim is to investigate the theoretical concept of self-development and contribute to a critical understanding of this phenomenon.

1.4.2 Significance

In the following, we will dive into the significance of this thesis in theoretical and practical terms. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, there are several articles that claim the phenomenon of self-development is under-researched (Jiang et al., 2021; Reichard et al., 2017). Furthermore, Day (2014) and Walker and Reichard (2020) specifically call for additional research on leader self-development. The authors encourage future research to focus on what happens in the lives of leaders while they develop and in what way organizational contexts can support or hinder this development. Moreover, as depicted in the problem discussion, different perspectives are outlined in the literature. Nevertheless, the voices of leaders are underrepresented, which adds relevance to this research. By examining the theory of self-development and incorporating leaders’ underrepresented voices we aim to contribute to the literature.

Secondly, from a practical perspective, the concept offers a complementary or alternative path to formal leadership programs and is argued to help leaders develop in accordance with the challenging and changing business environment (Boyce et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is essential to provide organizations with clarity to facilitate the construction of an approach that genuinely aids and supports leaders in the development of their roles. There are possibilities to encourage self-development but given the individual design of the concept they might be complicated to understand for organizations. Lastly, the significance of this study lies in the fact that leaders are given a voice. This also addresses the previously
mentioned need argued by Day et al. (2014) to examine the lives of leaders while learning and developing. Simultaneously, less experienced leaders who are developing can learn from the activities of other, more experienced leaders.

1.5 Structure
In the previous parts, we addressed the contextual background of our thesis and the problem discussion that led to our research questions. We have explained the significance of the thesis and will now continue with the theoretical framework and concepts, diving further into the theoretical background of the thesis with a literature review. This chapter will be followed by the methodology which contains our approach to conducting the research. Then, the findings and results will be shown, and the data analysis will be presented. Afterward, there will be a discussion to provide an answer to our research question. We will finalize with a conclusion and some closing remarks.

Theoretical Concepts & Framework

The main focus of this thesis is self-development, which has a rich background as outlined in the introduction section. As a result, this thesis is firmly grounded in theory, with various concepts leading up to self-development. First, the phenomenon of leadership and leaders in an organizational context. Second, learning and development are addressed as these are part of self-development. Thereby, sensemaking, the underlying and inevitable process of development and learning, will also shortly be introduced. Third, self-development which is thoroughly explained and several sub-concepts relevant and underlying to self-development are described. Then we continue with the individual activities and the organization’s role toward self-development including supporting and constraining factors. This altogether will be summarized and serves as the theoretical framework.

2.1 Phenomenon of Leadership

Leadership as a phenomenon is a complex concept and simplification and ideologization should be handled carefully (Alvesson et al., 2017). These matters can be seen in the different and various perspectives on the concept itself. One intriguing aspect explored in this thesis
pertains to the inquiry of whether leaders are inherently born or can be nurtured and
developed. This topic encompasses varying perspectives on the interplay between innate
qualities and the nurtured aspects of leadership. Some that follow the trait theory, argue that
leaders were born with the skills to lead, and some argue that leaders are born with the skills
to develop (McDermott et al., 2011). A further group is somewhere in between the two
previously mentioned extremes and finds a balance somewhere between nature and nurture.
For example, a balance between personal traits, early life experience, and career-related
learning opportunities (McDermott et al., 2011).

Specifically, the perspective that a leader can be developed, is of interest for this thesis. To
elaborate, in this belief, continuous learning and education are central to leadership (Bennis,
2009; Zisu, 2021). In particular, Bennis (2009), who is often quoted, emphasizes learning.
Learning can be done in various ways such as learning from mistakes, mentors, yourself,
books, and experiences to eventually entirely re-invent yourself as a leader. In this thesis,
the focus on the learning and development of leaders is central as we assume that leaders
can be developed.

2.2 Leaders in Organizational Context

Leadership is contextual. This means that leadership and leaders are surrounded by a context.
Within this thesis, the effect of the context and individual and its dynamic is of particular
interest as it might influence the development of a leader (Hamilton & Bean, 2005). Central
in this thesis is the organizational context of managerial leaders, which can also be referred
to as the managerial context.

Contexts can consist of several components. This managerial context in which managers
operate focuses on people, resources, structure, and culture (Page et al., 2003). Porter and
McLaughlin (2006) conducted an extensive literature review on leadership, and although not
precisely aligned, a consensus is found on the following components of the context:
culture/climate, goals/purposes, people/composition, processes, state/condition, structure,
and time. These components affect leaders’ behavior and their effectiveness. Culture is also
mentioned by Alvesson et al. (2017) as a crucial component of the context in which
leadership exists. Culture frames leadership, but leadership also influences culture. Here, the dynamic between leadership and the organization becomes visible. Noteworthy are the people and social construct mentioned by the sources above, which lead to followership. Followership is inevitable when practicing leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017). Hence, this social aspect in the context cannot be avoided in this thesis either.

Leaders are present in the organizational context and can develop their role in these constructs (Zisu, 2021). More specifically, organizations should offer people the possibility to learn and also ultimately to lead. Furthermore, leadership opportunities should be provided to potential leaders as well as the chance to take risks, make mistakes and learn (Bennis, 2009). As explained previously, organizations influence leaders, but leaders also influence organizations, their cultures, and their people (Alvesson et al., 2017; Zisu, 2021). According to Zisu (2021) to achieve organizational success leaders should develop with the intention for others and the wider organization. This shows the relationship between leaders and the context relevant to this study.

2.3 Learning and Development

2.3.1 Learning

Although learning and development are related and entwined, they are different. Learning is the initial, more superficial reply to external incentives. Whereas development requires a deeper, sustainable change within an individual. Despite the name, leader development requires both the processes of learning and development (Walker & Reichard, 2020). One returning theory for leader development is the constructive development theory: the concept of learning through experiences. This theory focuses on the process of making sense of the environment to construct reality and create meaning out of experiences (Amit et al., 2019; Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Olivares, 2008; Walker & Reichard, 2020). This understanding might lead to a more complex and different understanding of the world (Olivares, 2008). Additionally, leaders can learn from observing examples of leaders around them (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). When the leader develops further but not the organization, it might be a
problem as the meaning created by the leader could be more advanced than from the others in the organization (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008).

These aforementioned experiences are constructed by the environment. However, leaders can also take the responsibility to learn. These individual initiatives to learn refer to the concept of self-directed learning. Self-directed learning targets acquiring or developing specific skills, knowledge, or behavior that is needed (Boyce et al., 2010). Self-directed learning according to Nesbit (2012) is informal learning that is not structured by the organization. Here, the individual takes the initiative, defines what is needed, formulates goals, utilizes what is needed to learn, and eventually evaluates the outcome. This can be regarded as conscious and intentional actions directed by the leaders within their organizational setting. These opportunities to learn need to be grasped on a continuous basis, due to the continuously changing environment (London & Smither, 1999). Continuously learning as a leader results in the continuous development of those individuals as well (Nesbit, 2012). Hence, development will be elaborated on in the next part.

Increasing leadership capabilities also result from the expansion of a frame of reference and the process of sensemaking. This act of expanding one’s frame of reference converges learning and development. Thus, this complex and continuous phenomenon is the underlying process of both learning and development (Boyce et al., 2010; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). This underlying process of expansion of the frame of reference connects to the concept of sensemaking. Boyce et al. (2010) write: “Development reflects a process, not only of gaining skills, but also of acquiring a deeper understanding of one’s operating environment, and one’s self as a leader” (p.161).

Learning takes place in how an individual framed the experience, somewhat generalizing the sensemaking process. This deeper understanding adds to the complexity of how the meaning of leadership is constructed (Boyce et al., 2010). This meaning is created by sensemaking and enlightens the crucial difference between learning and development. The latter will be elaborated on in the next section.
2.3.2 Development

The term development in regard to sensemaking can be described as the outcome of individual learning based on how an event is transformed into a meaningful experience. According to Olivares (2008), development is about learning and sensemaking. Sensemaking is an operation of intentionality, learning therefore is acquired through experiences. Moreover, reflection is needed to make meaning of actions, learn, and transform into action thus, development.

Therefore, development is a process that requires a deeper understanding of oneself and the environment and leads to sustained progress (Boyce et al., 2010). The roots go back to human development. According to Douglass C. North in Karp (2013), the part where individuals are intentional about their actions is crucial to human development. This also translates to other sorts of development, as individuals are involved. In this thesis, we address leaders and therefore look at the broad concept of leadership development. Leadership development focuses on the collective and social aspects of leadership (DeRue & Myers, 2013; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). To clarify and show the contrast, leader development can be seen as the individual process of developing human capacity, knowledge, skills, and abilities in relation to leadership (DeRue & Myers, 2013; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Noteworthy, these two concepts are different but interact with each other, as leadership needs a social part to function.

2.4 Leader Self-development

After discussing all the needed concepts to understand the theoretical background and the core concept of our thesis, we have now come to the core of our research, which is leader self-development. Before we continue, it is important to further distinguish and at the same time acknowledge the overlap of leader self-development with leader and leadership development. Although different, the development types are related. Some authors argue that leadership development is a process of self-development (Karp, 2013). In each of the three development concepts, the individual is present with the aim of developing leadership skills and abilities. According to Walker & Reichard (2020), formal development practices
are mostly introduced and conducted by a trainer. These are referred to as formal development programs. It is not denied that leadership and leader development approaches are ineffective in general. Nevertheless, Walker & Reichard (2020) have highlighted that these approaches might not achieve an effective result when the individual does not purposefully use the experience. Therefore, in comparison to leader self-development the initiative of the development in leader/ship development does not start within the individual (Olivares, 2008). This individual responsibility of the leader within self-development is key and will be explained in the following section.

Despite the organization’s ability to support development cycles, the responsibility lies within the individual (Reichard et al., 2017). The key to self-development is that the individual initiates, monitors, and evaluates their own practices of self-development instead of expecting the organization to provide development opportunities (Boyce et al., 2010, as cited in Reichard et al., 2017). Thus, it is crucial to emphasize once more that an important driver of self-development is the leader's own drive and ability to pursue respective activities, such as feedback seeking (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Self-development is done over an extended amount of time with a purpose in mind in accordance with the context. This purpose or goal is directed to leadership capabilities and the conduct of leadership, identified by the individual. The individuals here are leaders and their capabilities, hence the reference to leader self-development (Boyce et al., 2010; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010; Ren et al., 2014).

2.4.1 The Background of Leader Self-development

As the term leader self-development already suggests, the self is a fundamental part of this concept. The self refers to the individual and here the leaders and their role, their capacity, and capability. According to Karp (2013), the leader's self-development process is ongoing “individuation: his or her attempt to create, and recreate, his or her leadership self” (p.133).

Diving further into the individual, a variety of different theories and concepts can be revealed. Firstly, there are underlying skills or competencies needed. According to Nesbit
(2012), meta-skills are “skills that allow for the development of other skills” (p. 209). The author links three meta-skills to self-development which are: self-reflective practice, managing emotional reactions to feedback and self-regulation. Hall (2004) referred to these skills as meta-competencies and listed self-awareness and adaptability. Self-awareness is a recurring concept in the self-development literature. The concept can be explained as an ongoing, reflexive process to understand oneself (Karp, 2013; Nesbit, 2012). Harris & Kuhnert (2007) refer to self-awareness as the following “Enhancing self-awareness can help individuals focus on their strengths as well as areas that need improvement” (p. 51). Ruderman & Clerkin (2020) also name self-awareness and self-regulation and add self-motivation to the list. Moreover, the authors say that leaders are challenged to improve performance and therefore need respective self-management skills or intrapersonal competencies. Although difficult to measure, these form an essential part of how to maximize performance. Additionally, there is self-efficacy which refers to the belief of an individual that skills can be used. Self-efficacy is believed to be linked to the propensity of a leader to engage in self-development activities (Reichard et al., 2017).

