

Leadership as a contributing factor to the forming of High-Performance Teams in Startups.

Master Thesis

Submitted in Fulfillment of the Degree International Management and Leadership

Master of Arts

University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg

International Management and Leadership

Submitted to

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Dornbirn, 07.07.2023

Dedication

“Be a goldfish.” Ted Lasso

Abstract

Leadership as a contributing factor to the forming of high-performance teams in startups.

This study aims to address the research gap surrounding the role of leadership in the formation of high-performance teams within startup companies. While there is existing research on high-performing teams, limited attention has been given to leadership in this environment. To bridge this gap, the study combines a literature review and qualitative analysis through semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders in startups, with the goal of providing practical guidance for startup executives based on the research findings. The study uncovers key aspects of leadership in high-performance teams, emphasizing the importance of skills such as motivation and support for team members, fostering psychological safety and trust, and effectively managing uncertainty. In addition to resource constraints and high expectations, the study sheds light on the challenges faced by leaders in startup and high-performance team environments, particularly the blurring of traditional leadership roles as team members seek autonomy and decision-making authority. These findings present opportunities for future research to explore this progressive leadership style.

Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of leadership dynamics within high-performance teams operating in the context of startups. It offers valuable insights that can help startup executives navigate the complexities of leadership and foster the development of successful and high-performing teams.

Keywords in English: leadership, high-performance teams, startups, entrepreneurship, organizational development

Kurzreferat

Führung als beitragender Faktor für die Bildung von hochleistungsfähigen Teams in Startups.

Diese Studie zielt darauf ab, die Forschungslücke rund um die Rolle der Führung bei der Bildung von hochleistungsfähigen Teams innerhalb von Startup-Unternehmen zu beheben. Obwohl es bestehende Forschungen über hochleistungsfähige Teams gibt, wurde der Führung in diesem Umfeld nur begrenzte Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt. Um diese Lücke zu überbrücken, kombiniert die Studie eine Rezension der relevanten Literatur und qualitative Analyse durch halbstrukturierte Interviews mit vielfältigen Stakeholdern in Startups, mit dem Ziel, auf der Grundlage der Forschungsergebnisse praktische Leitlinien für Startup-Manager bereitzustellen. Die Studie enthüllt wichtige Aspekte der Führung in hochleistungsfähigen Teams sowie unterstreicht die Bedeutung von Fähigkeiten wie Motivation und Unterstützung für Teammitglieder oder des Umgangs mit den Unsicherheiten des Startup-Lebens. Neben Ressourcenknappheit und hohen Erwartungen beleuchtet die Studie die Herausforderungen, denen Führungskräfte in Start-up- und Hochleistungs-Teamumgebungen ausgesetzt sind. Insbesondere auf die Verschmelzung traditioneller Führungsrollen, da Teammitglieder Autonomie und Entscheidungsgewalt suchen. Diese Ergebnisse präsentieren Möglichkeiten für zukünftige Forschung, um diesen progressiven Führungsstil zu erforschen.

Insgesamt trägt diese Studie zu unserem Verständnis der Führungsdynamik innerhalb hochleistungsfähiger Teams bei, die im Kontext von Startups tätig sind. Es bietet wertvolle Erkenntnisse, die Startup-Managern helfen können, die Komplexität der Führung zu navigieren und die Entwicklung erfolgreicher und leistungsstarker Teams zu fördern.

Keywords in German: Führung, Hochleistungs-Teams, Startups, Entrepreneurship, Organisationsentwicklung

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1 Introduction

When individuals come together to collaborate as a team, great things can happen: synergies are created, ideas are evolved and often developed into world-changing innovations. However, not all teamwork makes the dream work, as many businesses suffer from low productivity and efficiency. These issues led the tech giant Google to investigate what makes a perfect team and therefore started a research project called Project Aristotle. The company spent millions of dollars to measure and analyze almost every aspect of its employees' lives: from who people eat their lunch with, to which traits the best managers share, their People Operations team did not leave out one thing on their quest to find all the components that make a perfect team, and had great success with it (Duhigg, 2016). Since then, more and more businesses started focusing on how to model their teams after the tech giant's example. However, this desire to build high-performance teams does not always work out as intended and the reasons for this are as diverse as their approaches to building the perfect team.

High-Performance teams, a buzzword one can hear and read everywhere nowadays, seem to be the answer. High-Performance teams are teams that outperform all expectations and although there has been vast research into the inner workings of these kind of teams, there is one conclusion that stands out the most: high-performance teams cannot be created, high-performance teams simply appear when all conditions are right (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Interestingly, the topic of leadership in high-performance teams is not as well researched as one would assume. When it comes to leadership, usually there is an extensive amount of literature to be found. Research has drawn various conclusions on leadership in high-performance teams but none of them have come to a compelling outcome, which led to assume that leadership is the missing link as a contributing factor to the forming of high-performance teams.

Thus, the aim of this thesis is to investigate leadership and its contribution to the forming of high-performance teams in startups. The reason for limiting the research to startup companies, is that both leadership and teams are critical to a startups success or failure. Additionally, the global startup economy created \$3 trillion in value in 2019 worldwide, which is a level that is comparable to the GDP of a G7 economy (Startup Genome, 2020). Therefore, taking a look into the inner workings of these highly innovative organizations, aspiring to be the next Google or Facebook, is a relevant field for research. Consequently, it will be aimed to answer the

following research question: *How does leadership contribute to the forming of high-performance teams in startups?*

By conducting an initial literature review, it is aimed to address the research gap in the literature related to startups, leadership and high-performance teams. In doing so, the study is designed to qualitatively analyze these topics through carrying out semi-structured interviews to learn of three perspectives: investors and executive coaches, founders and leaders of startups, and lastly their followers, the employees. Finally drawing from the findings of the previous research, advice will be provided, leading to practical recommendations for startup leaders to apply in everyday working life.

2 Entrepreneurship

“An entrepreneur is someone who jumps of a cliff and builds a plane, while falling towards the ground.”¹

Historically speaking, the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1942) delivered one of the most compelling definitions of entrepreneurship of the 20th century:

“We have seen that the function of an entrepreneur is to reform or to revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention or, more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity [...] This kind of activity is primarily responsible for the recurrent “prosperities” that revolutionize the economic organism and the recurrent “recessions” that are due to the disequilibrating impact of the new products or methods. To undertake new things is difficult and constitutes a distinct economic function [...] This function does not essentially consist in either inventing anything or otherwise creating the conditions which the enterprise exploits. It consists of getting things done.”

In their book “Entrepreneurship”, Freiling and Harima (2019) describe entrepreneurship as the construction up until the establishment of a new company from nothing so to say. With this they describe the what (the object), the how (the method and stile) and the where (the context). However, they point out that entrepreneurship exclusively refers to the establishment of new companies. They further identify the mode of leadership as the primary focus of entrepreneurship, which they divide into exploration and exploitation, drawing a clear line to Schumpeter’s definition. Exploration is defined as the establishment of something new and exploitation as the skimming of potential. Especially during the early phases, entrepreneurship is characterized by a dominant exploration component, as the new next big thing must be created at first. The more this idea matures, the more exploration and exploitation meet on eye level. In short, Freiling and Harima established the following definition:

“Entrepreneurship consists of the proactive composition of enterprising responsibilities, both explorative and exploitative in nature, for the creation and implementation of new business foundations. Chronologically, entrepreneurship starts with the forming of new business foundations and ends with the establishment in the market.”

Drucker (1986) defined entrepreneurship in a simple and concise form as business startup activities. On the contrary, Fritsch and Wywrich (2021) describe entrepreneurship in a broader

¹ Personal Communication with the author during a workshop in March 2023

fashion. Entrepreneurship, to them, stands for certain characteristics and actions such as innovation, creativity, enterprising initiatives, and the willingness to take economic risks. It construes those forms of entrepreneurialism that constitute a driving force for economic development. Furthermore, these characteristics are mostly related to new and young businesses. Also referring to Schumpeter and his definition on entrepreneurship, Fritsch and Wyrwich (2021) deliver concrete examples for fundamental changes and innovation in history such as the introduction of the letterpress in the 15th century.

Furthermore, entrepreneurship can be defined with the individual characteristics and actions of the entrepreneur itself. Such characteristics may be: Alertness and opportunity recognition, creativity, pro-activity and drive, introduction of new ideas, the quest for (self) empowerment, autonomous responsibility, assertiveness and finally, the willingness to take risks (Fritsch & Wyrwich, 2021). Thus, an entrepreneur is to be seen as an adaptor of change, caused by an immutable environment (Fritsch & Wyrwich, 2021).

2.1 Startups

There are many definitions for startup companies. Baldrige & Curry (2022) describe startups as “young companies founded to develop a unique product or service, bring it to market and make it irresistible and irreplaceable for customers”.

In their book “The Startup Owner’s Manual”, Blank & Dorf (2022) defined a startup as a “temporary organization in search of a scalable, repeatable, profitable business model”. They further argue that it is the founders’ job to translate their vision into facts to mature their company from a faith-based enterprise into a fact-based customer centric enterprise.

Grant (2022) formulates the following key points that define a startup: they are companies in their first stages of operations. They are founded by one or more entrepreneurs, who believe there is demand for a product or service they want to develop. As a result, these companies are financially characterized to bring in only limited revenue but demand high costs. Thus, startups are often in need of external capital from various types of investors.

Due to the high relevancy of external funding for a startup company’s beginnings, it is necessary to describe the various existing funding rounds and their characteristics.

Stage	Round	Team Size	Typical Investors	Amount of \$ raised	Valuation
1	Pre-Seed Funding – “the earliest stage”	very small, often founders-only	Founders, Family, Friends, Angel Investors, Incubators	< \$ 500,000	Difficult to determine, as this is a relatively new part of the startup lifecycle
2	Seed Funding – “from an idea to the first steps”	Minimally viable team	Family, Friends Angel Investors, Incubators, Venture Capital Firms	\$500,000 to \$ 2 million	\$3 to \$6 million
3	Series A – “proving a great idea will make a great company”	Core team	Venture Capital Firms, Angel Investors	\$2 to 15 million	\$10 to \$15 million
4	Series B – “product/market fit and ready to expand”	Extended core team	Venture Capital Firms	\$7 to 10 million	\$30 to \$60 million
5	Series C – “reaching the international market”	extended team, including solid leadership team and senior key executives	Venture Capital Firms, Private Equity Firms, Banks, Hedge Funds	an average of \$26 million	\$100 to \$120 million

Table 1: The Startup Funding Rounds

Source: (Rutan, 2023); (DocSend Startup Index, 2020)

Visible.vc, a platform launched by a group of founders supporting other startups with updates and insights into funding and investor relations, created an overview of the major startup stages:



Figure 1: Average Round Size by Stage

Source: (Visible.vc, 2023)

For the majority of startups Series C is the last funding round, as many then prepare for an exit or an Initial Public Offering.

2.1.1 Unicorns

Unicorns is a term for startup companies, which are privately held but reached a valuation of over \$ 1 billion (Lee, 2013). At the time of writing the article, Lee compiled a list of 39 companies including names like Facebook, LinkedIn, AirBnB and Uber.

By conducting a thorough investigation into these unicorn startups, a series of common points could be determined for companies to reach unicorn status:

1. Utilization of social media to amplify their message and impact on their target audience.
2. A customer centric business strategy lifting user experience to the core of all business operations (from ideation to manufacturing to after sales).
3. Following a “get big fast” strategy by following internationalization and having a scalable business model.
4. Employing a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural team leading to disruptive ideas.
5. Embracing uncertainty and developing extraordinary resilience (Iberdrola.com, 2023).

In 2022, the list of unicorns had already grown to almost 900 worldwide (Hubspot.com, 2022). Although, there are no magic recipes that ensure becoming a unicorn startup, however, there are various stages and steps many existing unicorn companies followed: finding your business's niche market and the ability to rapidly scale were two that most unicorns mastered (Hubspot.com, 2022). By being able to do so a downright boom of unicorn startups can be seen over the last 10 years:

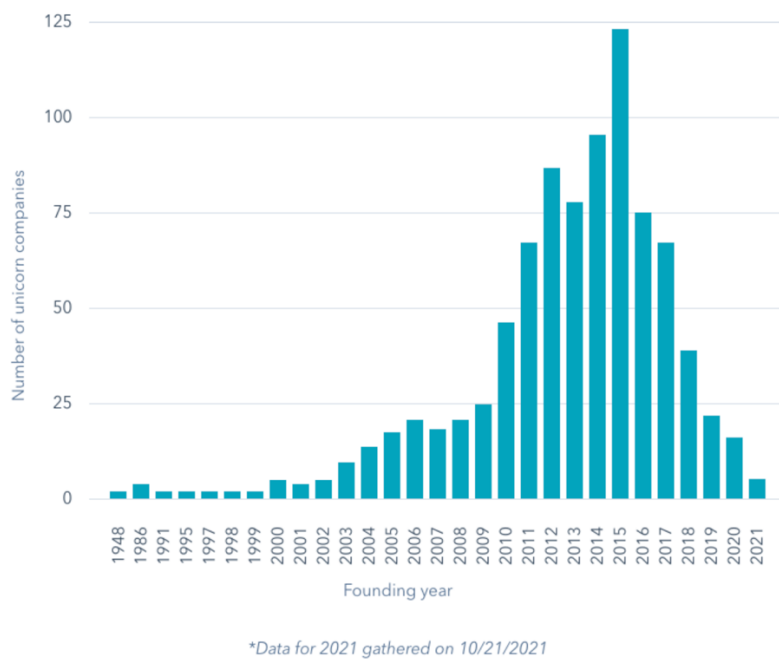


Figure 2: Number of unicorn companies per founding year
 Source: Hubspot.com, 2022

Analyzing the success of these companies, also led to the analysis of their leaders. The uniting trait for many of them first and foremost is a passion for technology and solving problems. Besides this, several other traits, not related to technology could be determined such as the ability to network and to seize opportunities. Furthermore, these leaders demonstrated the ability to understand success as a place beyond what a single person can achieve and an ability of utmost focus. Finally, these leaders recognized that creating solely great code will not ultimately lead to success but creating a kernel essentially acting as the heart of the business (Santilli, 2023).

2.2 Success factors for startups

Operating a successful startup is a complex endeavor. Thus, several factors have been described to contribute to a startup companies' success:

1. **Innovative and Differentiated Offering:** Successful startups often bring innovative and differentiated products, services, or solutions to the market. They identify gaps or pain points in existing offerings and develop unique value propositions that resonate with customers. Disruptive ideas and the ability to solve problems in new ways can give startups a competitive advantage (Aminova & Marchi, 2021).
2. **Market Opportunity:** Startups need to operate in a market with significant growth potential and demand. A successful startup identifies a target market that is large enough to support its growth aspirations. Thorough market research and analysis help startups understand customer needs, market dynamics, and potential opportunities for growth (fastercapital.com, 2023).
3. **Strong Value Proposition:** Startups must have a compelling value proposition that clearly communicates the benefits and value their offering brings to customers. A strong value proposition addresses customers' pain points, provides a unique advantage over competitors, and clearly articulates the value customers will derive from using the product or service (Wouters et al., 2018).
4. **Scalable Business Model:** Scalability is a critical factor for startup success. A scalable business model allows a startup to grow rapidly without proportional increases in costs or resources. Startups should have a plan to expand their operations, reach more customers, and generate revenue at an accelerated pace. This often involves leveraging technology, automation, and efficient processes (Picken, 2017).
5. **Strong Leadership and Team:** A capable and visionary leadership team is vital for startup success. Leaders with industry expertise, strategic thinking, and the ability to inspire and motivate the team can guide the company effectively (Gupta et al., 2004; Zaech & Baldegger, 2017). Startups also need a talented and dedicated team that is aligned with the vision, possesses relevant skills, and can execute plans with enthusiasm (Lopez Hernandez et al., 2018).
6. **Adequate Funding and Financial Management:** Adequate funding is crucial for startups to develop their product, scale operations, and penetrate the market. Successful startups secure funding from various sources, such as angel investors, venture capital

firms, or crowdfunding (Rutan, 2023). Moreover, effective financial management, including budgeting, cost control, and revenue generation, is essential to sustain and grow the business (Sreenivasan & Suresh, 2023).

7. **Customer Focus and User Feedback:** Successful startups prioritize understanding customer needs and delivering a great customer experience. They actively seek and listen to customer feedback to refine their offerings, improve user experience, and adapt their strategies. Building strong relationships with early customers and iterating based on their input helps startups gain traction and loyalty (Wouters et al., 2018).
8. **Agility and Adaptability:** Startups operate in a dynamic and rapidly changing environment. The ability to adapt to market shifts, industry trends, and customer demands is crucial. Successful startups are agile, open to experimentation, and quick to pivot when necessary. They continuously iterate, learn from failures, and refine their strategies to stay relevant and seize opportunities (Shirazee, 2023).

It's important to note that startup success is not guaranteed, and each startup's path to success can be unique. However, incorporating these elements into the startup's strategy and operations can significantly increase the chances of achieving success.

2.3 Leadership in startups

Leadership is crucial in startup companies as it sets the vision and direction, manages uncertainty and risk, builds and motivates the team, manages resources effectively, facilitates fundraising and investor relations, drives adaptability and agility, and builds partnerships and networks. Effective leadership is essential for the survival and success of startup ventures in their early stages and throughout their growth journey. As entrepreneurial leadership is a key driving force behind the creation, development, and success of startups, it is appropriate to further discuss.

2.3.1 Entrepreneurial Leadership

In their research, Cogliser and Birgham (2004) noticed similarities between how leaders articulate their visions to inspire followers and how entrepreneurs motivate key venture

stakeholders. Furthermore, they determined that the way leaders influence others towards reaching specific goals, mirrors how entrepreneurs tactically appeal investors for resources. They also found that leaders, who are managing creative individuals, require the same skills as entrepreneurs operating in highly innovative environments. Finally, they established purposeful planning as key factor for both leaders in highly complex organizations and entrepreneurs operating in dynamic environments.

Reid et al. (2018) consider entrepreneurs to be responsible for the discovery, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities. Furthermore, ensuring successful entrepreneurship requires the effective leadership of resources, processes, and people. They determined five key areas at the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship:

1. Vision: entrepreneurial chief-executives communicate their vision to key stakeholders and are equally able to establish objectives which directly motivate and drive both increases in annual sales and employee growth.
2. Influence: having the ability to influence others is fundamental to both leaders and entrepreneurs. They must influence others to mobilize resources for launching new ventures and convince both internal and external parties that an opportunity is worth pursuing.
3. Creativity and Innovation: the creation of innovative ideas and methods is at the core of entrepreneurship. However, it is central for successful leadership too. Both entrepreneurs and leaders must act creatively and recognize innovative opportunities and create innovative businesses and products. At the same time, being able to promote creativity and innovation among followers will lead to positive organizational performance outcomes.
4. Planning: Planning was identified as one of the critical cognitive skills that shape leadership performance, as it enhances effectiveness by mitigating potential prejudices that could affect decision-making processes. Providing a clear path to reaching predefined goals enables leaders to direct followers' behavior and actions. Similarly, an entrepreneur's ability to plan and face uncertainty can have positive impacts on the overall business performance.
5. Dispositional and cognitive approaches: Individual differences in beliefs, attitudes and personality attributes may impact performance related outcomes in both the entrepreneurial and leadership process. These differences can influence how individuals cognitively process experiences and how these then can change future behaviors.

Audretsch and Tamvada (2022) argue that a critical responsibility of entrepreneurship is leadership. The core function of an entrepreneur is to lead the identification, creation, and commercialization of opportunities. As a result, they conceptualized the “TRY” leadership model for entrepreneurs:

Leadership	Trust	Respect	You
Inside the organization	In team members and employees Becoming trustworthy to internal stakeholders	For team members and employees	Asking team members and employees “what can I do for you?”
Outside the organization	Becoming trustworthy to external stakeholders	For external stakeholders	Asking external stakeholders “what can I do for you?”

Table 2: TRY Leadership for Entrepreneurs

Source: (Audretsch & Tamvada, 2022)

TRY leadership for entrepreneurs views leadership through stakeholder theory. Explaining TRY leadership within the organization, they argue that trust affects both speed and cost. High trust leads to higher dividends through improved employee performance. Furthermore, they point out how trust will develop a sense of accountability within the organization. Combining trust with respect for all team members will lead to an increased organizational commitment. This kind of supportive leadership acknowledges how bottlenecks and overload can stop employees from making their best contributions. By shifting the focus to “what can an organization (or I) do for you?”, leaders enable their employees’ intrinsic motivation. Thus, the TRY leadership model creates a culture of responsibility by enhancing relationships that intrinsically motivate team members to increase their performance. Through facilitating the TRY leadership model outside the organization, the entrepreneur takes initiatives that convince external stakeholders of their trustworthiness. Additionally, by demonstrating respect towards external stakeholders and their needs, the entrepreneur gains respect which in turn will lead to positive externalities.

Startups lacking a CEO who creates and circulates a vision, coaches and inspires employees and does not intervene in business processes and procedures are more likely to fail (Zaech & Baldegger, 2017). As the development of structures and culture is time intensive, it requires

the constant interaction of the founder-CEO and its employees. Their study (2017) indicates that there is not one single type of leadership behavior to ensure success. Rather leaders need to be able to utilize different behaviors and evaluate their effectiveness depending on the respective situation and context. Thus, they conclude that entrepreneurial leaders need to demonstrate a wide variety of skills on top of the basic competences needed for founding and running a business. As leadership is an interpersonal process, it requires more sophisticated abilities than developing a product.

Kuratko & Hodgetts (2007) created an integrated definition of entrepreneurial leadership:

“Entrepreneurship is a dynamic process of vision, change, and creation. It requires an application of energy and passion towards the creation and implementation of new ideas and creative solutions. Essential ingredients include the willingness to take calculated risks – in terms of time, equity, or career; the ability to formulate an effective venture team; the creative skill to marshal the needed resources; the fundamental skill of building a solid business plan; and, finally, the vision to recognize opportunity where others see chaos, contradiction, and confusion.”

Kuratko (2007) goes on to describe the Entrepreneurial Revolution that has happened throughout the world to be more powerful to the 21st century than the Industrial Revolution was to the 20th century. Entrepreneurs will carry on to critically contribute to the economic growth, facilitated by their leadership, innovation, R&D effectiveness, their job creation, productivity, and formation of new industries (Kuratko & Hodgetts, 2007). It is furthermore paramount to note, that entrepreneurship itself, is an integrated concept pervading our society in an innovative manner. In its essence entrepreneurial leadership can be described with the innovative spirit that can be found in every individual (Kuratko, 2007).

However, Kuratko (2007) points out that the usually positively perceived behaviors of entrepreneurial leaders can become liabilities too. Depending on how entrepreneurs confront risks can potentially lead to negative outcomes. Moreover, the entrepreneurial ego is an important component that could be exhibited to the extreme, such as a general sense of distrust, an overbearing need for control or unrealistic optimism (Kuratko & Hodgetts, 2007). Additionally, the leader’s behavior serves as an example that others will follow (Kuratko, 2007).

According to Gupta et al. (2004) entrepreneurial leadership involves the fusion of concepts of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial orientation and entrepreneurial management with

leadership. This emphasizes taking a strategic approach to entrepreneurship as it can form the foundation for competitive advantage and technological growth in all types of organizations that are oriented towards leadership and excellence. Arguing that organizational context, components of transformational, team building and value-based leadership that are relevant for entrepreneurial leadership are those that enable a leader to meet the entrepreneurial challenges, can only be done by leaders who have the ability to

1. Extract exceptional effort and commitment from stakeholders.
2. Convince stakeholders that they can achieve goals.
3. Articulate a compelling organizational vision.
4. Promise their effort will lead to extraordinary outcomes.
5. Persevere in the face of uncertainty and change.

Gupta et al. (2004) then go on to create an Entrepreneurial Leadership Model explaining the roles and attributes for entrepreneurial leaders :

Roles	Attributes	Explanation
Framing the challenge (specifying highly challenging but realistic outcomes for the cast of actors to accomplish)	Performance oriented Ambitious Informed	Sets high standards of performance Sets high goals, works hard Knowledgeable, aware of information
Absorbing uncertainty (taking the burden of responsibility for the future)	Has extra visionary insight Foresight Confidence Builder	Intuitive Has a vision and imagination of the future Anticipates possible future events Instills others with confidence by showing confidence in them
Path clearing (negotiating opposition and clearing the path for scenario enactment)	Diplomatic Effective bargainer Convincing Encouraging	Skilled at interpersonal relations, tactful Can negotiate effectively, able to make transactions with others on favorable terms Unusual ability to persuade others of their viewpoint Gives courage, confidence, or hope through reassuring and advising
Building commitment (building an inspired common purpose)	Inspirational Enthusiastic Team Builder Improvement-oriented	Inspires emotions, beliefs, values and behaviors of others, inspires others to be motivated to work hard Demonstrates and imparts strong positive emotions for work Able to induce group members to work together Seeks continues performance improvement
Specifying limits (building a common understanding and agreement of what can and cannot be done)	Integrator Intellectually stimulating Positive Decisive	Integrates people or things into cohesive, working wholes Encourage others to use their mind – challenges beliefs, stereotypes, and attitudes of others Generally optimistic and confident Makes decisions firmly and quickly

Table 3: Entrepreneurial Leadership Model

Source: (Gupta et al., 2004)

Leitch and Volery (2017) criticize many scholars' approaches to tie entrepreneurial leadership too closely to the individual at hand. They rather see entrepreneurial leadership at the intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership and consider it a new paradigm. First, they argue that from the early beginning of a new company founders must exhibit leadership in order for their business to take form. Second, contrary to the “great person” school perspective

promoted by many researchers, Leith and Volery (2017) note that most founders and new entrepreneurs have only limited leadership experience and usually will learn on the job. Third, the entrepreneur plays a significant role in their business and thus, their personal experiences, emotions, thoughts, and beliefs are likely to have great impact on the way they influence members of their team.

In conclusion, entrepreneurial leadership refers to the unique style of leadership exhibited by entrepreneurs, who are individuals who identify opportunities, take risks, and create new ventures. It combines the entrepreneurial spirit with effective leadership practices to drive innovation and involves visionary thinking, passion, resourcefulness, adaptability, empowerment, and a focus on ethical and socially responsible business practices. Understanding Entrepreneurial Leadership as a new paradigm, like Leith and Volery (2017) suggest, poses an interesting new perspective to be further researched.

3 Teams

Teams can occur in various settings and contexts. Wherever collaboration and collective efforts are required to achieve a common goal, teams exist. In the workplace teams are common and an essential component of organizations. They are designed to accomplish various tasks and goals, which range from execution to solving specific problems. Utilizing teams in the workplace offer many advantages to organizations, including improved problem-solving, diversified perspectives and increased collaboration.

In their book „The Wisdom of Teams. Creating the High-Performance Organization“, Katzenbach and Douglas define a team as

„... a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.“

They follow up by describing each component of their definition. Although not as essential as the other components, they argue that they decided to specify a team as a small number of people, as most of the teams they encountered during their research consisted of less than ten people. Besides, the more people come together the more difficult it becomes for them to interact constructively. Furthermore, larger groups are more likely to develop herd behavior and tend to revert to formal hierarchical structures (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

To be successful, teams must develop the right mix of skills, which are divided into three categories: technical or functional expertise, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and interpersonal skills. It is noteworthy that Katzenbach and Smith found in their research that most teams do not have all these skills from the beginning and highlight the power of teams with regards to learning and development. The focus on performance leads to a quick identification of gaps and development needs, and their shared sense of commitment leads to a healthy fear of failure accelerating the desire for improvement. Once teams learn to utilize their individual accountability and turn it into a common understanding, a culture of learning is reinforced (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

A common and meaningful purpose is what can be considered as the glue that keeps a team together. Excellent teams invest a significant amount of time and effort into developing and shaping a purpose that is at the same time both collectively and individually appealing. An integral part of the purpose are performance goals. Being able to break down broad ideas into specific and measurable performance goals is essential to building a common and meaningful

purpose. A valuable side-effect of clearly defined performance goals is the facilitation of clear communication and constructive conflict within the team. At this moment it is also important to emphasize the reciprocal relationship of a team's purpose and performance goals. While the latter enables to measure progress, the former provides the necessary emotional bond (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Only through developing a common approach, teams will be able to accomplish their purpose. This approach must include both a social and an economic and administrative aspect. Finally, Katzenbach and Smith define mutual accountability as the promises individuals and teams make to themselves and others. These promises are what in the end lead to trust and commitment.