The willingness to self-develop is also determined by the ability, reflected in certain characteristic traits that affect skills and motivation (Boyce et al., 2010; Reichard et al., 2017). DeRue and Ashford (2010) even state that nothing is as powerful as the desire and ability to self-develop. An individual needs the ability to get in touch with inner dimensions, a second-order consciousness according to Locke (1979/1690, as cited in Karp, 2013). Individual characteristics could be job involvement, organizational commitment, or behaviors that seek feedback. These characteristics forecasted engagement in self-development activities (Olivares, 2008). Moreover, motivation might depend on how leaders categorize themselves (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). This illustrates how closely related underlying skills, characteristics, and motivation are. This can be summarized by referring to Hannah and Avolio (2010 as cited in Reichard et al., 2017) who state that developmental readiness consists of motivation and ability. Under motivation fall interest, goals, learning goal orientation, and self-efficacy. For ability that is self-awareness, complexity, and meta-cognitive ability.
Employing self-development activities requires time and energy from the individual. High workloads and busy schedules of managerial leaders influence these two aspects (Boyce et al., 2010; Reichard et al., 2017; Ren et al., 2014). This can be considered as individual aspects, but this is also where the wider context and organizational setting come in. Therefore, after clarifying self-development practices there will be a focus on the organization’s role in self-development activities.

2.4.2 Intentional Self-Development Activities of Managerial Leaders

Leader self-development can be conducted by practicing certain activities. There is a difference between activities in practices displayed in the following quote: “Practice is the degree to which an activity requires the individual to produce responses, cognitive or physical, using the instructional content of the activity rather than merely watching, listening, or reading the content” (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010, p.661). These activities can be described as the voluntary engagement of leaders in these practices. Leaders engage in these activities with the purpose of learning something new and improving their capacity and performance by acquiring or developing new skills or knowledge (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). We acknowledge that various people have different aspirations for leadership and therefore also different goals and motivations for why they want to develop (Jiang et al., 2021). Specific activities attached to these goals can be regarded as highly individual. Nevertheless, there are several examples of such activities, such as job experiences, courses, workshops, professional conferences, work, and career-growth orientation (Boyce et al., 2010; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). Within this thesis, we want to gain a better understanding of these activities by testing this theory and concentrating on selected activities that are highlighted and listed further on.

Experiences are crucial to development. According to Christensen et al., (2020), “every experience, conversation, meeting, and deliverable—carries with it an opportunity to develop and grow” (p. 2). When engaging with the mindset to learn from the experience, can be referred to as intentional learning (Christensen et al., 2020). The above shows the
importance of intentionality in activities. Moreover, intentionality is shown in various other aspects related to self-development as discussed in the following. The process of intentionality is part of the self-directed learning theory and is key to all human development. And lastly, sensemaking is intentional and links to learning through experiences. These intentions together with goals and plans are crucial for the engagement in activities (Reichard et al., 2017). Although separated in different sections above, learning, development, and sensemaking need to happen in combination as depicted by McDermott et al. (2011) who state that leaders need to invest time to reflect on the experience and turn this into action and thus, activities. This intentionality as outlined above and as introduced in the background is worth explaining further as this is core to our thesis. We assume that leaders intentionally practice self-development in an organizational setting. Before talking about distinct activities, it is required to elaborate on the meaning of intentionality in more detail.

Intentionality can be seen from different philosophical perspectives and not one single definition is attached to this ambiguous term (Padilla & Gaffal, 2017). Therefore, we rather explain the meaning of intentionality for this thesis and how the term is used. Interactions with the environment determine and shape the content of intentions. Within this master thesis, we refer to intentionality as when an action will be made in the future (Padilla & Gaffal, 2017). This means that intentionality is directed and referred to something, for example, directed toward events (Siewert, 2022). Olivares (2008) talks about “forward looking” (p.530). According to Olivares (2008), goal setting is a tactile way to carry out intentions that are followed by action. To conclude, activities that one chooses to perform and that demand deliberate effort directed towards can be understood as intentional activities. In this thesis, an intentional practice and activity would be something to which a will, a concrete plan, and a purpose are attributed. After having discussed what an intentional self-development activity is, we now deduce and list particular activities from the theory. The focus lies on four specific activities, listed, and elaborated on below.
a. Managing Own Learning

The literature on self-development provides different examples of self-directed learning. This concept was previously introduced and is of importance here. This can be, for example, voluntary participation in training, reading a book to strengthen certain skills, or attending workshops or conferences which are not compulsory (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). When a leader does that with a certain directness, reason, or goal in mind, this is an intentional self-development practice.

Furthermore, self-development can be practiced by learning from others. According to Murphy and Young (1995, as in Reichard & Johnson, 2011), leaders count on their personal and professional networks for knowledge, support, or guidance. For example, a leader can intentionally observe strategies and behaviors of positive, but also negative role models in order to learn. Observing successful and effective leaders, or those who are perceived as unfruitful can contribute to learning (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, taking inspiration from those one trusts, in an organizational setting leaders or peers, can contribute to self-development (Reichard et al., 2017).

b. Engaging in Stretch Assignments

Mimbs (2002) analyzed different profiles of how self-development emerges. We want to draw attention to one particular finding of this study: Self-development can unfold when a leader is willing to take risks and leave their comfort zones. Part of moving beyond comfort zones can be for example stretch assignments (McCauley, Eastman, & Ohlott, 1995 as cited in Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Such an assignment might be something challenging that exists outside of a leader’s specific profession. Rotating in one’s job, the expansion of duties, or accepting an assignment as an expatriate can be self-development activities (Reichard et al., 2017). Furthermore, the example of volunteering for an additional task at work is provided in the literature on self-development. Making and leading training programs for other people might be a further example of a stretch assignment (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). Reichard and Johnson (2011) state that “the most important strategy for leader self-
development is seeking out and engaging in challenging leadership experiences on a routine basis” (p.35). Thus, the authors state that a crucial component for the occurrence of learning and development is making experiences as a leader. The meaning of leaving one's comfort zone and also the matter of challenging leadership experiences are individual interpretations. Nevertheless, if leaving the comfort zone or trying something new with intentions in order to learn and develop, this can be referred to as an intentional self-development activity.

c. **Reflection**

To learn from the aforementioned experiences, reflectivity is needed to make sense and meaning out of the happenings. Thus, it is said that reflection on what one has experienced is essential for the process of self-developing (Karp, 2013; Mimbs, 2002). Reflection is described as “an active process of probing cause-and-effect, questioning assumptions, and analyzing the meaning of experiences” (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p.151). Understanding why a situation succeeded or failed, how one's oneself contributed to it, and how the actions of others affected the procedure and result are goals of reflection (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). Christensen et al. (2020), state that reflection which happens before, during, and after a task leverages learning.

As we examine intentional self-development activities, it is important to draw attention to the intentional process of reflection. When one pauses to reflect on a moment that requires special attention, it is an intentional reflection (Herrington et al., 2014). A structured reflection practice might help with the sensemaking process of experiences. This can be done by talking, thinking, or writing about it. For this reason, a notebook is positioned as a useful instrument for seeking one's own self-development (Nesbit, 2012).

d. **Seeking Feedback**

Feedback-seeking behavior is not only a characteristic as mentioned previously, but also translates into an activity. For example, when experimenting and trying out new behaviors or practicing skills, the impact on others needs to be evaluated and can be categorized as seeking feedback (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). Nevertheless, Ashford and DeRue (2012) have established that feedback is often not requested with the aim to protect one's own ego. This
leads us to briefly highlight potential barriers to self-development activities in a managerial leader’s position. Alvesson et al., (2017) highlight the matter of time to conduct reflectivity. Nesbit (2012) seconds this time constraint by stating that people might not have the time to keep a journal.

Moreover, we acknowledge that several individual factors and characteristics such as self-awareness, motivation, and self-reflection are contributing factors but simultaneously potential barriers to self-development (Boyce et al., 2010; DuRue & Ashford, 2010; Hall, 2004; Nesbit, 2012; Reichard et al, 2017). Personal dimensions which hinder self-development are not further considered in the context of this thesis since we aim to investigate intentional activities and research the organizational frame. We merely concentrate on actual pursued activities in an organizational context. Hence, we will now elaborate on the role of the organization.

2.4.3 The Role of the Organization in Self-development

Leaders are present in a specific context, such as the organizational setting, as was indicated at the beginning of this chapter. In this context, the leaders also perform self-development activities. In the background, we have touched on the importance of the role of organizations in self-development and in supporting the activities of leaders. Therefore, it is interesting to elaborate on the role of the organizational setting in leader self-development.

The importance that leaders' self-development may have on the overall organization serves as an important reminder of the significance of organizations. Antonacopoulou (2000) states that the interaction between individual and organizational factors is essential in self-development. Reichard and Johnson (2011) contend that an organizational approach that encourages leader self-development can increase the capacity of the individual leader but also the leadership capacity of the entire organization. Furthermore, it is said that the organization itself is more adaptable to changes in the environment. We want to underline the importance of organizations in this relation as certain organizational factors can actually support self-development activities pursued by a leader. According to Reichard et al. (2017), organizational support is needed for “translating intentions into actual leader development
behavior” (p.152). Furthermore, Orvis and Ratwani (2010) argue that organizational efforts are essential to foster and support growth when leaders engage in self-development. If this is not provided, organizations cannot expect their leaders to engage in self-development.

The implementation of self-development behavior can be influenced by a psychologically safe environment (Reichard et al., 2017). This environment can be described as having strong developmental norms, encouraging positive attitudes toward personal progress, and giving leaders considerable influence over their own development. Furthermore, coping with mistakes in this environment plays an important role (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Reichard et al., 2017). London and Smither (1999) highlight the importance of an empowering environment for self-development. In such an environment one can manage oneself and it is possible to create relationships and communication with other people in the organization regardless of role or division. The following section deduces distinct findings from the theory to create an understanding of how organizational efforts can support leaders in their self-development activities.

2.4.3.1 Supporting Factors within the Organizational Setting

a. Feedback Processes

Another important factor within the organization are opportunities to get and provide feedback. It is considered to be important for a leader’s self-development. Firstly, when taking part in self-development, positive feedback and recognition can support further self-development activities of managerial leaders. The instrument for that can be formal and informal incentives mechanisms within organizations. Such incentives can be monetary in the form of extra payment or in the form of written recognition (Orvis & Ratwani, 2011).

Moreover, feedback aids to understand what is going on and is important because it can support deliberate efforts to change and develop (Ruderman & Clerkin, 2020). The 360-degree feedback method can be beneficial for a leader’s self-assessment as one might get an idea of how others perceive their behavior (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; London & Smither, 1999). This feedback tool does not regard promotion, which reduces potentially daunting
feedback from others (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). The method of 360-degree feedback can much more help to establish a formal network as a dialogue is initiated. Moreover, the organization can support self-development activities through the provision of a mentoring program. Mentoring or coaching might be helpful as they can provide individualized guidance on how to make sense of challenging interpersonal situations (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Additionally, the supervisor is crucial in the feedback process because they can offer constructive criticism that focuses on particular behaviors that need to change (London & Smither, 1999). This leads us to the next organizational factor, supportive supervisor behavior.

b. Supervisor Behavior

The role of a leader’s supervisor is important for leader self-development (London & Smither, 1999; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). It is stated that the support of one's direct manager can benefit to establish self-development practices in an organizational frame (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). According to the authors, this can be accomplished through individualized consideration. Firstly, as introduced earlier, supervisors for example can provide personalized recommendations and feedback as they oversee the daily working life (Walker & Reichard, 2020). Secondly, they can help to reframe “challenging assignments as development opportunities” for the self-developing leader (Walker & Reichard, 2020, p.35). This was also referred to as stretch assignments earlier. Thirdly, supervisors could make use of unofficial social networks to improve leader self-development by giving leaders opportunities for interaction which leads us to the next point (Walker & Reichard, 2020). Thus, one can say that supervisors are able to affect a variety of organizational factors that encourage leaders to practice self-development (London & Smither, 1999).

c. Access To Networks

In general, access to networks plays an important role in self-development. Reichard and Johnson (2011) state that these can consist of informal networks as friends on the one hand. On the other hand, they can exist in an organizational setting consisting of professional
advisors, or previously mentioned mentors or coaches. Furthermore, it is argued that the organization can use technology and provide tools to create access to social network opportunities. Within such networks, leadership experiences can be discussed. This can be seen as a supportive factor in the self-development of a leader (Ghosh et al., 2013; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Thus, it can be concluded that the organization can support self-developing activities by providing access to networks.

d. **Platform To Learn from Others**

Technology platforms make it possible to store information within an organization. These can for example provide opportunities for leaders to learn from videos, podcasts, or blog entries that share knowledge (Walker & Reichard, 2020).