Sundstrom, DeMeuse, and Futrell define a team as an interdependent collection of individuals who share responsibility for specific outcomes for their organizations. Teams depend on the same information, resources and skills, and their members combine their efforts to achieve a common goal (Sundstrom et al., 1990). Thompson summarized the Five Key Characteristics of a team as:

1. Teams exist to achieve a shared goal.
2. Team members are interdependent regarding some common goal.
3. Teams are bound and stable over time.
4. Team members have the authority to manage their own work and internal processes.
5. Teams operate in a social system (Thompson, 2004).

Moreover, four different types of teams are defined: Manager-Led Teams, Self-Managing Teams, Self-Directing Teams, Self-Designing Teams and Self-Governing Teams (Thompson, 2004).

Kriz and Nöbauer (2008) describe teamwork as an action which is performed meaningfully based on relevant guidelines. These guidelines permit increased flexibility, self-guidance, autonomy and individual responsibility. Thus, the team takes ownership of all operational aspects, such as planning, decision-making and execution, and can develop self-organized processes and procedures for fulfilling all tasks. Subsequently, the entire organization will undergo a transformation process. Following Clutterbuck (1999), whose differentiation primarily is in relation to a team's learning dynamics, Kriz and Nöbauer (2008) go on to outline four different types of teams: stable teams, project teams, the cabin crew and evolutionary teams.

As illustrated, teams and teamwork contribute significantly to a company's success and offer numerous benefits to the organizations and the individuals within. Teamwork can lead to increased productivity and enables diverse perspectives and ideas. As a result, the team members experience a higher level of motivation and job satisfaction. Effective team dynamics, clear communication, trust, and a supportive work culture are crucial for harnessing the full potential of teams in achieving organizational objectives.

3.1 High-Performance Teams

High-performance teams are groups of individuals who work together in a collaborative and cohesive manner to achieve outstanding results and exceed expectations. These teams demonstrate exceptional levels of cooperation, coordination, and synergy, enabling them to consistently achieve superior performance. Startup settings, which can be often described as volatile, could benefit greatly from high-performance teams. High-performance teams possess the skills, expertise, and dedication needed to execute tasks efficiently, enabling startups to achieve their goals and objectives effectively. However, any organization, startup or not, needs to provide an environment that allows the forming of high-performance teams in the first place.

Katzenbach and Smith define High-performance teams simply as teams who outperform all expectations. What differentiates High-performance teams from other teams is the high level of commitment, particularly to each other. These commitments display far more than ordinary teamwork, with members who are genuinely interested and willing to support their team members to achieve not just their professional goals, but also their personal goals. High-performance teams are infused with the notion "if one of us fails, all of us fail". Additionally, High-performance teams share leadership more than other teams, and have more fun. Moreover, all the mentioned points lead to high-performance teams being completely self-sufficient. Whichever difficulty or challenge might be thrown in their way, high-performance teams will not be deterred from their goal. And on top of this, the members of high-performance teams who took part in their research described how much fun they had and how special their experience was (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

Similarly, Kasperowski describes the building blocks for high-performance in his book "High-Performance Teams. The Foundations.":

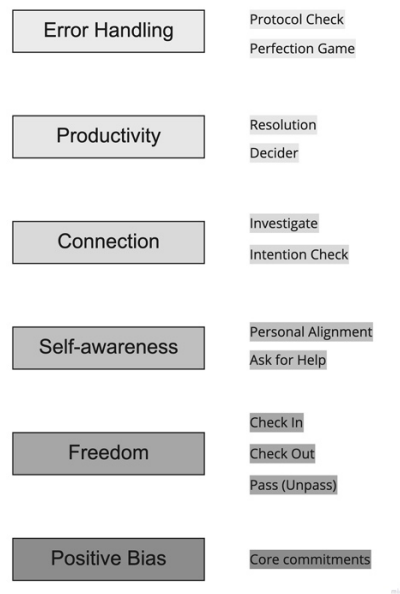


Figure 3: High-Performance Building Blocks

Source: Kasperowski, 2018

Kasperowski goes on to explain each building block and provides the reader with many tools for implementing these in their own teams. Positive bias and practicing positivity mean for him to implement the “Yes, and…” communication technique. This technique supports in reframing a team’s mindset, where positivity fuels growth. He further argues, how the replacement of negative words can open up space for novelties leading to a myriad of ideas and opportunities (Kasperowski, 2018).

Freedom is a discipline that needs practice and is described as the great personal satisfaction from being optimally productive. It describes a team members freedom to engage or disengage with their work, according to their inner state and effectiveness. Freedom according to Kasperowski means, to have an appropriate degree of autonomy and flexibility to manage oneself and one’s contribution level (Kasperowski, 2018).

Especially when working in a psychologically safe team, team members can bring their whole self to the team. Thus, it must be acknowledged that all of us are complex chaotic humans with all the baggage that entails. Teams need to recognize and accept this, otherwise the impact this has on a team’s effectiveness will be ignored (Kasperowski, 2018). Likewise, it is paramount for team members to ask for help when needed and do it early enough in the process before the problem turns into a crisis.

All the above-mentioned points lead to a high level of connection between the team members and are the foundation for a team to become a high-performance team. Another building block is productivity, where these teams are described as getting things done, being decisive and moving things forward. However, at the same time it is necessary to appreciate the humanity of every team member, with tremendous potential to improve. Thus, high-performance teams continuously strive to optimize not only processes but also themselves (Kasperowski, 2018).

Lastly, a healthy failure culture sets high-performance teams apart from ordinary teams. These teams are aware that within a complex, creative, and fast-moving process mistakes happen. They plan and budget for it from the beginning and fix mistakes without judgement (Kasperowski, 2018).

Another model is the 5 Step Model of High-Performance Teams created by Jenewein and Heidbrink:

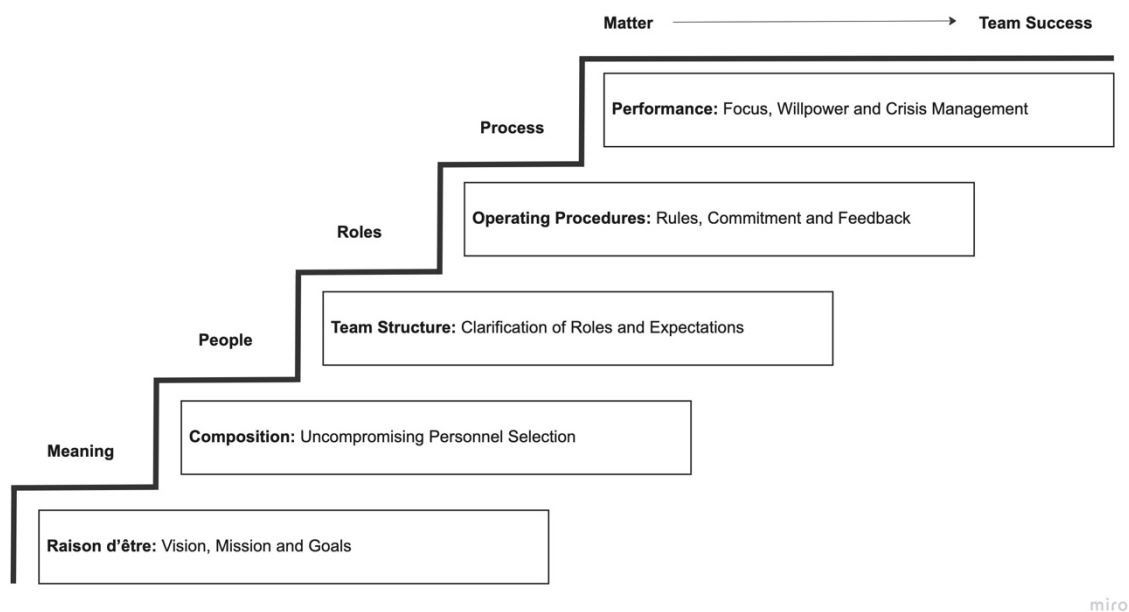


Figure 4: 5 Step Model of High-Performance Teams

Source: Jenewein & Heidbrink, 2008

They argue that developing their model in a stepped shape indicates that fundamental questions must be clarified before a team can be successful on the factual and performance level. Only once the lower levels have been mastered successfully, enough energy can be mobilized to focus over longer periods of time, to tackle crises and to work on the actual team goals. If a team is set up from scratch all five steps have to be followed in the portrayed sequence

(Jenewein & Heidbrink, 2008). Concurrently, this model expresses the necessary action points when problems on the factual level occur. Thus, this model is not a one-way solution but rather lets one revisit previous steps if the lowest common denominator of a team needs to be rediscovered (Jenewein & Heidbrink, 2008).

O'Neill and Salas (2018) definition of a High-Performance Team covers three different areas:

1. High-Performance Teams must deliver on stakeholder objectives at the highest level of quality.
2. High-Performance Teams must grow into capable work units over time.
3. High-Performance Teams must empower their members to continuously develop their skills.

Considering the complex environments team leaders and team members of high-performance teams find themselves in, it is necessary for them to develop a high amount of reflection skills. They need to be able to reflect both on a procedural and social level. West's (2004) research on team reflexivity could pose a support tool for high-performance teams to strengthening their reflection skills, as it discusses various conflict types that can arise in time-critical environments, including emotional conflicts and constructive conflicts. It suggests that understanding these conflict types can help team leaders and members recognize emotional or dysfunctional conflicts, anticipate their escalation, and employ effective strategies to de-escalate them in such time-sensitive situations. This leads to a continuous challenging of tasks and social interactions, which, according to West (2004), is important for a team's efficiency and effectiveness.

In their work, they characterize four different types of teams founded on their procedural and social reflection skills:

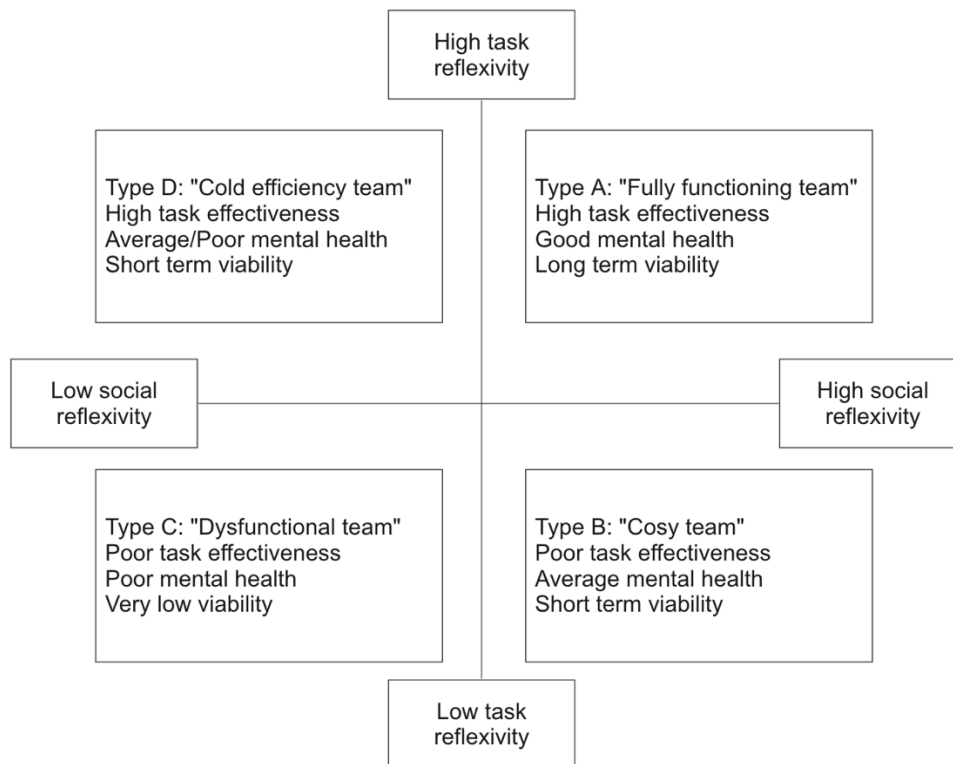


Figure 5: Types of Team Reflection

Source: West, 2004

In conclusion, high-performance teams offer numerous positive outcomes and benefits for organizations. High-performance teams consistently achieve outstanding results and surpass expectations. Their collective efforts and synergy enable them to accomplish challenging goals and deliver exceptional outcomes. Furthermore, high-performance teams are highly productive. Through effective collaboration, streamlined processes, and efficient utilization of resources, these teams maximize their output and accomplish tasks more quickly and effectively. Another important factor is that high-performance teams foster a culture of innovation and creativity. By encouraging diverse perspectives, brainstorming, and open communication, these teams generate fresh ideas and novel solutions, leading to innovative products, services, or processes.

Delving into the relationships of the team members in high-performance teams their high engagement and motivation is evident. They feel a sense of ownership and pride in their work, which fuels their commitment to achieving team goals and delivering exceptional performance. Team members communicate openly, listen actively, and share information transparently. This enables effective problem-solving, reduces misunderstandings, and strengthens trust and camaraderie within the team. Team members rely on each other's expertise, support one

another, and collaborate seamlessly. This trust fosters a positive team environment and enables efficient decision-making and problem-solving.