When sharing development stories is an integral part of organizational processes, one can also talk about a certain platform that makes it possible to learn from others. Different role models (e.g., coaches, mentors, and other leaders) within an organization can leverage the development processes of those listening. This can be done by sharing own development stories and showing vulnerability and self-awareness to organizational members. Development stories can for example be about the leaders’ journeys, how they dealt with presuppositions, and in general, emphasizing that other leaders are not alone in the process can be helpful (Walker & Reichard, 2020).

e. **Formal Development Programs**

As earlier stated, leader self-development is initiated by the leader oneself. Nevertheless, according to Walker & Reichard (2020), self-initiation is not necessary for leader self-development. Leader self-development can also be supported through structured programs when a leader actively integrates the information provided during training (Walker & Reichard, 2020). Furthermore, Nesbit (2012) states that for example, self-reflection practices can be an integral part of leadership training.
We have assumed that organizations can and have to support self-development initiatives. After having presented how this can be done, it is also important to take potential constraints for self-development activities into consideration. In the frame of this thesis, this is directed at certain organizational factors.

2.4.3.2 Constraining Factors within the Organizational Setting

Previously, the supporting factors within an organizational setting for intentional self-development activities have been outlined. As seen in the literature, organizations tend to use other formal development programs and have not yet all utilized self-development. For example, Walker & Reichard (2020) imply that organizations have to transform to make self-development an organizational strategy. Based on this statement and the assumption that organizations influence self-development activities it is worth elaborating and examining the constraints as well. The mentioned and listed constraints below are based on the occurrence in the literature.

According to Boyce et al. (2010), organizational support programs increased the engagement of some individuals but decreased the engagement of other individuals. The difference between the two groups was that individuals with a high tendency to self-develop reduced executing self-development activities. This shows that certain contributing organizational programs can have the opposite effect and hinder individuals from engaging in self-development activities. Moreover, it is important that strategic leaders are aware of how the organizational setting can contribute to or hinder the self-development strategy, and therefore activities (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). In combination with this overview, leaders and responsible employees or departments should improve their current, possibly hindering procedures. Instead, organizations should focus on identifying, understanding, and encouraging individuals that engage in self-development activities and step down from the standardized one-size-fits-all approaches (Jiang et al., 2021).

a. Failure and Mistakes

Generally, how an environment handles mistakes plays an important role (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Reichard et al., 2017). More specifically, Temporal (1984,
as cited in Antonacopoulou, 2000) highlights the hindering factor of an organization that does not tolerate failures and mistakes. Additionally, the amount and accuracy of feedback within an organization to leaders can be limited or inaccurate (Reichard et al., 2017).

b. Limited Promotion Possibilities

In the organizational setting, limiting promotion possibilities may also be a barrier to self-development (Pedler & Boydell, 1980 as cited in Antonacopoulou, 2000). Moreover, even though a leader might require a more challenging job assignment, it is not a given that this will be provided by the organization (Reichard et al., 2017).

c. Available Resources - Time & Budget

There are situational aspects that individual leaders cannot influence. Reichard et al. (2017) point to time constraints in organizations, as well as budget limitations that both lead to limited possibilities within development. For instance, paid formal training and access to sponsored coaches and software. Moreover, available resources may give leaders the confidence to engage in self-development activities instead of getting stuck into habits. Jiang et al. (2021) state that organizations need to allocate sufficient resources to self-developers. Few researchers have explored organizational factors in relation to self-development activities. This can be seen from the fact that reference has often been made to Walker & Reichard (2020), Reichard et al. (2017), and Reichard & Johnson (2011). We aim to contribute to the research by including the voices of leaders and empirically examining which factors might actually contribute or rather hinder.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

In the background, it was assumed that leaders intentionally practice self-development. After having outlined what intentional practices might look like, we summarize the identified activities from the literature in the following. As Reichard et al. (2017) have stated that the responsibility for self-development initiatives lies within the individual, we aim to examine if and how individuals take on this responsibility and if the identified activities from the literature are integrated by managerial leaders.
In order to answer sub-question one which is *What intentional self-development activities do managerial leaders engage in to develop themselves?* we focus on four dimensions of self-development activities. These dimensions are extensively discussed above and deduced from the literature on self-development.

a. *Managing own learning:* We empirically investigate if and how leaders manage their own learning with the intent to self-develop (Reichard & Johnson, 2011; Reichard et al., 2017).

b. *Stretch assignments:* We examine if and in what way leaders accept stretch assignments and get out of their comfort zone because they want to self-develop (Mimbs 2002; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010; Reichard & Johnson, 2011; Reichard et al., 2017).

c. *Reflection:* We empirically examine if and how leaders practice reflection (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Christensen et al., 2020; Herrington et al., 2014; Karp, 2013; Mimbs, 2002; Nesbit, 2012).

d. *Seeking Feedback:* It is of interest to empirically analyze if, and how leaders seek feedback for the purpose to self-develop (Ashford & DeRue, 2012).

In the background, we have stated the assumption that organizations can support a leader’s efforts when engaging in self-development activities. After having reasoned this assumption, we depicted different dimensions of how organizations can support development cycles (Reichard et al., 2017). We believe that the dynamic can be stronger between individuals and organizations through the supportive efforts of the organization, so we aim to examine these supportive factors that might occur in an organizational setting. In the following, we summarize the dimensions derived from the literature on organizational factors that we want to examine in this master thesis.

In order to answer sub-question two, which is *What aspects of the organizational setting support the intentional activities of managerial leaders?* we empirically examine supporting
factors within the organizational setting. Also, these dimensions are extensively discussed above and deduced from the literature on self-development.

a. **Feedback Processes:** Firstly, we empirically examine if and how feedback processes within an organizational setting can support self-development activities by a leader (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; London & Smither, 1999; Reichard & Johnson, 2011, Ruderman & Clerkin, 2020).

b. **Supervisor Behavior:** Furthermore, it will be investigated if and in what way the supervisor supports the intended self-development activities of managerial leaders (London & Smither, 1999; Reichard & Johnson, 2011; Walker & Reichard, 2020).

c. **Access to Networks:** We empirically examine if and how access to networks supports a managerial leader’s effort to engage in self-development activities (Ghosh et al., 2013; Reichard & Johnson, 2011).

d. **Platform to Learn from Others:** Additionally, we conduct this qualitative study to see if and the way role models can inspire self-development (Walker & Reichard, 2020).

e. **Formal Development Programs:** Lastly, we empirically examine if and in what way formal development programs can support a leader’s intent to self-development (Nesbit, 2012; Walker & Reichard, 2020).

Sub-question three: *What aspects of the organizational setting constrain the intentional activities of managerial leaders?* is answered with the help of three different dimensions.

a. **Mistakes and failures:** It is first examined if and how the handling of mistakes in an organizational setting prevents a leader from practicing intentional self-development (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Reichard et al., 2017).

b. **Limited Promotion Possibilities:** Secondly, we empirically investigate if and in what way limited promotion possibilities are a barrier to self-development (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Reichard et al., 2017).

c. **Available Resources - Time & Budget:** Finally, it is examined if and how available resources such as time and budget represent a barrier to self-development activities (Jiang et al., 2021; Reichard et al., 2017).
The three factors with its dimensions are visually summarized in Figure 1: Theoretical Framework.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework
Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

3.1.1 Approach
To construct this thesis, a deductive approach was followed (Saunders et al., 2019). During the entire research project, we have remained reflexive on the research approach. The different approaches were carefully considered, and eventually, the best suitable approach was chosen to be aligned with the purpose and questions. This decision was reflected in the setup of the thesis, as the background is based on theory. Since it was possible to derive the dimensions from the literature, a deductive approach was most suitable. These dimensions and respective theories are further explained in the theoretical concepts and framework chapter, on which the interview questions were based. Thus, theory was critically examined exploratory.

3.1.2 Research Design
The following section outlines the chosen research design that fits the research question. The first step was to develop a profound theoretical background of the concept of self-development. Further concepts that are related and important for research were theoretically outlined. Developing this background was important to identify existing research and findings related to our research question. The second step was to review the existing theory pertaining to the topic. By that, we aimed to further identify research and knowledge gaps and also build up our own knowledge in order to conduct the interviews. We used standard search engines and databases such as OneSearch, Google Scholar, and BSU (BusinessSourceUltimate) to retrieve the articles. This was done by using the following search strings: “Leadership” AND “self-development”; “Leader” AND “self-development”. Furthermore, “self-development”; “leadership development”; “leader self-development” were used as search terms (Saunders et al., 2019). A number of criteria, including the scientific level and whether the material is peer-reviewed, were taken into consideration when selecting the articles. In addition, recent literature reviews by Day et. al (2014) and DeRue & Myers (2013) were included in order to reflect the current state. To effectively
manage articles, highlight important information, and make comments on the material as a research team, the software Mendeley was used. After analyzing existing theories on this topic, the third step was to gather primary data with a qualitative approach. As practices on the phenomenon of self-development are examined, the nature of this research was exploratory (Saunders et al., 2019). The process was an iterative learning journey for us individuals, as we went back and forth regularly during the research (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). In general, we took on an external and interpretive role as researchers during these steps as we had to interpret the meanings of the participants.

3.1.3 Methodological Choice

In this research project, primary data was gathered and created through interviews with leaders. Therefore, this research is a mono-method qualitative study. This was followed by a matching qualitative analytical technique with a well-established procedure. Although the literature is available on the phenomenon over a long period of time, this research focused on self-development at one point in time and is therefore cross-sectional. Especially the primary empirical data in the form of interviews were collected in a short time frame and gave insights specifically during this time (Saunders et al., 2019).

Day’s et al. (2014) call to investigate the everyday experiences of leaders that motivated us to make this respective choice. A qualitative approach makes it possible to investigate experiences and the perceptions that managerial leaders have of their organizational setting. Saunders et al., (2019) state that gathering data in a qualitative manner can be used “to give participants a ‘voice’ through which to talk about and record their experiences and perceptions” (p.639). Furthermore, as the self-development concept itself is very individualized, a qualitative approach was the appropriate choice. This is not an objective report as individualized perceptions were investigated.
3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Interviewees and Sampling

For this project, empirical data in the form of interviews were collected. To access the empirical data, we reached out to leaders from our professional networks. This means non-probability sampling in the form of snowballing and self-selection was used (Saunders et al., 2019). The search for participants was conducted via LinkedIn and our private networks. A post was created and published to recruit participants via LinkedIn. As a result, interested participants reached out. In addition, we also reached out to leaders from our private network who have extensive experience and a large number of direct reports. Thus, our participants formed a heterogeneous group. This character diversity can be recognized in various differences such as the number of direct reports, years of experience, job positions, companies, national culture, age, and gender. By that, the quality of the data collection and research, in general, is increased (Saunders et al., 2019). As the people in our networks are mainly located in Germany and the Netherlands, the scope of our research is limited to Germanic Europe in accordance with the GLOBE project (Results – Netherlands Globe Project, n.d.). Given the fact that we relied on our networks for interviewees and the majority thereof is located abroad, the interviews took place virtually. The aim was to conduct the interview via video with a camera. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded using the video software ‘Zoom’ which also offers the possibility to record the interviews.