On top of that high-performance teams prioritize continuous learning and growth. Team members actively seek opportunities to enhance their skills, share knowledge, and support each other's growth. This focus on learning ensures that the team remains adaptive and up to date with industry trends and best practices. They also embrace change, learn from setbacks, and remain flexible in their approach. This adaptability enables them to navigate complex situations and adjust strategies to achieve success.

High-performance teams have a significant positive impact on the overall success of an organization. Their exceptional performance contributes to improved productivity, increased customer satisfaction, enhanced innovation, and ideally a competitive advantage in the market. All of these positive outcomes make high-performance teams invaluable assets for organizations seeking to achieve excellence and success.

3.1.1 Leadership in High-Performance Teams

Leadership in a high-performance team plays a crucial role in guiding, motivating, and empowering team members to achieve exceptional results. Nevertheless, leadership often appears only to be mentioned as a secondary contributing factor to a high-performance team's success when researching the existing body of work.

It is necessary to point out how rare it is to come across high-performance teams to begin with and that it is impossible to create them on purpose (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Executives and team leaders thus must understand them if they are to take advantage of them. They even go so far to state that these leaders need to do whatever they can in order to keep these high-performance teams alive (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). In general leaders need to understand that team performance is more important than individual performance. They describe the role of leaders is to clarify the purpose and goals, build commitment and self-confidence, remove obstacles, strengthen skills and to create opportunities – and most importantly, leaders also do work themselves. Moreover, these leaders understand they cannot succeed without the contributions of all team members. High performance levels depend on a team's decisiveness and how to be in control. This can only happen when teams are able to take risks, experience healthy conflict, develop trust and understand their interdependency. If a leader needs to have

the final say on every action, none of this happens, ergo high-performance teams don't happen (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

In her work Wing discusses leadership in high-performance teams and determines that firstly, leaders need to act as role models. Only teams which are led in a mindful and thoughtful way, levels of excellence can be experienced and if a leader wants to effectively lead a high-performance team, one must model the behavior they want to see in others (Wing, 2005). Second, attention needs to be drawn to the immensely qualified talent that needs to be hired for a high-performance team. Not only does this increase the skills within the team itself but it also pushes leadership out of their comfort zone (Wing, 2005). Third, it is imperative for the leader of a high-performance team to understand the market they are operating in and to build a strategy. It is critical for overall success that the members of a high-performance team understand the strategic intent. Therefore, a leader needs to share this knowledge to enable the team to work towards the organization's vision and mission (Wing, 2005).

Interestingly, Wing then stresses that one leader cannot do it by themselves anymore. Instead, she argues for a multilayered distribution of leadership within the high-performance team. Considering the high skills of each team member, a leader should get out of their way as much as possible, to allow them to perform at their most proficient levels (Wing, 2005). However, it is also made clear, that it is the leader's obligation to articulate how goals can and will be accomplished, and to build the needed infrastructure. It is necessary to identify all team members' roles and responsibilities and define goals and objectives. Building on that, the most important role of the leader of a high-performance team is to further develop the team and its skills. Once this is accomplished work activities need to be distributed, however, yet again this is a task, which the leaders will not do by themselves. Members of a high-performance team are highly knowledgeable and instrumental in supporting work activities. Simultaneously, this empowers the team members to develop their "voice" as a leader in their own right (Wing, 2005).

The most fundamental component of high-performance teams is trust and here it is important that the leader sets a climate where sharing both good and bad information can be handled by the team. Sooner or later a bigger problem will arise and being able to do so means nobody will be punished but rather that the team will work the issue out together and handle it maturely. A climate of established trust in a team will usually bring most of the problems to light before they escalate (Wing, 2005). Another highly underestimated factor in organizations is creativity. Creativity is at the core of any high-performance team and while there is the possibility that

ideas are discarded, members of high-performance teams know that these ideas might work well at a later moment and in a different context (Wing, 2005).

Paramount for high-performance teams is dynamic communication. These teams work in an environment that enables them to communicate directly with each other and share the information that is vital to their success (Wing, 2005). Likewise establishing metrics and understanding the organization and its rules empowers these teams to focus on all relevant and critical activities. Leaders need to accept that high-performance teams usually are far ahead of mainstream organizational thinking and thus need to connect their efforts to the rest of the organization (Wing, 2005). Additionally, it is very important that the leader of a high-performance team displays consistency, assuring the same level of engagement and capacity for listening whenever they are approached. Teams need to be supported and feel the confidence of that support (Wing, 2005)

Considering components mentioned above, such as effective communication, consistency in leadership, process development and metrics, will enable members of high-performance teams to take the best decisions for the organization. At the same time, these decisions might be of moderate risk, as these employees have both the information and support to facilitate new plans and ideas for the benefit of organizational growth (Wing, 2005).

In summary, leadership is crucial in forming high-performance teams as it provides vision and direction, aligns goals, builds a cohesive team, motivates and inspires, facilitates decision-making and problem-solving, promotes effective communication and feedback, and ensures accountability and performance management. Effective leadership sets the tone and creates the conditions necessary for a team to perform at its best. Through the literature review it has become clear that leading a high-performance team requires a combination of strong leadership skills, effective communication, and a deep understanding of team dynamics. They recognize that each team member plays a vital role in the team's performance and show appreciation for their efforts. By employing these strategies, leaders set up high-performance teams for success and to reach their full potential.

3.2 Followership

Followership is a crucial aspect of team dynamics and is often overlooked in discussions about leadership. It refers to the role and behaviors of team members who actively support and contribute to the team's goals and objectives. Effective followership is essential for the success of any team. This all even applies more so when looking at high-performance teams. In 2014 The Leadership Quarterly published an article of Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) trying to provide a systematic review of the followership literature and to introduce a broad theory of followership into leadership research. Based on their review, they identified two theoretical frameworks for followership: a role-based approach and a constructionist approach.

It is paramount to understand that leadership as a process is co-created in social and relational interactions between people. Thus, leadership can only occur if there is followership, without followers and following behavior there is no leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

The role theory approach defines followership as “a role played by individuals occupying a formal or informal position or rank” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In this view followership is examined as a role and set of behaviors (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

The constructionist approach defines followership as “a relational interaction through which leadership is co-created in combined acts of leading and following” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Therefore, constructionists explore followership as a social process that is highly conjoined with leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

The role theory approach and the constructionist approach, together with their sub-categories lead to the following overview of followership theory:

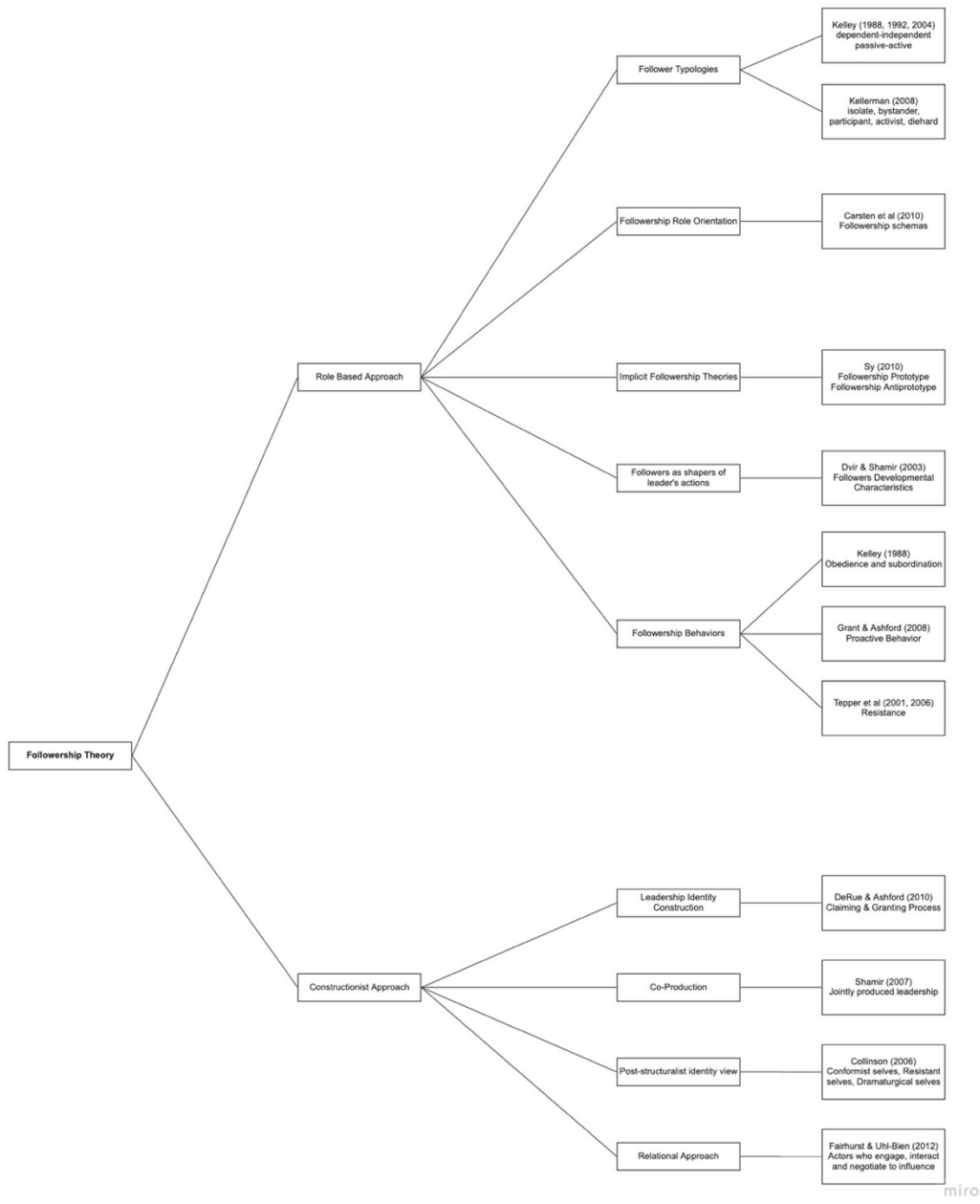


Figure 6: Followership Theory Overview

Source: Uhl-Bien et al., (2014); Kelley, (1988); Kelley, (1992); Kelley, (2008); Kellerman, (2008); Carsten et al., (2010); Sy, 2010); Dvir & Shamir, (2003); Grant & Ashford, (2008); Tepper et al., (2001); Tepper et al., (2006); DeRue & Ashford, (2010); Shamir, (2007); Collinson, (2006); Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, (2012)

As described, effective followership is essential for team success. It complements effective leadership by creating a collaborative and supportive team environment. When team members actively contribute, align with the team's goals, communicate effectively, and take ownership of their responsibilities, the team is better positioned to achieve its objectives and maximize its performance.

4 Summary of Literature Review

As illustrated by the discussion of the relevant scientific literature it has become evident that leadership in a startup and leadership in a high-performance team are closely related but have some distinct characteristics due to the different contexts in which they operate.

In a startup, the leader defines the overall vision and mission of the company, while in a high-performance team, the leader aligns the team's goals with the broader organizational objectives. In both cases, leadership provides a sense of purpose and guides the team towards a common goal. Additionally, in both startup and high-performance team settings, leadership plays a crucial role in building and managing the team. In a startup, leaders need to recruit and assemble a team with the right skills and expertise to drive the company's growth. In a high-performance team, leaders assess individual skills, build a cohesive team, and foster collaboration to maximize performance and achieve desired outcomes.

Similarly, leaders in startups and high-performance teams share the responsibility of motivating and inspiring their team members. In a startup, leaders inspire team members to embrace the company's vision, take risks, and persevere through challenges. In a high-performance team, leaders motivate team members to give their best effort, recognize and celebrate achievements, and create an environment that encourages innovation and continuous improvement. Furthermore, both startup leadership and high-performance team leadership involve facilitating decision-making and problem-solving processes. In a startup, leaders make critical decisions about the company's direction, resource allocation, and strategies. In a high-performance team, leaders facilitate decision-making within the team, encourage diverse perspectives, and support problem-solving efforts to achieve optimal outcomes.

Effective communication and collaboration are essential in both startup and high-performance team contexts. Startup leaders communicate the company's vision, goals, and progress to stakeholders, employees, and investors. In a high-performance team, leaders ensure open and transparent communication, provide regular feedback, and promote collaboration among team members to foster a culture of trust and high performance.

Finally, leadership in both startups and high-performance teams requires adaptability and agility. In a startup, leaders must navigate uncertainties, make quick adjustments, and pivot when necessary to respond to market changes. In a high-performance team, leaders need to adapt to evolving circumstances, embrace change, and facilitate the team's agility in order to maintain high performance and achieve goals.

Overall, leadership in a startup and leadership in a high-performance team share many common aspects, such as providing vision, building and managing teams, motivating and inspiring members, facilitating decision-making, fostering communication and collaboration, and embracing adaptability. However, the startup context often involves broader strategic decision-making and managing the overall company's growth, while high-performance team leadership focuses more on maximizing team performance within the larger organizational framework.

5 Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to explore the relationship between leadership and the formation of high-performance teams in startup companies. The study will employ qualitative analysis methods, including semi-structured interviews, to gather insights from three different perspectives: investors and executive coaches, founders and leaders of startups, and employees, who are the followers within these organizations.

By examining the findings of previous research and incorporating the perspectives obtained from the interviews, this study intends to provide valuable advice and create a practical toolbox for startup leaders. The toolbox will offer actionable strategies and approaches that leaders can implement in their day-to-day operations to enhance team performance and create a high-performance culture within their startups.

5.1 Research Philosophy

The following study pursues an interpretivist research philosophy and an inductive approach, which is commonly related to qualitative research. Interpretivism helps to understand the socially constructed nature of reality and the aim is to gain deeper understanding of the topic at hand. It focuses on the specific, the unique and deviant. In interpretivist studies meanings are created through relative dimensions, such as context, time and culture. Furthermore, it enables an interactive, participative, and cooperative relationship between the subject and researcher. Thus, the desired information to be gained in interpretivist research, is about what some people think and do, what kind of problems they are confronted with and how they deal with them. The researcher studies the topic within its context, while applying an emerging approach by identifying categories along the way (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

5.2 Method

In this study the aim is to answer how leadership contributes to the forming of high-performance teams in startups. As the research question is formulated in a broad sense, qualitative interviews were chosen as method of data collection.