For the purpose of this research, leaders were interviewed. Given the ambiguity of this definition, we came up with a clarification of whom to categorize as leaders. Firstly, as we focused on the business side of leadership, leaders in private business organizations and within managerial positions were interviewed. These managerial leaders were all part of a hierarchical organization. Meaning these leaders have people under and above them in the organizational hierarchy. Since we focused on individuals and their development, the aspects outlined here are important. Nevertheless, to specify our research and interviewee criteria further the decision was made to focus on one specific industry. As introduced in the problem
discussion this study focused on the tech industry. Hence, all leaders interviewed are employed in this respective sector.

Secondly, leadership cannot exist without followership. Therefore, leaders have followers (Alvesson et al., 2017). This means that the interviewees had at least two direct reports. For the purpose of the research, it was necessary that leaders reflect on themselves and their possible self-development within their role as leaders. Therefore, the leaders we interviewed received at least one promotion in their career to a position in which they have direct reports. It adds value to the research to have different sorts of leaders in different stages of their careers and experience. This difference in quality could possibly show differences or similarities in data and therefore offered an interesting insight into the phenomenon.

3.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

After describing the sampling of our research, the process of the interviews is outlined in the following. We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews between the 12th of April and the 11th of May 2023. After agreeing on a date and time with the participants, invitations with the respective Zoom link were sent. This email also contained a document with the consent form, as well as further information about the interview process. Before conducting the interviews, we prepared a set of interview questions that were based on the knowledge we gained through previous courses and the research for the thesis project. Hence, from the start, the questions were based on theory. Over the course, these were tailored and made more specific and clearer to get the best possible answers. These questions were not shared with the interviewees beforehand, to minimize prepared and biased answers. Nevertheless, to clarify the meaning of self-development activities to the interviewees a description was sent beforehand. Moreover, to consider the intentionality of the practices, we specified the questions and asked for their activities to develop their skills as leaders. Developing their skills and expanding their frame of reference would be the respective intentions. The questions were structured to fit the deductive approach we chose and the theoretical concepts that we aimed to examine (Dr. Alan Shaw, 2020). The interview guideline can be found in Appendix 1 - Interview Guideline. The interviews lasted around 30-45 minutes and were
introduced with a general introduction and closing dialogue. The conducted interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews were aligned with the purpose of an exploratory thesis and offered the possibility to explore different perspectives and understandings (Saunders et al., 2019). Depending on the process of the interview, follow-up questions were chosen. This lies in the nature of a semi-structured procedure.

In regard to the quality of the research, it was important to consider the risks semi-structured interviews bring such as lack of reliability and biases. The central takeaway was that it was worth spending sufficient time on the preparation of the interviews to overcome quality issues. Detailed issues and their solutions are elaborated on in a later section.

3.4 Data Analysis
In order to analyze the data, we performed a thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). This was done to identify themes and patterns in the collected data from the interviews. Step one was to prepare the data by transcribing the interviews using intelligent verbatim transcription rules (McMullin, 2023). This method allowed us to make the transcripts easily readable but keep them as close to the original conversation as possible.

A thematic analysis was performed in order to analyze the data. As this research followed a deductive approach, the themes were derived from existing theories (Saunders et al., 2019). The procedure started with (1) getting familiar with the data. Familiarity was reached through transcribing the interviews and writing down reflections and thoughts in our personal notes. (2) Then the data was codified by gathering all transcripts in one file in the online tool “Google Drive” so both researchers had a view of the transcripts and coding. By going through the interviews, a codebook was created in Excel, so both researchers were aligned on the codes used (Nowell et al., 2017). (3) The themes established were based on theory, in line with the deductive approach. The three themes were: self-development activities, organizational supporting factors, and organizational constraining factors. These themes were divided into sub-themes which are the dimensions as portrayed in the chapter on theoretical concepts and framework. The codes were categorized among these themes and sub-themes and allowed us to recognize relationships and patterns in the collected data.
In this stage, the experiences and perspectives of the leaders were interpreted. (4) Once the data was examined completely, the themes, sub-themes, and codes were reviewed and discussed by both researchers. As a result of this, both researchers were aligned which led to the last step of writing up the analysis. (5) The analysis was written in such a manner that it was structured by the identified themes and sub-themes. For each theme, the overall findings were presented as well as more in-depth results and outstanding, noteworthy findings and quotes.

3.5 Trustworthiness
In this section, the trustworthiness of this thesis will be addressed. This is split up into two parts: credibility and dependability. The aim is to provide a clear and comprehensive description to show the possibilities for transferability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

3.5.1 Credibility
Several techniques were used to align the results of the research with the intended reality of the participants (Saunders et al., 2019). As external researchers, we aimed to establish trust and mutual respect while conducting research as the interviews required openness from the interviewees. The interviewees formed a heterogeneous group, and this adds different perspectives to the phenomenon intended to investigate (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Furthermore, we considered how to overcome language barriers since our native language and that of the participants were not English. We ourselves prepared the interview questions thoroughly by testing them on close contacts not involved with the research. Moreover, we included participants that felt comfortable communicating in English. In order to achieve the best possible quality, some of the interviews were conducted in German and then translated into English. Once the interviews were done, the insights were shared with the participants to confirm the information given.

Additionally, for the data analysis, a suitable analytical method was chosen, which was a thematic analysis. This assisted in creating a thorough analysis to codify, link, and thematize the meanings behind the interviews best. We consider ensuring credibility as we were two
researchers involved in constructing the research, analyzing the findings, discussing ideas, and making the best suitable decisions for the research approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

3.5.2 Dependability

In order to make the research understandable and assessable for others and therefore dependable, several steps were taken. Semi-structured interviews are exposed to several data quality issues such as biases and a decrease in reliability. These can include interviewer, and interviewee bias, and the lack of structure can decrease reliability (Saunders et al., 2019). Hence, it was important to us that the interviews were prepared well. To minimize biases and to increase the quality of the research, several techniques were applied. These methods consisted of considering the researcher's knowledge, appropriate settings as well as expectations and information shared with participants.

Research steps and decisions should be documented well to ensure dependability. Given the nature of this research which concerned meanings, and interpreting answers of interviewees the step of documenting changes was vital (Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, the interviews were semi-structured which allowed for follow-up questions. Through that, we had the possibility to go in-depth into the questions needed to explore our topic. To remain consistent and address the same components in each interview, the identified dimensions were used, and a dialogue was held to adapt and make the best focused and suitable questions (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Aligned with documenting changes, each researcher kept a personal logbook and notes. Moreover, thought processes, draft ideas, and shared notes were kept to be reflexive on the process and conducted research (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

In general, the research approach came along with ethical considerations. Firstly, an ethical principle we had to be aware of was research ethics and the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. The interviews entailed personal and sensitive information. Thus, we ensured confidentiality throughout the process by anonymizing the participants’ names and the company they are working for. Furthermore, we set clear expectations before the
interview and planned enough time to conduct these, so we had extra time for the introduction and to finalize the interview. Also, we aimed to create trust with the participants and showed respect by introducing ourselves, letting the interviewee have time to answer, and addressing them in an appropriate way (Saunders et al., 2019).

Moreover, a researcher’s attitude might influence the outcomes, which depicts an ethical issue that needs to be addressed (Saunders et al., 2019). As the meaning of the interviews was interpreted to analyze the data, it was important that our objectivism was taken into consideration (Saunders et al., 2019). Challenging the thought processes and biases of each other as a research team was the manner in which we maintained the objectivity of this study.

3.7 Limitations
In the following, we outline limitations that were encountered during the research process. For this research, the aim was to access leaders who matched our criteria and were willing to participate. As leaders are often faced with a high workload, it was questionable if they were willing to take time for the interview. So, this aspect had to be considered carefully. Moreover, the topic itself required personal reflection from leaders. Thus, answering the questions required more effort and capacity. Both time and deep reflection impacted the interviews. The time frame was limited. Due to this fact, the number of interviewees was limited. Nevertheless, the interviewees participating in the research bring a high variety and quality to the research. Furthermore, the core topic of this thesis, self-development, is often partially unconscious. This part of the concept is not possible to address in the research approach. Thus, we focused on the identifiable, intentional parts of self-development in the research. Nevertheless, we can just assume that they practiced these activities with the intention to develop their skills as leaders. Finally, it is important to mention that we examined the supportive and constraining factors of an organizational setting only from the managerial leader’s perspective without observing their behavior or organizational processes. Therefore, exclusively their subjective reality is reflected which depicts a limitation of this study.
Data Analysis and Themes

This chapter presents the results of the interviews conducted, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data is organized into various themes and sub-themes, in line with the theoretical concepts and framework discussed in the preceding chapter. The aim is to describe the self-development activities that individuals engage in with the intention of enhancing their leadership skills and knowledge. As per the relevant literature presented in the chapter theoretical concepts and framework and explained to the interviewees beforehand. The subsequent findings are presented below.

4.1 Theme 1: Self-development Activities

The first theme is the self-development activities that leaders engage in, which was deduced from the literature and examined in the interviews. This theme is further split up into five sub-themes, each of the sub-themes will be highlighted below. Overall, the interviews revealed that the leaders undertake a variety of intentional self-development activities, some of which were mentioned by the participants themselves while others were explored through dedicated questions. Whilst some of the activities were common among the interviewees, there was considerable variation in the types of activities mentioned, highlighting the individualized nature of self-development. Indeed, each leader had their own approach to self-development, which was evident throughout the interviews. It was clear that every individual has unique requirements to practice self-development, including their own continuous process and career trajectory (e.g., moving from an individual contributor to a manager). Though some participants had set long and short-term goals for themselves (interview #2, 11). The approach to self-development activities was generally perceived as “unstructured” (interview #1, 4, 8, 9, 10) and it was emphasized that personal growth does not happen automatically (interview #10).

4.1.1 Managing Own Learning

Within the sub-theme of managing own learning, the interviewees were asked about their self-development activities and how they acquired new skills. Interviewee #2, Head of Talent Acquisition provided the following summary: “... looking back at what has helped
“me most in developing myself as a leader is more of my own initiatives rather than the company’s initiatives”.

Upon examining the results, it became evident that all interviewees engaged in various self-development activities. The most frequently mentioned activity was learning from others, with several interviewees emphasizing the importance of observing the behavior of their managers or other leaders within the company (interview #1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10). One interviewee was searching for smarter people outside of the company (interview #3). The second most common activity was reading books or articles, which was mentioned by most of the interviewees (interview #2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11). In addition to reading, other media such as movies, videos, audio, and LinkedIn were utilized for self-development (interview #4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). Moreover, the results from the interviewees also highlight the value of coaching in dealing with leadership challenges, with one individual paying for coaching themselves and others receiving company-funded coaching (interview #1, 2, 3, 5, 8). However, all interviewees independently decided to invest in coaching.

4.1.2 Stretch-assignments
Regarding stretch assignments, most interviewees reported taking on tasks outside of their job responsibilities with the aim of developing new skills (interview #2, 4, 7, 10). Other interviewees spoke about deliberately selecting experiences outside their comfort zone, such as taking on new responsibilities or assignments (interview #5, 6, 11). In this context, it was furthermore mentioned that taking on a new role (interview #3) or building stronger connections in order to get things done (interview #2, 7, 11) were part of self-development activities. For some interviewees, the role itself presented a challenge (interview #2, 8).

Some interviewees mentioned the importance of practicing new skills through experimentation (interview #2, 5, 7). A few participants also described voluntarily taking on additional initiatives such as setting up new programs to create more effective processes (interview #5, 10). “I take care that these 10,000 people have optimal infrastructure to be able to work” which shows that this participant, who holds the position of CIO, takes over responsibility and develops themselves at the same time (interviewee #5).
The same CIO set up a self-organized unit which has been a challenging task. This activity not just developed the interviewee themselves but also the employees of their IT department. Additionally, #5 aimed to transfer the self-organized set-up to neighboring departments, so that the benefits can be recognized and adopted, which indicates an engagement in stretch assignment. Furthermore, this participant went against the opinion of the CEO in order to protect one innovative action of an employee, evidently in this quote: “I didn't give my colleague a warning, but I praised him”.

Interviewee #5 did not receive support from the CEO as “the owner of this company sits on the board, so he simply owns everything and unfortunately has a completely different idea of leadership than I do”. Therefore, to be able to deal with challenging situations this participant stated to have received support from an external coach, reading books on agility and attending seminars. This specific finding shows that interviewee #5 takes over the responsibility for developing others but his self-development activities are impacted by the dynamic within the organization. This is of particular interest for this study which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

4.1.3 Reflection

Interviewee #6, Director of Change and Transformation stated “you can only reflect if you take yourself out of the system, I always like to talk about the commander's hill. You take yourself out of the lower operational, stand on the mountain and see what is actually going on - only in this way can you reflect when you take yourself out of the system”.

The quote above illustrates reflection within their role while referring to the surroundings and the importance of distancing oneself from it while reflecting. Generally, reflection was identified as an important self-development activity by several participants (interview #2, 9). Upon further questioning, more interviewees confirmed that they actively engage in reflection, triggered by both experiences and formal development programs. They reflected on a range of experiences, including day-to-day activities and mistakes made (interview #2,
6, 7, 9, 10), as well as their own behavior and the impact it had on others (interview #2, 4, 8, 9). One interviewee stated, “I think that had an effect on my team as well, so I think that was a really interesting learning for myself, how my energy level affected the people on my team as well” (interview #2). Some participants reflected on their own by writing down their thoughts (interview #7, 10) while others reflected with others such as a coach, their manager, or team members (interview #2, 4, 10, 11). One participant mentioned reflection was constantly going on in their head, this had an impact on their mental health. Reflection was a challenge, but it is now set as an objective to be turned into a strength (interview #11).

4.1.4 Seeking Feedback

In interview #9, it was found that a particular “spark” was necessary to pinpoint a prospective area of development. One way to initiate this catalyst was by requesting feedback. Many participants engaged in the active pursuit of feedback, as observed in interview #3, 4, and 8. Most commonly, interviewees directly solicited feedback from their own team or direct reports (interview #1, 3, 5, 8, 9). Nonetheless, the authenticity of this feedback was questioned by several interviewees (interview #8, 9). For instance, as interviewee #9 stated: “And also always ask yourself how authentic is it, right? I have to evaluate them, so sometimes they would be concerned that providing negative feedback may impact their evaluation”. Therefore, some interviewees had the opportunity to gain the most authentic feedback by getting this anonymously (interview #7). To get more authentic feedback, leaders aimed to build trust and build a safe environment (interview #8, 11). In the data, it became visible that feedback was not only sought but that these comments were also turned into action and aimed to be implemented (interview #1, 3, 9). For example, by talking about it with the team, having it as an action point, or exaggerating the feedback received.

4.2 Theme 2: Supporting Factors within the Organizational Setting

Theme 2 pertains to the supportive factors present within the organizational setting. It has been further subdivided into five sub-themes, each of which corresponds to a specific dimension identified in the literature. The data suggest that the different dimensions within the organizational context facilitate the self-development activities of leaders, although the significance of individual needs is duly acknowledged. As one participant stated, “the
company can only do so much” (interview #2), showing that individuals have a crucial role to play in utilizing supportive organizational factors.

Despite being categorized as constraints, “failures and mistakes” as well as “limited promotion opportunities” may also have supportive functions (interview #2). Similarly, formal development programs might have some constraining elements, as evidenced in the data and depicted below (interview #3, 4, 9, 10). Furthermore, the budget was rather perceived as a supporting factor. Especially personal budgets that could be used for what the interviewee needed (interview #8). Here, it again becomes visible in the interviews that the tool or resource is something that the organization offers, but the employee used it and dedicated it to a specific learning need.

4.2.1 Feedback Processes
During the interviews, some participants identified standardized feedback processes within the company as a supportive factor. Based on their responses, two types of feedback processes could be distinguished: anonymous feedback processes (interview #3, 4, 7, 8) and non-anonymous processes (interview #6, 7, 8, 9, 11). The data indicated that anonymous feedback was viewed positively, as it enabled individuals to receive authentic feedback (interview #7), from other peers who “did not dare to speak up” (interview #4). Non-anonymous feedback, often mentioned in the context of weekly meetings, was also considered supportive. Nevertheless, one participant also commented that some of the direct reports gave very direct feedback, but other comments might be “sugar-coated” (interview #7). Although feedback processes were defined as supportive within the literature, the findings show that structured feedback processes were partially not evaluated as being supportive. For instance, it was mentioned that one takes no time to look at the results within the tool (interview #1, 7). Also, it was said that peers are not trained in providing feedback (interview #2).

4.2.2 Supervisor Behavior
The collected data highlights that the leader’s managers were perceived as having a supportive role in their self-development activities. Participants noted that their supervisors
provided individual feedback, which helped with reflection and provided support for various challenges (interview #4, 7, 8, 10). Furthermore, participants reported that their supervisors provided them with the opportunity to engage in stretching tasks and supported them in setting individual goals focused on areas of development, which led to experimentation (interview #7, 10, 11). However, parallel to supporting the goals of interviewee #11, their direct manager is less interested in development than the leader themselves and therefore does not actively encourage them to invest in development.

Another noteworthy finding from the data is that an experienced manager highlighted that a manager’s supportive role can also be that of a coach, as they bring an independent perspective (interview #4). However, it is crucial to note that the evaluation of a manager’s supportive role can change over time. For example, in some cases, participants reported that their managers were helpful earlier in their careers, but as they grew and developed, this perception changed (interview #4, 9). An important finding that emerged from the data collection was that a manager may not always be evaluated as supportive of their direct report’s self-development activities, especially for leaders in upper management positions. This observation was not explicitly stated in the theoretical framework, indicating that it may be a previously overlooked area in the literature. For example, one participant stated that the CEO does not support personal development, because it is solely important to meet the targets (interview #3). Another experienced participant, who also reports to the CEO, stated that the management board rather blocks his own development. This was explained by the fact that they had different understandings of leadership and thus, also the way how mistakes were handled (interview #5). Interviewee #5 said the following: “He gives me goals, of course, clearly I get goals from my boss. In my personal development little. As I said, we are actually a very hierarchical company. I rather try, on the contrary, to make my ideas clear to my boss, which is a bit difficult.”

4.2.3 Access to Networks
The data analysis revealed that a leader’s self-development activities were perceived as supportive by providing various avenues for networking within the organization.
Participants mentioned both formal and informal networks within the organization when asked about opportunities to network.

One identified pattern within the data is the importance of having conversations with self-selected peers and colleagues within the organization which can be referred to as a self-created network. One key aspect mentioned was “Having people in the company who care for you and give honest feedback” (interview #4). Furthermore, exchanging ideas with peers, including those from different departments, who are in similar situations and facing similar challenges, was mentioned as a valuable means of support for self-development activities (interview #7, 8, 10, 11). It was highlighted that it helps to think about problems and find solutions together (interview #10).

A participant who was relatively new to the company also emphasized the importance of networking with certain individuals within the organization to be able to perform well in their new role (interview #7). The data highlights the value of networking not just for personal development, but also for professional success within the organization. Additionally, participants noted that exchanging ideas with directors who are leading bigger teams can also be beneficial for self-development activities (interview #2). In addition, the same participant acknowledged the dependence on others in difficult situations such as an uncertain period for their business.

The aforementioned points highlight the potential value of networking with individuals who hold higher positions within the organization for personal and professional growth. A further pattern that was derived from data was networks provided and organized by the company. These were mentioned as being supportive by several participants (interview #5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). For instance, different forms of manager get-togethers like connect events, coffee roulettes, lunches, and management circles were mentioned (interview #5, 8, 9). Within these networks, it was highlighted that discussing critical cases and sharing specific development stories was helpful (interview #6, 7). Some participants decided to invest their budget in this to participate in peer groups (interview #3, 11). Furthermore, the
organization's support by creating access to networks related to the profession outside of the organization was mentioned (interview #6, 10). Within such a network interviewee #6, a senior leader, found comfort in exchanging experiences with like-minded individuals, helping them cope with situations and realizing that others have faced similar challenges.

4.2.4 Platform to Learn from Others

When asking about platforms to learn from others, company meetings (interview #2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9) were mentioned several times. The data also indicated that technology platforms (interview #4, 10, 11) were perceived as supportive factors for self-development activities. “We have a great learning world with many learning offerings from our company and also from partners. It's a platform that helps me”, as stated by interviewee #10. Further specific examples such as platforms filled with videos, knowledge management, and tools as well as newsletters that presented both, successes and failures were mentioned (interview #4, 10). Nevertheless, one interviewee mentioned that it could be helpful to not solely focus on the successes but also more on the failures in order to learn from them (interview #11).

This shows the potential value of technological tools for facilitating learning and self-development as perceived by the interviewees. Moreover, a recurring pattern in the data was the practice of presenting failures and challenges within company meetings, as mentioned by participants in interviews 3, 5, and 6. This suggests that open communication about setbacks and obstacles can be a supportive factor for a leader’s self-development activities.

4.2.5 Formal Development Programs

In general, the participants perceived formal development programs differently; as supportive but also not contributing to self-development activities. When discussing self-development, a few participants mentioned that formal development programs provided by the organization are supporting their growth (interview #2, 4). “What I liked at one training was that at the end, we had to note down 3, 4, 5 key learnings, really to improve and then put it into a letter, and then the trainer took it along. After half a year he sent it to our home address and you could check this.” (interview #9). Further participants mentioned that these programs support by serving as a reminder and teaching certain techniques (interview #5, 6,
The dedicated time when conducting a formal development program was perceived as a supportive factor for self-development (interview #4, 5).

It seems that while formal development programs may be helpful for early-stage career development, they may not be as effective or relevant for higher-level leaders. “If I’m honest, you’re mostly familiar with that” (interview #5). This participant indicated that the upper-management level acts as a pilot to subsequently distribute the programs to lower levels. The data suggests that formal development courses are less beneficial for high-level leaders (interview #3, 10). However, despite the limitations, both participants and interviewee #11 acknowledged that formal development programs can be helpful in the early stages of one’s career. Additionally, these few participants highlighted the importance of networks as a more crucial factor for self-development (interview #6, 10). Along with the supportive factors, the constraints of formal development programs were also mentioned such as the lack of long-term reminders at the end of the program (interview #6, 9).

4.2.6 Other Supporting Factors

While asking about supporting factors within the organizational setting, several other perspectives were provided by the interviewees. Various supportive factors for self-development were identified through the interviews. Participants mentioned having a personal budget for development (interview #2, 3, 8, 10, 11), which could be used for a range of activities such as hiring a coach, attending conferences, or pursuing an advanced degree like an MBA or Ph.D. Experiencing both good and bad examples of managers within the organization was also seen as helpful (interview #1, 2). Last and most important, was the cultural setting mentioned by the majority of the interviewees. “They do have a culture where people make mistakes all the time because it’s just not possible to not make them... so it’s a growth mindset I’d say did they have” (interview #7). A company culture that allowed for promotions, mistakes, development, and learning new things was described as supportive. Moreover, this growth mindset within the company was named by several participants, as helpful for executing self-development activities (interview #2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11). One of the interviewees mentioned that the opportunity to make mistakes and learn was
due to the high growth within the company, where everything moves fast, and you have to try things out when you do not have time to think about it (interview #11).

In the findings, it becomes evident that leaders found support in their organizational setting, especially in difficult situations and times. Many interviewees came to the realization that they were not alone in their struggles, as others were in similar situations (interview #2, 6, 7). As one interviewee noted, knowing that others have the same struggles can make it easier to get through them (interview #7). Additionally, interviewees recognized that difficult situations could lead to growth and that building connections and networks can provide support (interview #2, 6).