Qualitative interviews are a research approach used in qualitative studies where more personal interaction is required whereas detailed data is gathered from the participants directly. Usually, such interviews involve follow-up questions and are more conversational. The interviewer allows the participant to open up and provide detailed information on the research topic (Adams, 2015). In the following study semi-structured interviews were chosen for data collection.

5.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews use a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions. These questions are often accompanied by follow-up questions such as how or why. The conversation can focus on the topic at hand, however, due to its flexible nature the semi-structured interview leaves room to explore unforeseen matters (Adams, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews are time-consuming and work intensive. Furthermore, the ideal interviewer possesses a certain amount of experience with conducting interviews. This results in semi-structured interviews not being appropriate for large-scale research studies, due to their usually smaller sample sizes (Adams, 2015).

However, semi-structured interviews also offer many benefits and are suitable for various research situations:

- For probing, open-ended questions, inquiring of the participants' independent thoughts.
- For probing, open-ended questions on topics that the participants might not want to share within group settings.
- For examining unexplored topics resulting in many uncertainties for the interviewer and interviewee (Adams, 2015).

5.2.2 Interviewee Selection and Interview Guide

Having identified the target group possible interviewee's can be selected by employing one of the two following scenarios: if the target group is large, either a random sample or a stratified

random sample. If the target group is small, it may be extended to everyone that could contribute in some way (Adams, 2015).

For the purpose of this study, three categories of target groups for semi-structured interviews were identified. The interviewee categories were defined as follows:

Category A: Founders and Management Team members

For this category, only interviewees, who currently or in the past founded a startup venture or leaders, who currently or in the past work within a startup leadership team, were considered for the interviews. The aim of these interviews is firstly to gain first-hand insights from real-life founders, their experiences with starting and running a business, and what they have learned about leadership along the way. Second, members of leadership teams within startups find themselves in a quite unusual position: they have a tremendous number of responsibilities and decision-making power, and usually have close relationships with founders. However, they are still employees, even if they receive an equity stake in the company. Thus, they may give information on two perspectives: being a leader and being an employee.

For this study five people have been interviewed for this category. The interviews have been structured as follows: Int_A_01, Int_A_02, Int_A_03, Int_A_04, Int_A_05

Category B: Investors and Coaches

For this category, only interviewees, who invested in startup ventures or who had experience in coaching startup leaders, were considered for the interviews. With these interviews it is aimed to gain an outside perspective to the inner workings of startup companies. Both investors and executive coaches gain deep understanding of these organizations due to their close relation to their leadership team. Nevertheless, they are usually not considered to be part of a startup's core team, and thus, remain with a more distanced view.

For this study three people have been interviewed for this category. The interviews have been structured as follows: Int_B_01, Int_B_02, Int_B_03

Category C: Employees

For this category, only interviewees, who currently or in the past were employed in a startup company were considered for the interviews. Hereby all startup employees up until including middle management positions, such as team leads, were defined. Any higher positions are considered within Category B. Startup employees are the gear that often keep these companies running. They often are highly engaged and intrinsically motivated to contribute to a company's success. The aim is to gain insights on how their view on leadership, their experiences with it and what personally contributes to their increased performance. Furthermore, employees are closer to the customer and the team members itself, which means they often possess informal information, the so-called rumor mill, and truly understand the atmosphere.

For this study four people have been interviewed for this category. The interviews have been structured as follows: Int_C_01, Int_C_02, Int_C_03, Int_C_04, Int_C_05

By conducting semi-structured interviews with three different categories, it is aimed to gather a holistic view through their different perspectives. Engaging with different perspectives broadens our knowledge base. It exposes the study to new ideas, alternative paradigms, and different ways of thinking, enriching the intellectual horizons and enhancing the overall understanding of the research topic.

The interview guide served as the outline of the semi-structured interview. As three different categories of interviewees were defined, it was necessary to ensure tailored interview guides for the respective categories. In this case, one interview guide was designed for both Category A and B, and a second interview guide was designed for Category C.

Interview Guide for Category A and B:

Icebreaker:

- Can you tell me about your professional background?
- How long have you been working with startups?
- Why startups?
- What are the rolemodels you have in mind, when you think of leadership (both positively and negatively)?

Question 1:

- What are high-performance teams for you?
- What kind of function does leadership of a high-performance team have?
- What place/value does leadership in a high-performance team have?

Question 2:

- Why are startups different from other types of organisations?
- What tasks does leadership in a startup entail?

Question 3:

- What do you think of leadership in a startup?
- What should be the main focus?
- What does this mean for employees? Do they take over some extent of leadership?
- What do you expect from leaders?

Question 4:

- How can leadership contribute positively/negatively to a team's performance?
- Do you have examples?
- Have you noticed that your leadership behavior had a direct affect on a teams increased/decreased performance?
- Are there any techniques do you use to lead?
- How was the team's performance affected?

Question 5:

- Do you change/adapt your leadership behavior depending on the situation?
- If yes, how and in which situations?
- Are there any leadership models, concepts or frameworks that you try to follow or do you rather trust your gutt?

Question 6:

- What do you think new founders/new executives should know about leadership in a startup?
- What is something that you would liked to have known but had to learn the hard way?

Question 7:

- What tips and tricks do you have for leaders in startups?

Interview Guide for Category C:

Icebreaker:

- Can you tell me about your professional background?
- How long have you been working with startups?
- Why startups?
- What are the rolemodels you have in mind, when you think of leadership (both positively and negatively)?

Question 1:

- What do you think of leadership in a startup?
- What should be the main focus?
- What does this mean for employees?
- What do you expect from your leader the leadership team in your organization?

Question 2:

- How can leadership contribute positively/negatively to a team's performance?
- Do you have examples?
- Have you noticed leadership behavior that had a direct affect on a teams increased performance?
- How was the team's performance affected?

Question 3:

- Considering your current and past leaders do/did they change/adapt their leadership depending on the situation?
- If yes, how and in which situations?

Question 4:

- What do you think new founders/new executives should know about leadership in a startup?

5.2.3 Conduction of Interviews and Transcription

All interviews were conducted online, using Google Meets. Appointments were arranged and invitations sent to the participants, which consisted of a link to join the conversation, a GDPR disclaimer and some introductory information on the topic. All interviewees were informed of their rights related to data protection at the beginning of each conversation, as the interviews were simultaneously video recorded and transcribed by Google Meets. All interviews, but one, were conducted in English. The other one was conducted in German and translated into English upon transcription, as the interviewee preferred to be interviewed in their native language. The duration of the interviews was between 25 minutes and 1,5 hours, depending on the interviewee's investment to the interviews. After the initial transcription was obtained from Google Meets, the transcription was corrected by re-watching the video recordings.

5.2.4 Analysis

The analysis of all collected data is conducted according to the qualitative context analysis method by Udo Kuckartz. It is a evaluation method for qualitative data, which analyses text material systematically and guided by rules. Kuckartz differentiates between three different types of context analysis methods: textual-structural, evaluative and type forming. Accordingly, one is offered three different possibilities for evaluation, and depending on the interest in the research field, combine or solely focus on one of the methods (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

The decision to follow Kuckartz' approach to conducting a qualitative content analysis over Mayring's was made after thorough consideration. Both emphasize the typical basic understanding of hermeneutics, and both are very keen on ensuring that qualitative content analyses are conducted as systematically as possible. Mayring has not described some methods in detail, which refer to Kuckartz' methods as basic methods in qualitative content analysis. The same applies for his instructions on electronic data processing. Kuckartz has provided complementary information on both aspects. Furthermore, the most significant difference is that Mayring advocates more for a theoretical basis that guides content analysis, whereas Kuckartz places even greater emphasis on the inductive nature of content analysis (Schreier, 2014). Thus, Kuckartz' approach seemed to be the more contemporary one.

For the further analysis of the gathered data for this study a textual-structural content analysis will be conducted. It allows for the creation of two different category types, inductive and deductive categories. However, in most cases a multilevel procedure for category creation and encoding is employed. The first phase is described as encoding roughly around a few main categories, which can be derived by the interview guide used for the qualitative interviews. This usually leads to a small number of max. 20 main categories. In the second phase of encoding, the categories are further developed and differentiated on the basis of the available data set. As a next step, the data material, which has already been encoded with the main categories, will be ciphered into the new categories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). Afterwards, the encoded data will be evaluated based on the main and subcategories, which have been created earlier. Where appropriate the encoded data can be additionally evaluated case by case.

When writing the research paper, the categories serve as a more or less fixed structure. By comparing and contrasting interesting groups, the category-based evaluation and presentation grows more in complexity, sophistication, and storytelling power (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

The following figure illustrates the sequence in which a textual-structural content analysis is conducted:

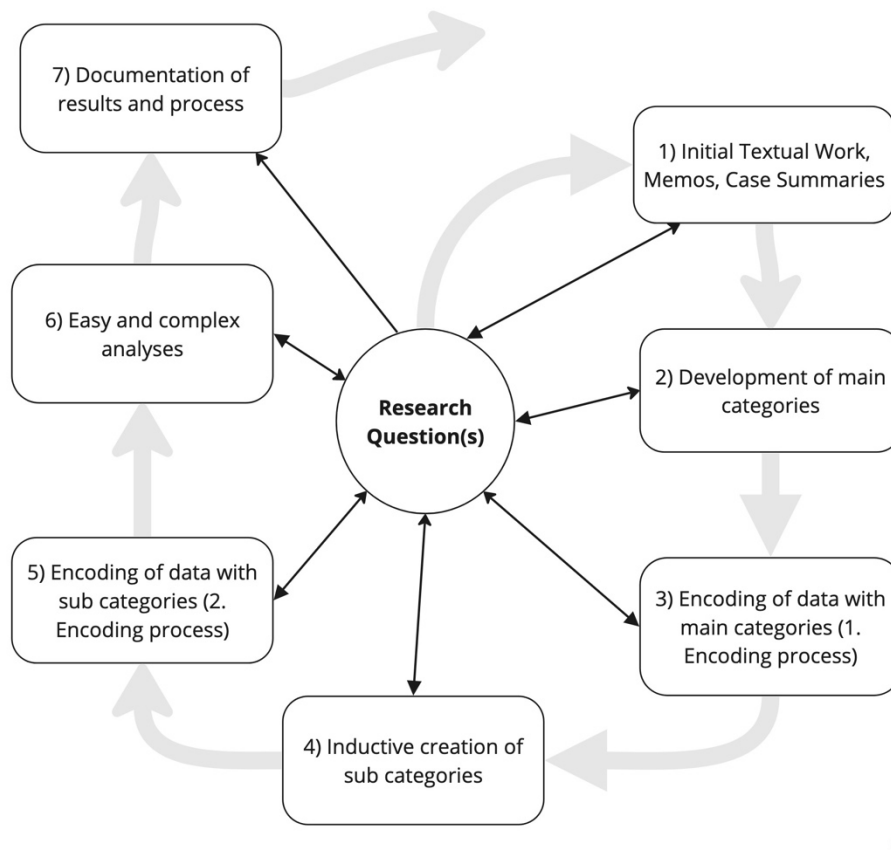


Figure 7: Process for a textual-structural context analysis according to Kuckartz.

Source: (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022) translated by the author

The textual-structural content analysis starts with preparing and reading the textual data. Important passages can be marked. Next, the main categories will be formed. Here it is important to derive categories from the initially framed research question(s). It is recommended to keep the encoding relatively open during the first encoding process. Any relevant or noteworthy data shall be documented. The more data has been analyzed, the more the analytical perspective will become evident. Furthermore, it supports with identifying topics of both small and high relevance to the research question(s). The first encoding process entails the sequential encoding of texts according to categories. Generally speaking, the following guidelines may be followed during the first encoding process:

The categories should be

- Strongly related to the research question(s) and goals of the research project
- Not too extensive and detailed
- Ideally include detailed descriptions of the categories
- Formulated keeping the later research discussion in mind
- Tested on a small part of the overall data set (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022)

Furthermore, four rules were defined to keep in mind, when encoding text passages into categories:

1. As a general rule, units are defined, that follow the same meaning; the smallest unit is a sentence.
2. If these units consist of several sentences or even paragraphs, they will be encoded as coherent segments
3. If the research question(s) is necessary for overall comprehension, they will be encoded too
4. When the categories are being assigned, it is recommended to find a good measure for the size of text passages that will be encoded around the relevant information. It is advisable that the text passage makes sense by itself.

The following seven main categories have been defined for this study:

Main Category	Definition
Leadership Role Models	Consists of all interview passages detailing leadership role models, either through the interviewee's own experiences or their own definition
Leadership	Consists of all interview passages detailing general leadership topics, as experienced by themselves as an employee or a leader
High-Performance Teams	Consists of all interview passages discussing high-performance
Working in Startups	Consists of all interview passages discussing working in a startup environment
Leadership Behavior	Consists of all interview passages detailing leadership behavior, either observed as employee or experienced as leader
Impact on Employees	Consists of all interview passages detailing possible impacts both the work environment and leadership itself has on an employee
Expectations for Leaders	Consists of all interview passages detailing expectations employees have for their leaders, current and/or past

Table 4: Overview of Main Coding Categories

Source: As defined by the author

It is advised to employ two or more people for encoding the data set (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). However, within the scope of this study, this will not be possible.

The next step of the process for a textual-structural context analysis according to Kuckartz, is to differentiate the relatively general categories created earlier. Any category that shall be differentiated by the forming of new subcategories. Then all text passages with the same categories shall be compiled in lists. This is followed by putting all data in order and the systematization of the lists. Furthermore, all relevant dimensions shall be identified and summarized.

Finally, the subcategories shall be defined and characterized by quotes from the data set (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

For the purpose of this study, two of the eight main categories were further differentiated by forming new subcategories: General Leadership and Leadership Behavior.

For the main category “Leadership” the following subcategories were defined:

Main Category	Leadership
Subcategory 1	Leadership in Startups
Subcategory 2	Leadership in High-Performance Teams
Subcategory 3	Leadership Techniques

Table 5: Overview of subcategories to “Leadership”

Source: As defined by the author

The following table details the subcategory definitions for the main category “Leadership”:

Subcategory	Definition	Examples from Data Set
Leadership in Startups	Consists of all interview passages detailing leadership in startup companies.	It is more difficult than it looks. Lead by example Be visionary and talk about the future.
Leadership in High-Performance Teams	Consists of all interview passages discussing leadership in high-performance teams	Enabling your team to grow. Lead by example. Be there if your team needs guidance.
Leadership Techniques	Consist of all interview passages discussing leadership techniques, both known and used.	I trust my gut. From each model I take something. It is never by the book.

Table 6: Definition of subcategories to “Leadership”

Source: As defined by the author

For the main category “Leadership Behavior” the following subcategories were defined:

Main Category	Leadership Behavior
Subcategory 1	Positive Leadership Behavior
Subcategory 2	Negative Leadership Behavior

Table 7: Overview of subcategories to “Leadership Behavior”

Source: As defined by the author

The following table details the subcategory definitions for the main category “Leadership Behavior”:

Subcategory	Definition	Examples from Data Set
Positive Leadership Behavior	Consists of all interview passages detailing leadership behavior that has been conceived in a positive way by the interviewees and may have a positive impact on a team’s performance	Understanding the process Giving a path to grow Giving feedback
Negative Leadership Behavior	Consists of all interview passages detailing leadership behavior that has been conceived in a negative way by the interviewees and may have a negative impact on a team’s performance	Micro-Management Pursuing internal politics Leading to nowhere

Table 8: Definition of subcategories to “Leadership Behavior”

Source: As defined by the author

The fifth stage of the process entails the second encoding process. Here the previously differentiated subcategories are encoded with the respective text passages of the main categories. This constitutes another run through the already encoded data set. Kuckartz (2022) recommends taking a pragmatic approach for considered subcategories.

The following sixth stage focuses on the easy and complex analyses and the preparation of the presentation of the results. In the case of a textual-structural content analysis the topics

and subtopics of the dataset take center stage. Several types of easy and complex analyses can be differentiated:

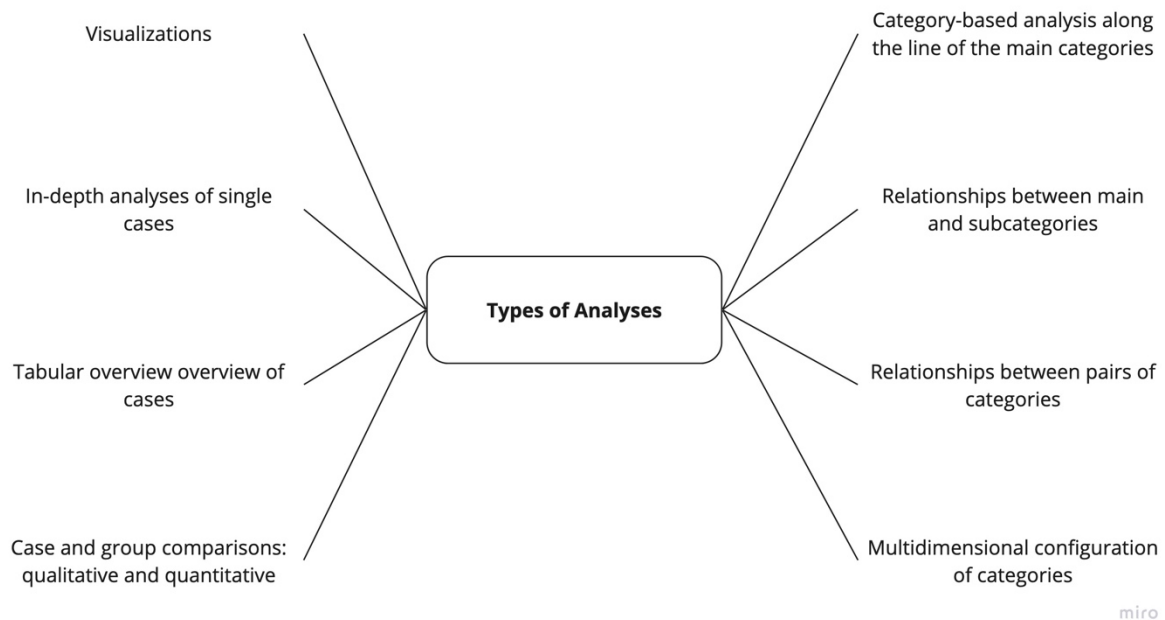


Figure 8: Various types of easy and complex analyses, translated by the author
Source: (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022)

In most studies a category-based analysis along the line of the main categories usually initiates the phase of data analysis. However, all mentioned types of easy and complex analyses may or may not be employed depending on the type of study conducted (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). As a closing step of the analysis, all acquired knowledge, all answers to the research question(s), shall be documented in a report (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

In summary, a qualitative content analysis is the right choice when one wants to systematically analyze communicative content or documents. It allows for exploratory investigation of an unknown research field using an inductive approach. However, the method is also capable of examining existing assumptions or theoretical constructs in a case-specific manner if one chooses the deductive variant. Depending on the basic construction of the qualitative content analysis, specific focuses can be set, and it is always possible to extract certain themes, content, or aspects from the data. Therefore, the method is applicable both for cross-case, theme-centered content analyses and for case-specific and/or typifying analyses.

6 Analysis of Data Findings

In the following part of this study the goal is to analyze the findings of the qualitative interviews by analyzing both the previously defined categories and subcategories.

As described in Table 4 the following main categories were defined: Working in Startups, High-Performance Teams, Leadership, Leadership Role Models, Leadership Behaviors and Impact on Employees.

6.1 Working in Startups

When asked why the interviewees decided to work in a startup or what led them to found one, they described a desire to have a bigger impact with their work and on the organization in general. Some of them even decided against opportunities in internationally successful companies, in favor of joining a startup:

“I had the chance to move to Amazon, to another big company. But then I decided I didn’t want to get into a more repetitive job where I’m one of 20 people doing a similar thing. I wanted something where I can problem solve, find my own solution, where I have some space to implement my solution.”²

Similarly, many were keen to join a startup, as they were attracted by the different working environment startups offered. Especially the flat hierarchies, the diverse and varied range of tasks, and the way teams in startups worked together influenced them to even found their own startup companies:

“So that environment pretty much shaped what I wanted out of the job kind of next and the following job and so on. So this is my kind of almost northern star. The environment I started working in has, yeah, has become like a goal in life to create. So, and now that was very friendly. So, I guess the sort of environment where everybody helps everybody. Mistakes are not punished. It’s gonna be positive reinforcement. You know, if you make a mistake, you help. If you achieve something you celebrate. And we would play games after work and stuff like that together and so that was my first startup environment then.”³

² As stated in Int_A_04, Paragraph 6

³ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 4

Digging deeper into the inner workings of a startup company and why they were different from other organizations, the interview participants mentioned several points. Yet again flat hierarchies were discussed, which enable a quick and easy decision-making process. Particularly the fast-paced environment of startup companies and the associated change of direction, often many times, stood out. Related to this, the interviewees identified, that it is necessary for people not only to be able to deal with these ever-changing environments, but actually to create and drive change. Thus, a high level of agility and flexibility is required:

“Because you have to be very fast, so things change so fast. Like, for example, I remember when I was at Omio, um, So, I was there for five years. We changed the guidelines in marketing, like every six months.”⁴

Working in a startup is not without its challenges and one that stands out, and has been mentioned many times is the high level of uncertainty, which increases the complex situations startup companies find themselves in. Furthermore, startups were often described as communities or groups of people being connected by sharing the same values. There is a strong focus on the companies' vision, purpose, and culture. Many of the interviewees stressed the importance of a healthy company culture and its contribution to a company's success. This strong emphasis on culture is often also described as a mindset that people working in a startup need, regardless of their position.

6.2 High Performance Teams

During the interviews it became clear that all participants understand a high-performance team as a team which is working independently and is driven by results and high-quality output. Many of the participants went on to describe a high-performance team in a similar way:

“So, it's like people who achieve results, and a high-performance team means people are able to find problems to solve and correct them. They need to pick the right battles and they need to be able to solve them without supervision.”⁵

⁴ As stated in Int_A_05, Paragraph 14

⁵ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 8

They believe that a cohesive team is capable of operating successfully even in the absence of certain individuals or specific knowledge. Thus, such a team is described as functioning like a precisely timed clock, where every component works together seamlessly. In this dynamic, team members react swiftly and adeptly when faced with challenges or the absence of someone or something. They possess the skills and resourcefulness to navigate obstacles autonomously, without relying heavily on constant guidance from team leaders. The team's self-sufficiency and ability to overcome hurdles efficiently contribute to its overall effectiveness⁶.

Furthermore, according to the participants, an ideal team is one that exhibits a high degree of independence, given the opportunity. They believe that when granted autonomy, teams can unleash their full potential. In their view, a team excels when they have a clear understanding of the goal at hand, enabling them to chart their own course towards achieving it. They emphasize the team's ability to navigate swiftly and efficiently, prioritizing both speed and quality in their approach⁷.

However, to become a high-performance team, it was emphasized during the interviews that these teams need to have a high level of trust and psychological safety. Additionally, these are teams that cultivate respectful relationships with their team members, which according to our participants leads to the team members holding each other accountable, deal with conflict in a positive way and challenge each other's opinions. Moreover, they are connected by a shared vision and understanding of the overall company objective, giving them a shared picture of where they are going. Besides this, the participants stated that these people know their strengths and weaknesses and are thus able to set free their full potential.

6.3 Leadership

The topic of leadership amounts to more than half of the entire encoded data of this study, indicating the significance of leadership for high-performance teams in startups. Speaking about the interviewees' comprehension of leadership as a concept and of their daily experiences in their work life, the participants provided a rich data set to evaluate. Once the second

⁶ As stated in Int_A_05, Paragraph 10

⁷ As stated in Int_C_02, Paragraph 8

encoding round concluded, three subcategories were formed: Leadership in startups, Leadership in high-performance teams and leadership techniques.

Generally speaking, leadership often was defined in very broad terms, describing an all-encompassing role. The interviews show that leadership entails both a visionary aspect and an operational aspect.

According to the participants, a leader is someone who possesses a T-shaped skill set, capable of both delving deep into specific functions and rising above to handle broader issues. This "T-shaped person" analogy highlights the leader's ability to dive into the details with others, working to troubleshoot and debug problems in a collaborative manner. Similarly, when switching to entirely different functions, the leader should adapt and engage in the same constructive approach. The essence of leadership lies in the leader's capacity to assist without necessarily providing all the answers. Instead, they serve as a supportive presence, akin to the industry metaphor of a "yellow rubber duck," being there for guidance and understanding. Leadership, as described here, encompasses various aspects, ranging from people management to other responsibilities. The individual in this role still participates in coding and undertakes tasks that any team member could handle. They actively interact with other teams, both within and outside the organization, while also providing valuable internal feedback⁸.

6.3.1 Leadership in Startups

Leadership in startups is very similarly illustrated as described before. Again, for the interviewees, leadership in startups involves both operational and strategic responsibilities, and is heavily emphasized on the vision, the mission, and the purpose of the organization. On top of these points, the high level of uncertainty increases the complexity of the entire situation immensely. Uncertainty is an inherent characteristic of startups and entrepreneurial ventures and a leader in this environment subsequently will have to find a way to not only accept it but to find a way to use uncertainty as an accelerator that sets up the organization for future success.

"First and foremost, it's a lot more difficult than it looks. [...] I guess it's not about leadership as much as risk taking. It's just being prepared to turn up for the worst kind of stuff. [...] You just kind of need to be ready and enjoy stepping out of your comfort zone."⁹

⁸ As stated in Int_A_02, Paragraph 12

⁹ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 28

Similarly, one of the participants of category B advised that prior to embarking on their entrepreneurial journey, individuals often underestimate the true level of difficulty involved. They say the pivotal moment of realization comes when they understand that they are not merely a small company but rather an early-stage, high-growth company, which is essentially the opposite of a small-scale operation. They are, in fact, a substantial entity that has not yet fully emerged. This realization sets the tone for their approach going forward. They learn to avoid implementing strategies that may have worked in a smaller team but are not suitable for a larger team. Once this fundamental mindset shift occurs, all other aspects of their entrepreneurial endeavors fall into place accordingly¹⁰.

In addition, C-Level executives and company leaders expressed that there are high expectations placed upon them, and they must meet these demands effectively. Understanding their role, responsibilities, and how to achieve their objectives becomes crucial. They furthermore highlight the distinction between being a founder and a non-founder. For founders, there is a deeper level of commitment and personal investment, known as "skin in the game," compared to those who did not play a role in founding the company¹¹.

In addition, the interviewees of category B identified the significance of self-leadership and the openness to accept help and feedback from their employees to coaches or networks. Considering the earlier described complexities of startup companies, it seems reasonable that one person cannot simply know it all. Leading under such circumstances means to embrace support and to pro-actively seek it out. These leaders need to continuously work on their reflection skills and need to be able to see various perspectives.

"First of all, the leadership team, and the factor of self-leadership. So how do they keep themselves in control? How do they keep themselves in balance because they constantly, not only need to create ideas, but they also need to empower people and they need to multiply their energy. And secondly, I would say, it really counts on the things that matter the most and that can rule your own impact. Because once you are in the daily avalanche of to-do lists, you have to do this and can no longer divide between important and urgent. That happens pretty often, so you always have to keep yourself in check and invest your work and your energy in the things that really matter and that brings the whole organization forward."¹²

¹⁰ As stated in Int_B_01, Paragraph 26

¹¹ As stated in Int_A_02, Paragraph 32

¹² As stated in Int_B_03, Paragraph 16

One suggestion is to begin by focusing on self-reflection. It is important to have a deep understanding of oneself, including strengths and weaknesses. Seeking assistance through coaching or other means can provide valuable support and dedicated time for introspection. Additionally, it is crucial to establish a network of individuals with whom one can openly discuss fears and concerns. Creating a safe space for open conversations is essential. Furthermore, actively seeking feedback is emphasized. Engaging in dialogue with employees and asking specific questions about their perceptions of one's performance and areas for improvement is encouraged. This proactive approach helps to gather insights and identify areas where growth and development are needed¹³.