4.3 Theme 3: Constraining Factors within the Organizational Setting
The third theme focuses on constraints within the organizational setting and is divided into three dimensions: failures and mistakes, limited promotion opportunities, and available resources. Whereas the latter is divided into two categories: time and budget. Overall, the interviewees reported few constraints within the organizational setting, although the time constraint was mentioned most frequently. Additionally, as discussed later on in 4.3.5, some interviewees reported additional factors that had not been previously identified in the literature as either constraining or supportive factors.

4.3.1 Failures and Mistakes
In terms of failures and mistakes, some of the interviewees experienced this as a constraining aspect of self-development activities. This was described in the interviews as experiencing blame and being made the scapegoat of issues or having an intolerant boss in response to mistakes (interview #1, 5). It was also revealed that this intolerance towards mistakes could be pervasive throughout the company, where the culture, in general, is set up to seek or assign blame for problems (interview #6). Not only was it seen as a constraint, but rather as an improvement as failures could be communicated more: “we've tried this, this is what we learned this, is what you should avoid... failure is going to be part of your success” (Interview #11).
4.3.2 Limited Promotion Opportunities

None of the interviewees felt directly limited by limited promotion opportunities. Nevertheless, exploring this dimension gave some related results. Some of the interviewees felt undervalued and therefore found it difficult to participate in self-development activities, either for their own development or to develop others (interview #1, 4). Moreover, a few interviewees change their behavior in pursuit of a promotion opportunity, such as exhibiting different behavior or exaggerating feedback (interview #4, 7). One interviewee was impacted by other team members being afraid to do something out of the ordinary that could potentially hinder their ability to deliver impact as described by #7: "People are afraid to do something out of the ordinary, because they say this could hinder me deliver on impact. So, if I change the org structure of my teams and we did that recently, they go crazy because they say listen, I need to finish the things that I've been working on because otherwise I can't be promoted, because I cannot show that impact". This finding suggests that momentum constrained participant #7 by other colleagues who were afraid of taking on challenges.

4.3.3 Time

While referring to the practice of reflection, participant #6 stated: “That doesn't always happen in everyday work, because you're very strongly driven, but you're also driven by timelines and expectations and a lot of operational activities that I have to do”. Time was the most frequently mentioned constraining factor (interview #1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). Interviewees described it as having too little time to reflect or as the biggest constraint to participate in self-development activities. The time aspect was often mentioned in conjunction with the workload, operational activities, deadlines, and the overall hectic nature of the job (interview #1, 6, 7, 8). Moreover, the time aspect within the company was also perceived as vague since there were no clear guidelines on whether to spend time during working hours or not (interview #11). Conversely, some of the interviewees did not experience time constraints because they were higher up in the organizational hierarchy and could therefore manage their own time and decide how much work to take on (interview #3, 5). “I have every freedom to use my time as I wish” (interview #5).
4.3.4 Budget

“...it's not a lot, I think it's like €400 a year and then it always needs to be approved by our people development department... I find this a little bit ridiculous that you then need to start arguing, why you would like to book which training” (interview #4). When addressing the budget, several interviewees experienced it as a constraining factor (interview #4, 5, 9), as more effective training is expensive and limited for the teams using them. Others experienced constraints around the process of requesting or utilizing the budget. This was mainly experienced when approval had to be given and a case had to be made to use the budget (interview #4, 6, 7). A noteworthy finding is that interviewees from upper-management level had little to no budget limitations (interview #5, 6). Moreover, one interviewee stated being aware of how to cross hurdles leads to no budget limitations (#11). Lastly, some of the interviewees did not experience the budget as a limiting factor at all but rather as a positive, supporting factor. Whereas it was used for coaches or whatever training perceived as suitable (interview #2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11).

4.3.5 Other Constraining Factors

The literature depicted that there are organizational constraints, which were divided into the dimensions discussed above. However, during the interviews, several additional constraining factors were mentioned and will be explained below.

Firstly, interviewees mentioned culture several times, with one stating “I don't like how we do things, how the culture is set up” (interview #1). Another interviewee mentioned practices within the organization as rather “reactive” instead of being “proactive”, which could hinder investing in development (interview #11). Additionally, some believed that others were not as interested in self-development, which hindered participation in such activities (interview #10, 11). Organizational structure was also identified as a constraint, with hierarchical structures and processes blocking leaders from executing activities (interview #5, 8). Interviewee #5 who set up a self-organized unit within a big hierarchical organization stated: “Well, I'm trying to do that right now, I'm in the process of doing that, but actually the existing processes in the large company are blocking me a bit”, showing the impact of
dynamics within the organizational setting. Participants also noted that C-level managers had limited support for self-development, as they tend to focus more on organizational goals (interview #3, 5, 9). In some organizations, it would be beneficial to have a clearer understanding of what it means to be a leader or to have examples of self-development activities (interview #2, 4). Participants also noted that the input learned or taught during self-development activities could not be implemented in real-world situations or should be practiced more actively in role-plays (interview #3, 8, 9). Lastly, participants identified the self as a general constraint, with some experiencing imposter syndrome (interview #2, 8).

During interview #1, it became evident that the organizational setting was not conducive to personal growth which depicts a further constraint. This participant expressed their sentiment by stating, “If I work for a company where I don’t really agree with how things are done, how should I teach others to excel there?” Moreover, the participant expressed a desire to perform the same role in a different company, indicating a lack of self-development opportunities within the current organizational context. This finding also reveals a dynamic, the importance of the context and the need for others in the developmental process which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

4.4 Insights Beyond Themes
Whilst not explicitly exhibited in the literature and used in the theoretical concepts and framework section, additional intriguing results from the interviews cannot be disregarded and will therefore be presented here.

4.4.1 Difference between Seniority Levels
The findings of the study revealed a clear distinction between leaders on different seniority levels. The group of interviewees who held upper-level management positions, such as directors or C-level leaders, provided similar responses to certain questions and could be considered “experienced leaders”. Conversely, middle managers who held managerial positions for less than 10 years were categorized as “inexperienced leaders”. Interviewee 3, Director of Customer Success commented, “development becomes more difficult when senior” (interview #3). Indicating that experienced leaders faced challenges and limitations
in their development (interview #3, 5, 6, 10). Experienced leaders found leadership development programs to be less useful and turned to other self-development methods, such as seeking guidance from external sources and sharing challenges with others. Also, the more experienced interviewees perceived their supervisors to be less helpful and had more flexibility with their time. Whilst inexperienced leaders such as interviewee #1, Team Lead Operations, expressed the need for support from managers and other connections to perform well (interview #1, 7). The same junior leaders also showed an interest in formal leadership development programs and theoretical knowledge.

The data furthermore reveals that more experienced leaders, specifically those in director and C-level positions (interviewees #3, 5, 6, 11), navigate the organizational landscape with greater ease. For instance, participant #11 mentioned their ability to overcome organizational obstacles and secure a budget for their development. Interviewees #5 and #6 indicated that they face no limitations on their budget and have the freedom to utilize it as they see fit. Time allocation for development is not a concern for participants #3, 5, and 6, as they enjoy greater autonomy in their positions. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that more experienced leaders seek assistance and inspiration from external sources outside the organization. This is evident in participant #3’s reference to seeking out individuals who are intellectually superior in order to continue learning, and participant #6’s quest for connections outside the organization who have faced similar challenges and offer an independent perspective on situations. Both participants actively seek independent inspiration and support to navigate challenging circumstances.

The data shows that more experienced leaders exhibit greater independence and rely less on the organization to identify development opportunities. The findings show that they take on the responsibility of fostering the development of less experienced leaders. The leaders do so by sharing their own experiences (interview #3), rather than relying solely on their supervisors, as the CEO may not possess the necessary capability for such mentorship (interview #3, 5). This does not hinder their own development; instead, they seek help and support from external sources (interview #3, 5, 6). Their development is driven by creating
self-organized units (#5), attending workshops, conferences, and networking events outside the organization (interview #3, 5, 6). Interviewee #3 also exemplifies how they assume responsibility for developing others, motivated by past experiences with ineffective managers, stating, “*I try to leave a good mark on the people who work with me*”. Participant #5 further mentions their role as a pioneer in formal development programs, which they then disseminate to less experienced leaders.

4.4.2 The Dynamic within the Context

The data showed that the organizational setting, including other individuals, affects the leader and the other way around, which reveals a dynamic between the organizational setting and the individuals.

The organizational context often plays an important role as already outlined in above stated findings. This can be furthermore derived from the interviews as the leaders address interacting with other individuals within the context. For instance, connecting and working with their peers, as well as receiving feedback, to eventually literally stating: “*it depends on the context*” (interview #2, 4, 6, 8). This context was seen in different lights such as the sense that the company did not understand that tasks are postponed to help others. Furthermore, limitations in available tools for senior development to limited support from the management board were mentioned (interview #3, 5). During interview #1, it became evident that the organizational setting was not conducive to personal growth which depicts a further constraint. This participant expressed their sentiment by stating, “*If I work for a company where I don’t really agree with how things are done, how should I teach others to excel there?*”. Moreover, the interviewee commented “*I think same job, different environment would be a next good step*”, indicating a lack of self-development opportunities within the current organizational context. This finding in this case also reveals a negative dynamic, the importance of the context, and the need for others in the developmental process which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
Nevertheless, the development of individual leaders can also have a significant impact on the organization as a whole. For example, one leader noticed that their energy level had dropped, and upon reflection, realized that it had affected their own team (interview #2). Furthermore, some leaders felt a sense of responsibility to contribute to the shaping of the organization while they developed themselves (interview #4, 5, 11). What was repeatedly mentioned was the aim to develop other people in this case direct reports, while practicing leadership. As shown in interview #2, “it is not about me anymore, it's not about me being successful but it's about setting that person up for success, that will make me successful”. The development of others was mentioned repeatedly, by developing and training others, providing feedback, helping them to reach goals, and building trust (interview #2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11). Moreover, the context of remote settings was mentioned to explain the setting teams were working in. The interviewees mentioned that the remote setting influenced the manner in which connections with colleagues and direct team members were made (interview #2, 8).

Previously, the results of interview #5 were already presented in distinct dimensions of activities and supporting factors. The CIO of this company has created a self-organized unit for his IT department, developing himself as it is a challenging task but also others from this unit as roles have changed and autonomy has been supported. This reveals that an experienced participant takes responsibility for others and knows at the same time how to manage the landscape of the organization while relieving it. Taking responsibility for the development of other leaders and employees was also found in interview #2, 3, 4, 9, 10.

Another finding from interview #5 underscores the responsibility that the more experienced leader takes on. As mentioned earlier, the CIO empowered one of his employees who initiated something for the whole company, whereby the CIO was not supported by the CEO. These findings are of great interest as they show how many supporting and hindering aspects come together within an organizational environment when a self-development activity is carried out, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
Discussion

The aim of this research is to answer the question: *How does the organizational setting relate to the managerial leader's intentional self-development activities?* The question is aligned with the purpose of this research to get a leader's practical viewpoint on self-development activities and how the organizational setting relates to them. In this chapter, we will address this aim and concentrate on answering the question by discussing our findings. The findings were analyzed by using a thematic analysis and so the themes and dimensions will be reiterated throughout the text. Important to mention is that there are four main arguments in this discussion, which assist in answering the research question.

The results provided interesting insights to answer our research question. Exploratory semi-structured interviews with managerial leaders from the tech industry were conducted to collect data. The findings of these interviews allow for new insights and are restricted to one specific industry. Nevertheless, self-development is an individualized concept and practice as stated in the literature and as visible in our results. Therefore, we only can assume that these insights can be found across hierarchical organizations in the private sector.