Leaders who recognize that leadership is not solely acquired through formal education or innate talent, but rather a continuous process of self-reflection and personal growth, understand a crucial aspect of their role. They acknowledge that becoming a better leader is an ongoing journey that requires conscious effort. This awareness enables them to actively seek feedback from others, as well as engage in continuous self-improvement. Only by embracing this mindset can leaders effectively seek advice and feedback, fostering their own development and growth as effective leaders¹⁴.

Lastly, the importance of the team itself was highlighted. It is crucial for leaders to understand the importance of having a strong team and acknowledge that without one, their aspirations and ideas may not materialize. Initially, a vision or product is merely a fantasy without the support of a capable team. Once a team is in place, it is essential to value their contributions and build upon that foundation. Founders should remain open to their own limitations and embrace the fact that not knowing something does not signify weakness. It is a recognition that they are human, just like everyone else. Anyone can be a founder, but it takes that extra level of leadership to truly make an impact¹⁵.

6.3.2 Leadership in High-Performance Teams

Culture plays a vital role in fostering high-performance teams within organizations, building the foundation for a high-performance team to emerge in the first place. A strong and positive organizational culture creates an environment where individuals feel motivated, engaged, and

¹³ As stated in Int_B_02, Paragraph 25

¹⁴ As stated in Int_B_03, Paragraph 28

¹⁵ As stated in Int_C_04, Paragraph 32

empowered to perform at their best. All three categories of interviewees refer to leadership commitment and the important role it plays for company culture.

“So, culture, like the culture needs to be right. It is very important to encourage people to do what they enjoy doing. And the other part is the way the team is assembled. So, for example, if you put a team together, it is leadership, responsibility to assemble the correct team. [...] And leadership I suppose is to provide this vision as to where things need to go.”¹⁶

Many participants emphasized the significance of focusing on the people and culture aspect within an organization, as it is something within their control. The development of offerings and the cultivation of a positive people-centric culture can be influenced and managed. For leaders, it is crucial to recruit the right individuals who align with the company's values and vision. From the very beginning, when joining a startup, it is the leader's responsibility to ensure that new team members feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. Leaders need to prioritize fostering a team-oriented environment rather than solely focusing on individual brilliance. They believe in leading by example and expect everyone in the organization to demonstrate a similar dedication¹⁷.

Furthermore, the interviewees believe in the potential to cultivate a high-performance team, with leadership playing a vital role in achieving this. Leadership provides the necessary structure and vision to guide the team. When a team has a clear understanding of their direction and follows a well-defined methodology to attain their goals, their chances of success increase significantly¹⁸.

An important part of culture subsequently is the team itself that is hired and leadership's responsibility to enable everyone's growth and development.

¹⁶ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 10

¹⁷ As stated in Int_B_01, Paragraph 20

¹⁸ As stated in Int_C_01, Paragraph 14

“They should enable their people, you know, and they should identify and prevent future roadblocks. They should not stand in the way of the team and the team should be able to function alone. As a leader you should just be there in case there are questions. Make sure that your team is going the right path with the best business interest in mind. And enabling the team with whatever they need, acting as a facilitator, kind of.”¹⁹

Finally, the essence lies in effectively managing a group of resilient individuals who are motivated to excel and prioritize performance. However, it goes beyond simply adapting to or tolerating change. True leadership involves fostering a mindset that actively seeks to initiate and create change. It entails the ability to think critically and creatively, not only embracing change but actively contributing to the creation of transformative outcomes²⁰.

6.3.3 Leadership Techniques

It was interesting to find that most interviewees of category A rather refrain from consulting and using established leadership frameworks and models. Although some of them seek information once they are in a certain situation, they usually do not implement it by the book but adapt it to their environment’s specific needs.

“It’s good to know what the best practices are. So, you try to integrate them. I think we follow a lot of those industry best practices, and we try to do some of those techniques [...] but it’s never by the books.”²¹

Others described striving to gain from personal experiences, particularly in situations where they have been on the receiving end of leadership. By reflecting on past encounters, they aim to avoid repeating behaviors or practices that they found unfavorable. Conversely, they seek to replicate and implement approaches that resonated positively with themselves. This iterative process of learning from both positive and negative experiences shapes their own leadership style and influences how they engage with and guide others²².

¹⁹ As stated in Int_A_05, Paragraph 12

²⁰ As stated in Int_B_01, Paragraph 16

²¹ As stated in Int_A_02, Paragraph 30

²² As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 26

The participants of category B, however, were more adapt with various leadership frameworks and model. It is necessary to emphasize that this obviously lies in the nature of their professions as coaches and investors.

Finally, what most participants of category A and B had in common is that they referred to their leadership style as leadership by example.

“So basically, you should do things to lead by example. So, you can't ask a person to do something you wouldn't do, right? So that's basically that's what it is.”²³

Similarly, it was described by another interviewee:

“We try to avoid the mission and purpose stuff because it's often too abstract. What people need or what an organization, not people, needs is a constitution, which allows it to take decisions at every level. [...] What we do instead is try to operationalize it a bit more and so we have the right to discuss it and you can spend two or three days on it trying to establish four or five so-called basic principles. Think about it in three dimensions: What do you want? What do you want your product or your service to be described? How do you want your customers and partners and suppliers to describe you? That's not rocket science. But it gives you guidance. And these basic principles, your operationalized mission, it is actually on you as a leader. You can never violate it, again you have to lead by example. These are things you have to internalize and live.”²⁴

6.4 Leadership Role Models

Role models play a significant role in shaping values, beliefs, and behaviors in anyone. Leadership role models serve as exemplars of effective leadership qualities, behaviors, and approaches. They inspire and guide others to develop their own leadership skills. Most participants throughout all categories of interviewees described role models they actually interacted with in their past and present lives, both professionally and privately. Also, it must be stated that perceiving someone as a role model is very subjective.

²³ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 18

²⁴As stated in Int_B_01, Paragraph 24

"I think my first boss here in Germany was a good role model even though it was very short. And I think, even though there was like a huge gap in age, it was someone that I could see trying to understand the process. So, what I was doing was very different from what he was used to, but he was trying to understand the process."²⁵

Furthermore, individuals are regarded as exceptional leaders, who can inspire others and execute tasks effectively. These individuals are known for their strong work ethic and dedication. The combination of their inspirational nature and hardworking approach contributes to their distinctive leadership style, which is characterized as hands-on and pragmatic. However, what sets them apart is their empathetic nature, which adds a unique element to their leadership approach²⁶.

Refreshingly, one participant stood out with their view on role models:

"My advice to first timers is not to have role models. Don't read books, because of the bias. There's a more precise way of explaining it. If you ask a lottery winner how to become rich and he says to buy a lottery ticket, that's not good advice. [...] But effectively the task is not copying someone else's behavior, but really understanding what teams expect."²⁷

6.5 Leadership Behaviors

Leadership behavior refers to the actions, conduct, and interactions exhibited by a leader in their role, which can lead to both negative and positive outcomes. Effective leadership behavior plays a crucial role in influencing and guiding individuals, teams, and organizations towards achieving goals and fostering a positive work environment. The interviewees identified a multitude of negative behaviors, which ultimately lead to a decreased level in motivation, performance and engagement throughout parts or the entire organization. From micro-managing to being unstructured, to poor communication skills, negative leadership behaviors are almost as varied as the leadership role itself.

²⁵ As stated in Int_A_02, Paragraph 8

²⁶ As stated in Int_C_01, Paragraph 8

²⁷ As stated in Int_B_01, Paragraph 6

"I mean, like, micromanaging, everyone. Telling everyone what to do, that would be negative or not giving clear directions. Also, like, for example, not having a clear structure on how the team works and who's owning what, creating an even bigger bottleneck. So, everything has to go through you and you have to make all the decisions and not let your team decide. So, I think that's going to have a negative effect."²⁸

Furthermore, it was pointed out how leaders accept help from other leaders and co-workers in their organization to overcome negative leadership behaviors. Thus, illustrating their ability to receive constructive feedback:

"I'm quite happy with the way things are going and at the same time there's some stuff that our Head of Talent was helping me out with some communication skills. Bad communication might affect someone negatively. Sometimes people do not feel valued for what they do, which is not the case. But just, you know, with async communication on chat, it may be perceived like that. [...] Just the way, the way I communicate, sometimes can affect people kind of negatively. That's what I'm working on as well."²⁹

Employees have experienced negative leadership behaviors which are often times related to poor communication transparency. For them it is essential to clearly communicate what task is urgent and why it holds significance. Setting deadlines without valid reasons will lead to a lack of adherence. Therefore, it is crucial to establish logical rationales behind deadlines. Enforcing unnecessary rules, such as strictly adhering to the Scrum methodology even in situations where it may not be applicable, can detrimentally impact performance. It is important to avoid imposing rules that do not align with the context or purpose, as they can hinder rather than foster productivity³⁰.

Similarly, the participants determined a variety of positive leadership behaviors that stimulate the work environment affirmatively. Leading by example was highlighted as leadership behavior with a high level of positive impact on employees. Furthermore, adding to employees' professional growth and their overall wellbeing, and at the same time, giving employees enough freedom in how they execute their tasks, have been mentioned to have a positive effect.

²⁸ As stated in Int_A_05, Paragraph 22

²⁹ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 20

³⁰ As stated in Int_C_02, Paragraph 20

“So positively is the, you know, be the change you want to see in the world, as cliché as it is if you want something to happen and you start doing it and people will notice and we’ll start doing it as well. So, we can drive change by doing it. You can show that it’s possible, you can show how to do it and then you can show that it is expected from them to do the same thing.”³¹

Additionally, it was pointed out that a leader usually has a four times higher impact than an average employee. This impact can manifest in two distinct directions. On one hand, a leader can serve as an energy multiplier, inspiring and empowering individuals to improve not just as employees but also as individuals. On the other hand, this impact can take a negative turn. In today's world, the role of leadership is more crucial than ever. It plays a vital role in attracting and retaining the right talent for an organization. Furthermore, effective leadership is essential in nurturing and developing employees, as they are the lifeblood of any organization. This places a high demand and responsibility on leaders to not only assemble a capable team but also continuously support and enhance their growth along the journey³².

Employees, on the other hand, demand for freedom. Granting individuals, the freedom to explore and experiment, as well as make necessary changes when something isn't working, leads to improved performance. Transparency and clearly defined goals are also crucial factors that foster success. These aspects provide individuals with the guidance and direction they need. Additionally, it is important to invest in the right tools and resources for the team, without compromising quality or cutting corners to save money. Prioritizing the team's needs and providing them with the necessary tools sets the foundation for optimal performance³³.

6.6 Impact on Employees

As already mentioned, leadership behavior has a significant impact on employees and their overall performance, engagement, job satisfaction, and well-being. Hence, it was critical for the entirety of the study to collect data of employees and their experiences with leadership in a startup and/or a high-performance team environment. As much as their leaders, employees need to have entrepreneurial spirit to some kind of degree, be prepared to do things outside their comfort zone and live by example every day. Many more of the characteristics mentioned

³¹ As stated in Int_A_02, Paragraph 22

³² As stated in Int_B_03, Paragraph 8

³³ As stated in Int_C_02, Paragraph 20

in the analysis of the previous categories do apply as much to the startup employees as they apply to their leaders, such as being able to reflect and to understand diverse perspectives, and self-management.

“So ultimately employees need to hustle and be prepared to do things outside of their comfort zone. And this is one of the key characteristics of like, kind of traits of a personality when you're hiring for a startup. They need to be a bit of a hustler. In a sense, they need to be prepared to deviate from what they do. It's not like I don't do X, right? Everybody does everything pretty much in a startup.”³⁴

The participants went on to describing that a leader establishes the benchmarks and consistently leads by example. When a leader exemplifies these standards in their daily actions, it inspires others to follow suit. Those who choose not to follow will need to assess whether they align with the team, culture, and overall values of the company³⁵.

As described before, employees will have the possibility to work with a broader sense of freedom, however, this freedom has a strong impact on them. It is crucial for employees to actively utilize the freedom provided to them, otherwise, their performance may be hindered. When granted a considerable degree of freedom, there is an inherent expectation for employees to reciprocate by delivering results and fulfilling their responsibilities³⁶.

Furthermore, employees in such an environment need to maintain an ongoing exchange of perspectives where employees actively step into the shoes of founders and the executive team, questioning the underlying motivations behind their actions and decisions. By continuously seeking to understand the rationale behind certain initiatives, employees foster a deeper level of engagement and alignment with the overall purpose of the organization³⁷.

Finally, it is pointed out that in the startup industry, there is a greater emphasis on proactivity and taking initiative. Employees are expected to be self-driven and take ownership of their tasks. They have a heightened level of responsibility, including the responsibility to

³⁴ As stated in Int_A_01, Paragraph 16

³⁵ As stated in Int_B_03, Paragraph 18

³⁶ As stated in Int_C_02, Paragraph 19

³⁷ As stated in Int_B_03, Paragraph 18

communicate their needs and requirements, such as additional information or educational resources, to support their work. Moreover, due to the lack of fully standardized processes in most startups, it becomes crucial to have employees who possess a high level of maturity and adaptability to navigate through dynamic and evolving environments³⁸.

Additionally, employees in startups and/or high-performance teams need to learn how to deal with the level of uncertainty just like their leaders.

"I think in general, a level of uncertainty, on the outcome. So, many times, I think it's necessary for people to find motivation in other things. It's not necessarily the performance of the company at all times, or knowing where we're going or having a path, but finding motivation into how they work together, collaboration, the mission, the things that they are doing and how they're developing. So, uncertainty not everybody can handle it."³⁹

Another point that was made regarding having a leadership position, however, being an employee themselves too. This is a situation many leaders find themselves in, which can be difficult at times, especially in smaller organizations, where leaders may have relationships with team members across all hierarchy levels.