5.1 Questioning the “Self” in Self-development

The findings indicate that managerial leaders actively participate in various self-development activities with the intention to develop their skills as a leader. These activities are aligned with the dimensions presented in the literature. The individual approaches and activities employed by the leaders become apparent, including stretch assignments, reflection, and seeking feedback. It is important to highlight that all the performed activities either included other people such as colleagues and direct reports or were based on interactions. Contrary to the existing literature, the findings of this study indicate that leaders cannot solely rely on themselves for self-development activities within the organizational setting. They are inherently dependent on others. Upon reviewing the aforementioned findings, it becomes evident that self-development activities cannot be initiated, monitored, and evaluated by individuals alone, as suggested by Boyce et al. (2010, as cited in Reichard et al., 2017). For example, seeking feedback as an activity holds significant importance as it
influences one’s development based on the perceptions of others. Henceforth, it can be argued that others contribute to shaping an individual’s practices, development, and growth. The same can be concluded in the engagement of reflective practices as this is facilitated through interpersonal discussions.

The findings clearly demonstrate that individuals in one’s environment have a substantial impact on self-development activities within a specific context. Although activities such as reading books or watching movies may be undertaken individually, the process of integrating these activities into one’s personal development journey and the underlying motivations behind them are heavily influenced by human interactions. The feedback received, the experiences gained, and the support provided by the organization all contribute to evaluating one’s development, underscoring the interdependence and limited scope of self-development in isolation. Furthermore, leaders acquire knowledge through experiences, necessitating the involvement of others. Ultimately, the people surrounding an individual play a crucial role in creating and supporting self-development activities.

The interdependence between individuals is also evident in the findings, particularly in the significance of building connections for personal development, as highlighted by the participants. Attending organizational events for networking purposes exemplifies the leaders’ dependency on others. In this case, individual development is contingent on establishing connections that shape actions and provide guidance. Furthermore, it becomes evident that receiving assistance from others is crucial in navigating through difficult circumstances, highlighting the interdependence between individuals. These challenging situations varied, but one common issue was the period of uncertainty faced in their businesses, which is typical in the tech industry. The participants’ developmental journey highlights the need for external support. This was also evident in the fact that listening to the stories of others helps to develop a sense of solidarity and to realize that one is not alone in one’s experiences.
The findings indicate that more experienced leaders had the autonomy to initiate activities themselves. For instance, setting up a self-organized unit within a hierarchical organization exemplifies such proactive behavior. This example displays the influence of the tech industry, highlighting two characteristics: decentralized organizations and autonomous employees. It underscores the influence of the organizational context on the leader’s ability to take independent actions for self-development. Nevertheless, the involvement of others was crucial to bring about this change. Overall, these results reinforce the notion that self-development activities require the involvement and support of others. The dependency on external factors, such as connections, guidance, shared experiences, and also the influences of the industry, highlights the limited scope of the “self” in self-development within the organizational context.

As illustrated above, the approaches to self-development activities are individual. However, it became obvious that the activities, even if individual, cannot be performed in an individual way and that the leaders are very much dependent on their context. Moreover, it can be argued that the leaders’ self-development activities were shaped and influenced by the individuals surrounding them. These individuals, who are all part of the organizational setting, contribute to the context within which the leaders operate. The impact of this context will be further explored at a later point. One major pattern found in the data is the difference between experienced and inexperienced leaders, which merits elaboration in the subsequent section.

5.2 Experienced Leaders as Supportive Factor

Although each respondent had their individual approach to engaging in development activities, it is notable that all of them operated within the context of their respective organization. Given the similarities in industry and organizational structure, a distinct contrast between experienced and less experienced managerial leaders is evident. An interesting observation from the findings is that less experienced leaders demonstrate a higher degree of dependence on organizational support and guidance from their peers compared to their more experienced counterparts. The dependency was demonstrated in the
findings and then further addressed in 5.2.1, which has now led to a comparison of experienced and less experienced managers. Additionally, it is observable that experienced leaders take on the responsibility of driving their own development and the development of their direct reports while being influenced by others in the organization, thereby assuming a proactive role within the organization.

When examining the findings, it appears that more experienced leaders, specifically those in director and C-level positions navigate the organizational landscape with greater ease. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that more experienced leaders seek assistance and inspiration from external sources outside the organization. They actively seek independent inspiration and support to navigate challenging circumstances. It is evident that more experienced leaders exhibit greater independence and rely less on the organization to identify development opportunities. Furthermore, the findings revealed that more experienced leaders emphasized the importance of granting freedom to their employees to explore and experiment with new ideas. Their own experiences and positions within the organization allow them the flexibility to inaugurate such initiatives. Intriguingly, these experienced leaders also took on the responsibility of fostering the self-development activities of less experienced leaders who showed a greater dependency on their guidance within the organizational context. Experienced leaders are their role models and can provide the less experienced leaders with development stories, feedback, or autonomy, supporting them in their self-development activities.

The literature did not previously explore the idea that more experienced leaders encounter fewer opportunities to discover supportive structures within the organization. However, the aforementioned discussion highlights that experienced leaders are less dependent on the organization, navigate their development path more effortlessly, and assume responsibility for developing less experienced leaders as part of the organizational context. This statement can be further examined. Senior leaders have demonstrated their commitment to developing others as part of their own leadership and self-development activities. It is evident that experienced leaders employ various strategies to support fellow leaders in their self-
development endeavors, such as creating development plans and establishing self-organized structures. Especially the latter action can come with challenges and entail changes in their own role. In summary, experienced leaders take a share of the organizational responsibility to facilitate the self-development activities of others, effectively becoming a supportive force within the organizational setting.

5.3 The Meaning of Support

The dimensions identified in the literature as supportive factors generally contribute to the self-development activities of managerial leaders. Among these factors, access to diverse networks emerges as a key supportive element. Notably, interactions within both informal and formal networks stood out as particularly beneficial. In addition, various factors and processes within the organizational setting, such as learning platforms, company-wide meetings, and technology platforms were seen as supportive, suggesting that the context of the technology industry plays a role in shaping self-development activities. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of these supportive factors relies on the interactions and initiatives of individuals within the organization. Organizational processes alone cannot guarantee the success of self-development activities; it is the engagement and drive of individuals that determine the development and execution of these activities. This underscores the significant role played by the organizational setting, including leaders at all levels of seniority, in determining the extent to which these factors support self-development activities.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that some of the factors identified in the literature as supportive were also perceived as limiting by the interviewees. One such factor was supervisor behavior which had both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, direct managers could provide guidance and support for development. On the other hand, direct managers could hinder progress by not being as engaged in development as the direct report themself. Similarly, formal development programs, as outlined in the literature, were found to have both supporting and limiting factors according to the interviewees. Formal development programs as a supportive factor for self-development activities tend to be seen
as more supportive for junior leaders, compared to senior leaders. Though the organization might take the responsibility to provide formal development programs, the individual needs to use this and realize which learnings to grasp and utilize for their development. Furthermore, it is important how well the program is suited to personal needs, whereby the interaction with others again plays an important role to identify these needs. Moreover, after taking part in such a program, support from the individuals in their environment is needed to progress with the theoretical learnings in their individual environment. This again shows that leaders cannot practice self-development on their own and that the environment shapes the leader continuously. This insight links back to the formal development programs as portrayed in the background and problem discussion. To a certain extent, formal development programs can support self-development activities, while solely utilizing them would be insufficient.

The findings consistently highlighted the importance of feedback processes, which were mostly established within the leaders’ organizations. However, it was observed that even if the company has feedback processes in place, they may not contribute to the self-development activities of leaders if individuals within the organizational context do not value or utilize these tools. Additionally, although the organizations may provide supportive aspects as outlined in the literature, the effectiveness of these factors is contingent upon the engagement and involvement of other individuals within the organizational setting. If others do not prioritize or support a leader's self-development, these supportive factors lose their effectiveness. Similarly, if a leader does not actively contribute to the development of others by providing constructive feedback, being a good supervisor, or offering stretch opportunities, the overall development ecosystem may be compromised. This exemplifies the dynamic, the impact of the context, and the dependence of self-development activities on their surroundings.

The dimension of failures and mistakes was initially identified in the literature as a hindering factor. Interestingly, a few interviewees perceived this dimension to be a supporting factor within their companies. They shared that their organizations allowed for mistakes to be made
and handled in a positive manner. The rationale behind this approach was attributed to the high-growth and fast-paced nature of their organizations. In such dynamic environments, it was acknowledged that experimentation and occasional failures were inevitable and even encouraged as a means of learning and innovation. This particular finding shows the influence of the context and can be traced back to the characteristics of the tech industry, where businesses require constant adaptation and continuous development of their employees.

Ultimately, different interviewees perceived different supportive factors. The findings of the study reveal that the supportive factors identified in the literature can also have constraining effects, as observed in the interviews with managerial leaders. It is important to note that these findings are based on the individual experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the leaders. If a leader does not perceive a factor as supportive, it does not function as a supportive factor for them. This brings up the question of what defines a supporting factor, as multiple components influence whether something is considered supportive. It is evident that the meaning of support is subjective and varies among individuals. Furthermore, it is worth noting that certain activities can be considered supportive factors in their own right, irrespective of individual perceptions. However, the evaluation of these activities is ultimately determined by how they are perceived and experienced by the leaders.

5.4 The Meaning of Constraints
As examined in the interviews some constraining factors could be identified. The findings of the study indicate that the interviewees perceived time constraints as the most significant hindrance to their self-development activities. This time constraint was closely intertwined with their workload, as revealed in the results. The high workload, tight deadlines, and numerous projects can be attributed to the specific characteristics of tech companies, as previously outlined in the problem discussion. Once again, this highlights the influence of the organizational context on self-development activities. Among the available resources, the budget dimension was predominantly perceived as supportive by the interviewees. However, it is important to note that some of the participants did encounter limitations and
challenges related to the budget and the associated processes. The organization provides both the budget and the process. Oppositional, it is still up to the individual to use the budget. Here, the fine line between individual and context appears.

A small number of respondents expressed feeling constrained by the organization's tolerance for mistakes and failures. However, it is noteworthy that the majority acknowledged the rapidly changing environment in which they operate. Within this dynamic and evolving context, tolerance for mistakes becomes necessary and is aligned with the characteristics of the tech industry, which significantly influences the context of self-development activities. Limited promotion possibilities are not identified as a hindering factor. Nevertheless, it became apparent that the contexts shaped the leaders and their behavior towards activities that come along with promotion opportunities as the surrounding has expectations of the employee to achieve promotion.

The limitations that an individual leader might experience are very different due to contextual, situational, or individual aspects. This is best exemplified by the following instances. One interviewee encountered limitations stemming from the organizational culture, while another interviewee faced constraints based on their seniority within the leadership roles. Both individuals had to adapt to the context and employ individualized self-development activities. Furthermore, there were general observations regarding the organizational setting in which self-development activities took place, including the importance of fostering an active environment for growth. The interviewees explicitly acknowledged the influence of structure and culture, demonstrating their awareness of the contextual factors at play. Similarly, one interviewee was influenced by the organizational context, expressing dissatisfaction with the culture and struggling to support others in such an environment. In this case, the leader was unable to become a supportive factor themselves due to the perception of an unsupportive organizational culture which reveals a dynamic. In addition, leaders become a hindering factor for others and themselves within the organization. This is shown in the case where they do not allow themselves to make mistakes and struggle with the consequences of imposter syndrome.
Furthermore, certain activities presented challenges as well. For instance, some of the interviewees expressed concerns about the authenticity of feedback received from their direct reports. This highlights a complex dynamic in which the feedback provided by direct reports is viewed with skepticism, as they are being evaluated by the leader. Reflection could be too demanding for an individual, and therefore present itself as a challenge. Meaning that the activities that were intended to self-develop had another side to them.

Referring to the industry as described in the problem discussion is now appropriate, as the effects of the industry become visible in the findings as well. Although an experienced leader might take over the responsibility and provide opportunities for others to develop, the organizational context and wider context such as the industry can influence this. When external circumstances impact the industry in which the company is operating, the decision-makers and thus the organizational setting can be influenced. It is worth revisiting interviewee #2, who highlighted the challenges faced by the tech industry. Consequently, his organization also encountered difficulties, impacting both his personal development and that of his direct reports. While he initially served as a supportive factor, the influence of the context compelled him to adjust his own development trajectory, temporarily assuming a hindering role for himself and others.

5.5 Reflecting on Our Own Assumptions

The aforementioned discussion has led us to doubt our own assumptions on the matter of self-development activities and how the organizational setting relates to this. Specifically, the initial assumptions can be found in Chapter 1. Further understanding of the theory was presented in the Chapter “Theoretical Concepts & Framework”. Therefore, as we approach the conclusion of our study, we would like to take this opportunity to share our reflections on the initial assumptions. Throughout this journey, we have gained valuable insights that allow us to offer a nuanced perspective.
Our initial assumption was that leaders have complete autonomy in determining their learning and participation in activities, acting as individuals. However, upon analyzing the findings, it becomes evident that the leaders’ “self” in their decision-making regarding activity participation is only partial, as their involvement is influenced by external factors and limitations within the context. Activities are driven by the interactions of individuals in their context and exhibit a dynamic relationship.

Furthermore, we have assumed that leaders practice self-development activities with the intention to expand their personal leadership skills or to widen their frames of references. As introduced earlier, Reichard et al. (2017) have argued that organizations can help to translate a leader's intention into developmental behaviors. However, we now assume that intentions are often shaped by the environment and are likely not only explicitly focused on developing as a leader, but also on coping with specific situations in the organization that require adaptation. This is consistent with the view of Padilla & Gaffal (2017), who argue that interactions with the environment determine and shape the content of intentions. Again, this highlights the limited factor of the “self”.

Moreover, we presumed that the context influences the self-development activities of a leader. However, it is important to recognize that the self-development activities of a leader have an impact on other individuals and the overall organizational setting. Leaders, in this sense, become an integral part of the context, either as supporting or hindering factors. This realization emphasizes the significance of understanding one’s own contribution to this dynamic. It prompts us to reflect on how leaders can actively contribute to being a supportive factor for others and shape the context in which self-development is practiced.

It was further assumed that the organizational environment can support the efforts of leaders toward self-development activities. However, a more accurate understanding is that the organizational context not only supports but actually shapes these efforts and activities. It is the collective of individuals within the organization who drive these activities. Therefore, the focus should be on the people within the organization who contribute to the processes
and initiatives, rather than viewing the organization as a separate entity that solely provides these resources.

Additionally, it became more apparent than initially thought in the findings and discussion part how much the context of the organizations, in this case the technology sector, shapes the leaders’ activities. As stated in the findings and discussion, respondents were in a rapidly changing environment that requires acceptance of uncertainty, flexibility, autonomy, and continuous learning which influenced their activities.

The findings and subsequent discussion have raised doubts regarding our initial assumptions and the theories employed. Consequently, revisiting the theoretical framework, as depicted in Figure 1: Theoretical Framework, is warranted. However, slight modifications are required to account for the interplay between managerial activities, the context, and the leaders themselves, who are integral components of the context.

Conclusion

6.1 Answer to the Research Question

In this part, we concisely answer our research question: How does the organizational setting relate to the managerial leader's intentional self-development activities? The discussion showed that leaders cannot practice self-development in isolation within the organizational setting. Instead, they rely on external factors and are intricately interconnected with their environment. The leaders and their activities are not only influenced by their supportive or hindering surroundings but also actively contribute to shaping them. Simultaneously, constraints are not solely perceived as hindering and vice versa. In light of the aspects discussed, a clear dynamic emerges. It becomes apparent that leaders cannot exclusively rely on themselves for self-development and are heavily reliant on the support and involvement of others. This dynamic is evident in the study, as inexperienced leaders learn from their more experienced counterparts, who, in turn, have the freedom to engage in a broader range
of developmental activities. However, alongside their own growth, experienced leaders also shoulder the responsibility of developing others within the organization.

The organizational setting with its supporting and constraining factors relates incrementally to the managerial leader’s intentional self-development activities. The context is even related to such an extent that the organizational setting is needed to perform activities. Surprisingly, the self-development activities also were found to relate to the setting. Meaning both contribute to a reciprocal process: the dynamic.

6.2 Limitations
This thesis has certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Due to the time constraint of completing this report in under nine weeks, we had to make specific choices and interview a limited number of eleven leaders. Typically, leadership development studies require several years to conduct, including longitudinal studies. Therefore, this thesis represents only a fraction of what could be achieved in terms of research. Given the time limitation, we focused our study on one specific sector: the tech industry. The interviews were conducted with leaders from that industry with a focus on intentional self-development activities, based on the literature available. The available literature helped us guide and simultaneously limit the dimensions to be examined. Examining the theoretical concepts and framework was done by getting a practical perspective of leaders in interviews, which was the sole perspective and method used in this research. Finally, it is important to note that our study did not assess how the interviewed leaders are perceived by their followers. Therefore, it is possible that certain aspects of their behavior may have been idealized. Our focus was primarily on understanding leaders’ self-development activities and the factors influencing them. When the context would be incorporated into the research by assessing the organizational environment with the people shaping it, a more comprehensive study using other methods would be required.

6.3 Contributions
First and foremost, the findings of this thesis urged us to critically examine the concept of self-development. This has led us to question whether self-development activities can be
executed independently. The question that emerges is: Is self-development an individual pursuit or a collaborative process influenced by the environment and interactions with others? Questioning the concept of self-development allows for a new discussion to be opened up. Based on our findings, we assert that self-development cannot be achieved solely through individual efforts. The significance of the contextual factors has proven to be more substantial than initially presumed, challenging the existing literature in this area. Our position is that the environment and surrounding circumstances play a crucial role in shaping and facilitating self-development. Therefore, this outcome is something that is not yet represented in the literature. Furthermore, this study brought a new practical perspective on self-development activities. We have had the privilege of listening to the voices of leaders, who serve as the embodiment of “self” in leader self-development. Through their valuable perspectives, we have gained new and insightful understandings of their daily experiences, the factors they perceive as supportive or constraining, and their practical applicability to self-development activities.

6.4 Practical Implications
The findings of this study have practical implications for organizations seeking to enhance self-development activities. Recognizing the importance of context becomes even more vital, as this research highlights its crucial role in shaping and influencing self-development. Therefore, organizations should take these insights into consideration when designing and implementing strategies to support and foster the self-development of their leaders. Firstly, it is crucial for organizations to recognize the role they can potentially play in supporting self-development. When we refer to organizations, we specifically mean the individuals who hold decision-making authority and are responsible for facilitating development within these organizational constructs. This emphasizes the significance of organizational leaders and their active involvement in fostering an environment that promotes and encourages self-development. Secondly, organizations can focus on providing understanding and freedom for individualized approaches. In these individualized approaches, a major difference between experienced and inexperienced leaders was identified. Junior and senior leaders need different assistance when it comes to development and possibilities to engage in self-
development. Thirdly, organizations can prioritize the identification and resolution of supportive and constraining factors to establish an optimal learning environment for managerial leaders. By gaining a deep understanding of the factors that either facilitate or impede self-development, organizations can take proactive measures to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages ongoing learning and personal growth among their leaders. Lastly, by disseminating this research and knowledge, leaders have the opportunity to learn from the activities of their peers. Thus, providing them with a flexible framework for learning and development. This knowledge transfer, sharing of insights, experiences, and best practices proves particularly beneficial for inexperienced leaders, who can draw valuable lessons from the practices and experiences of more seasoned leaders. Furthermore, individual leaders are urged to realize that they are part of the organizational setting and have the possibility to be a supportive (or hindering) factor for their employees and their practices of development.

6.5 Future Research

As established previously, in alignment with the inquiry conducted by Day et al. (2014), it is essential to delve deeper into the daily lives of leaders and conduct further observations. Considering the time constraints and demanding workloads faced by managerial leaders, it would be valuable to invest more research efforts in this area. Doing so could contribute to a more nuanced and contextually grounded approach to supporting leaders in their self-development journeys. Furthermore, this study had an idealized perspective toward leaders. Nevertheless, leadership is constructed with followers and how followers perceive their leaders. Contrary to positive, inspiring leaders, leaders can also be perceived as destructive. Thus, this could be another avenue for further research.

Additionally, this study highlights a gap in the literature regarding constraining factors. Through the examination of the data, it is evident that there are additional factors that hinder self-development. Therefore, further research is warranted to identify and explore these constraining factors, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding and development of the concept of self-development. Directly linked to that are the constraining and supporting
factors of an individual. Self-development is contingent upon the presence of an individual, and interestingly, the interviews revealed instances where the self was perceived as a hindrance. Exploring this aspect would enhance the understanding of the concept of self-development, given its wide-ranging and profound significance in various academic disciplines. A further study could be conducted with a focus on intentions and how one's environment shapes the intentions.

One of the key insights derived from this research is that there are major differences between inexperienced and experienced leaders with regard to self-development activities. This finding not only contributes to our understanding but also highlights a significant area for future research exploration. Simultaneously, the context plays a vital role in self-development. To gain new insights, it would be valuable to explore different industries and organizational settings, such as corporates and scale-ups, which offer distinct environments and dynamics.
References


Dr. Alan Shaw. (2020, April 9). Developing Semi-Structured Interview Questions: A Deductive Approach [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXhO8gGuX0Q


Appendix 1 - Interview Guidelines

To give you a better insight in our topic of self-development and its practices we will shortly describe it to you: “A self-development activity is a voluntary activity that you deliberately perform for the purpose of learning something new for your job or improving your job skills or knowledge. Self-development activities are NOT mandatory or required by your organization or supervisor. Leader self-development activities consist of any activity that you engage in to better your skills as a leader. Your job requires you to continually help and guide others; think about what skills you need to do this. Any activity that you engage in to further those skills would be considered leader self-development” (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010, p.671).

1. Could you shortly introduce yourself and what your current role looks like (direct reports e.g.)?
2. What does leadership mean to you? How do you incorporate this into your daily life?

3. Intentional Self-development Activities: We provided you with a definition of self-development practices earlier, how do you work with that as a leader in your role?
   a. Managing own learning: How do you learn new skills necessary for your role as a leader?
   b. Stretch assignments: What sort of challenges do you engage in to get out of your comfort zone? What additional tasks do you do outside of your role? Why do you do that?
      Follow up: Expansion of duties, volunteering for additional tasks, creating and leading training.
      Follow up: What is your intention in engaging in these activities? How do you learn from these activities?
   c. Reflection: What role does reflection play in your daily working life as a leader?
      Follow up: How do you make sure that you reflect on a regular basis?
   d. Seeking feedback: How do you assure that you receive feedback?

4. Supportive factors within the organization: What in your organization helps you to initiate self-development activities?
   a. Feedback processes: How do feedback processes help you to develop in your role as a leader?
      Follow up: What do you do with this feedback?
Follow up: How does feedback help you to take further actions toward your development in your role?

b. *Supervisor behavior:* How does your direct manager influence you in your development as a leader?

Follow up: How does your direct manager help you when you have to deal with a challenging task?

c. *Networks:* How does your organization provide access to networks?

Follow up: Why do you decide to make use of the access to interact with different people?

d. *Organizational Platform:* How does your organization provide you with the opportunity to learn from others?

Follow up: What is the organizational platform used to learn from others’ successes or mistakes?

e. *Formal leader development programs:* How do leader development programs help you to develop in your role as a leader?

5. *Constraining factors within the organization:* What in the organization hinders you from initiating self-development activities?

a. *Failure & mistakes:* How is dealt with failure and mistakes?

b. *Limited promotion opportunities:* How do limited promotion opportunities hinder you?

c. *Available resources - time:* How does limited time hinder you?

d. *Available resources - budget:* How does a limited budget hinder you?