"I think sometimes, what I struggle with is, my role as a team leader a role model and as employee, you know, reporting to someone else myself. This mix between I have my own space, but I also report to a person that is above me and even without wanting to be much hierarchical, that's a situation and that's normal. And so, the mixing of what I want to do and how I manage the team and the things I want to know, what I have to do because it's somebody else's decision."⁴⁰

³⁸ As stated in Int_C_03, Paragraph 19

³⁹ As stated in Int_A_04, Paragraph 14

⁴⁰ As stated in Int_A_04, Paragraph 22

7 Discussion

As illustrated in the chapters before, leadership in a high-performance team is a challenging undertaking. Both the literature review and the data analysis show that leadership in a high-performance team entails a range of different skills and abilities, such as providing guidance and support to a motivated and competent group of individuals who strive for exceptional results. A high-performance team consists of people who strive for freedom and responsibilities. If given, these teams will create both change and structures, thus being empowered to reach not only their goals but also their individual potential and talent. These teams operate highly efficiently with various types of stakeholders and can substitute for missing team members with little effort, which points to their advanced ability to collaborate. Within their scope and function, high-performance teams can take decisions having the organization's best interest always in mind.

All of this is only made possible through a foundation of trust and respect for each other. It is the leader's responsibility to ensure an environment where this can grow. A leader's most fundamental role is to set the tone for open interactions, giving people the opportunity to speak up, share their ideas and take risks without fear of retaliation. Thus, it is the leader's obligation to create an environment of psychological safety. This implication has clearly become evident throughout the preceding discussions.

Company culture is further rounded off by the vision, the mission and the purpose of the organization, which has already been thoroughly examined, and again it is one of the leader's core responsibilities to convey these to all team members. If they are successful, they can captivate their people through their visionary and charismatic leadership. Outstanding leaders can both communicate these on a higher conceptual level, breaking these ideas down to the operational level, and lead by example. Hence, accountability may blossom throughout the entire organization.

Leadership in startups requires many skills that leadership in high-performance teams requires too. In fact, throughout this study the commonalities of leadership in both environments have become prevalent. This is based on their focus on achieving exceptional results in dynamic and demanding environments. Operating in rapidly changing settings, leaders in both contexts need to be adaptable, embracing change and guiding their teams through uncertainties. They must demonstrate resilience and help team members navigate challenges and setbacks effectively.

However, it must be highlighted that the level of uncertainty in a startup company can exceed the level of uncertainty in some high-performance teams significantly, as high-performance teams also can occur in established businesses. As per the previous chapters, startup companies face numerous uncertainties due to the nature of their ventures, which often can affect all aspects of the business. Thus, leadership in the uncertainty of a startup plays a vital role in guiding the company through challenges, making strategic decisions, and fostering a resilient and adaptable culture. Effective leadership can steer the startup through uncertainties and position it for long-term success.

Leadership in a startup and/or in a high-performance team is immensely complex and it is evident that one only becomes an exceptional leader if they are willing to put the time into it. Opposed to earlier views in leadership research, leadership qualities are not something a leader already possesses. Effective leadership is a difficult task requiring reflection, openness to other peoples' perspectives, and self-management. These leaders engage in self-reflection to gain a deeper understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs. By reflecting on their actions, decisions, and outcomes, they can identify areas for improvement and continuously grow as leaders. Reflection allows leaders to gain insights into their own motivations, biases, and behaviors, leading to enhanced self-awareness and personal development. They recognize the importance of diverse perspectives and actively seek input from others. They create an inclusive environment where team members feel valued, respected, and comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions. By fostering an atmosphere of openness, leaders can tap into the collective intelligence of their teams, make more informed decisions, and promote collaboration. Effective leaders understand the significance of managing themselves before managing others. They demonstrate emotional intelligence, self-control, and self-discipline. By maintaining composure in challenging situations, and displaying consistency in their actions, leaders inspire confidence and trust in their team members. Self-management also involves setting priorities, managing time effectively, and demonstrating personal accountability.

However, it is also necessary for these leaders to understand that they don't need to know everything, and that getting support from both team members and external stakeholders is an essential tool to continuously develop their skills. Especially the analysis of the qualitative interviews shows the value coaching offers to both experienced and inexperienced leaders. By pro-actively seeking support leaders learn to navigate even the most difficult situations. Curiously the analysis further demonstrates that the study participants rather tend towards industry best practices by adapting some of those ideas to their own unique situation.

However, they clearly avoid scientific leadership literature, which they seemingly perceive as too far-removed from their own experiences. Nonetheless, this perception may be driven by their personal bias.

Furthermore, most of the study participants were able to identify a number of leadership behaviors, which ultimately may contribute to both a positive and negative working environment independently from the type of organization. Evidently, many of the positive leadership behaviors are synonymous to the characteristics necessary in startups and/or high-performance teams, indicating that if followed any leader may be able to successfully contribute to the forming of high-performance teams in startups or any other type of organization. As mentioned, high-performance teams can occur throughout all types of companies, nevertheless, encouraging an environment where high-performance teams become possible, may be even more crucial for startups.

Lastly, having the right employees on board, who can weather the storms and sail in the unforeseen future with excitement, are key to creating a performance driven and resilient work culture. Notably both members of a high-performance team and effective startup employees demand a certain level of freedom and decision-making power, in short leadership responsibilities to a certain extent. This means leaders in this environment must be willing to give up some of their power and subsequently be led by their employees. This is in line with the previously discussed constructionist approach by Uhl-Bien et al (2014), meaning followership is “a relational interaction through which leadership is co-created in combined acts of leading and following”. This reinforces the necessity of reflection and openness to other peoples’ perspectives, however, not just only for leaders but for their employees too.

Joining a startup or becoming a member of a high-performance team means these employees need to be skilled in many different areas and not shy away from further developing their abilities. As mentioned in many of the qualitative interviews, in a startup people wear many different hats, and they must at least be open to dive into topics outside of their comfort zone. Equally important is their adaptability and flexibility to the ever-changing business requirements. This calls for employees to adjust their roles, responsibilities, and processes as the company grows and pivots.

Furthermore, startup employees need to think like entrepreneurs just like their leaders, taking ownership of their work, being proactive, and taking calculated risks. They should have a growth mindset, be willing to experiment, and demonstrate a drive for innovation. Employees who are self-starters, resourceful, and comfortable with ambiguity tend to thrive in startup environments. The journey can be challenging, and employees need to be passionate about the

company's mission and motivated by the opportunity to make a significant impact. A strong sense of commitment helps employees navigate the ups and downs, work long hours when necessary, and stay motivated during the challenging phases of the startup journey.

Creating an engaging and supportive work environment, providing opportunities for professional development, and recognizing and rewarding employees' contributions are crucial for attracting and retaining top talent in startup environments. By fostering a culture of learning, collaboration, and empowerment, startups can build a motivated and high-performing workforce that contributes to their long-term success.

8 Practical Recommendations

It is clear that effective leadership plays a crucial role in cultivating high-performance teams within startups and other organizations. Based on the findings from the literature review and qualitative interviews conducted in this study, several recommendations have emerged to assist leaders on this intricate path:

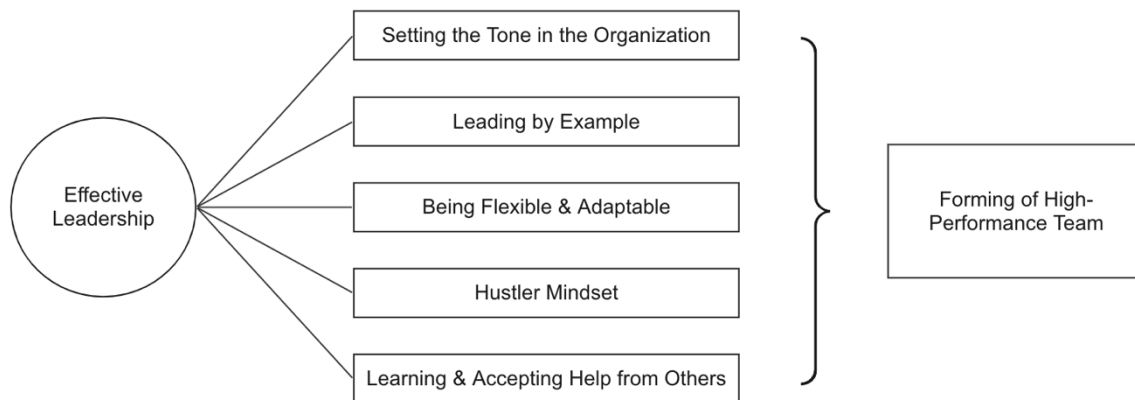


Figure 9: Practical Recommendations for effective leadership contributing to the forming of high-performance teams

Source: Illustrated by the author from findings of the study's data analysis and literature review

1. The leader sets the tone for the whole organization:

The leader sets the tone for the whole organization by serving as a role model and embodying the values and principles that define the company's culture. Every action, behavior, and decision taken by the leader reverberates throughout the entire organization, influencing employee morale, shaping attitudes, and ultimately impacting the overall performance. When a leader consistently demonstrates integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior, it establishes a strong foundation of trust within the organization. Employees feel secure knowing that their leader upholds high standards and acts with honesty and fairness. This fosters a culture of trust and accountability, where individuals are motivated to give their best and work towards common goals.

Conversely, if a leader displays inconsistent or questionable behavior, it can erode trust and create a toxic work environment. Employees may become disillusioned, losing confidence in their leader's judgment and decision-making abilities. This can lead to decreased motivation, increased turnover rates, and a decline in overall performance.

A leader's communication style also plays a crucial role in setting the tone for the organization. Open and effective communication creates a sense of transparency, encourages collaboration, and ensures that everyone is aligned with the company's vision and objectives. By clearly articulating expectations, providing feedback, and actively listening to employees, a leader fosters an atmosphere of respect and encourages open dialogue, which in turn enhances employee engagement and satisfaction.

Furthermore, the leader's decisions have far-reaching consequences for the organization. Whether it involves strategic planning, resource allocation, or addressing conflicts, the choices made by the leader impact the direction and success of the entire organization. A leader who demonstrates sound judgment, critical thinking, and the ability to make tough decisions inspires confidence and instills a sense of purpose among employees.

In addition to these direct impacts, the leader's behavior also influences the organizational culture. Employees tend to emulate their leaders, adopting their values and behavior as the norm. If a leader prioritizes innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning, it encourages employees to do the same. Contrarily, if a leader exhibits a lack of integrity, poor work-life balance, or an aversion to change, these traits can permeate the organizational culture, hindering growth and adaptability.

Recognizing the profound influence, they have; effective leaders embrace their role as cultural architects. They proactively shape the organization's values, encourage a positive work environment, and promote a shared sense of purpose. By cultivating a culture that values diversity, inclusion, and personal development, leaders can unleash the full potential of their employees and drive organizational success.

Ultimately, the leader's ability to set the tone for the whole organization is a critical factor in creating a thriving and high-performing workplace. By leading by example, fostering trust, promoting effective communication, making informed decisions, and shaping the organizational culture, leaders empower their teams to excel and achieve both individual and collective success.

2. Leading By Example:

Leading by example is a fundamental aspect of effective leadership that goes beyond mere words or directives. It requires leaders to embody the behavior, values, and actions they expect from their team members, serving as a living testament to the standards they set for the organization. By consistently demonstrating these principles, leaders create a culture of accountability that permeates all functions and hierarchy levels. When leaders lead by example,

they establish a powerful precedent for their team members to follow. By embodying the desired qualities and behaviors, leaders inspire and motivate their employees to emulate those traits. When team members witness their leader consistently adhering to high standards of professionalism, integrity, and work ethic, it sets the tone for the entire organization. This leads to a shared understanding and expectation of what is required to achieve success.

Leading by example also builds trust and credibility. When leaders act in alignment with their words, it reinforces their authenticity and reliability. Employees feel confident in their leader's guidance, knowing that they can be trusted to do what they say. This trust forms the foundation of strong relationships between leaders and their team members, fostering a sense of loyalty, commitment, and mutual respect.

Moreover, leading by example fosters a culture of ownership and accountability. When leaders model accountability in their own actions and decisions, it sends a clear message that everyone in the organization is responsible for their contributions and outcomes. Team members are more likely to take ownership of their work and strive for excellence when they see their leader doing the same. This creates a collective sense of responsibility and a shared commitment to achieving organizational goals. Leading by example also enhances collaboration and teamwork. When leaders demonstrate the values of collaboration, open communication, and cooperation, it encourages employees to do the same. By actively engaging in collaborative efforts, seeking input from others, and valuing diverse perspectives, leaders foster a culture of teamwork that transcends individual egos and promotes collective success.

Furthermore, leading by example serves as a powerful tool for leadership development. As leaders model the desired behaviors and skills, they provide tangible examples for aspiring leaders to learn from. Emerging leaders can observe and absorb valuable lessons by witnessing how their leader handles challenges, communicates effectively, makes tough decisions, and cultivates relationships. This creates a learning environment where leadership skills are actively passed down and developed within the organization.

In summary, leading by example is a transformative leadership approach that influences the organization on multiple levels. By modeling the behavior, values, and actions they expect from their team members, leaders inspire trust, build credibility, foster accountability, enhance collaboration, and cultivate future leaders. Ultimately, leaders who lead by example create a culture of excellence and achievement, driving the organization towards sustainable success.

3. Being Flexible and Adaptable:

In the dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of business, especially in a startup environment, being flexible and adaptable is a crucial trait for effective leadership. As a leader, it is essential to approach any roadblock or challenge with a mindset that embraces change and uncertainty. Whether it's unforeseen changes in the market, shifting business requirements, or internal obstacles, a flexible and adaptable leader can pivot and guide their team through turbulent times successfully.

Uncertainty is an inherent part of any organization's journey, and leaders who recognize this fact can create a culture of resilience and positivity. They understand that setbacks and unexpected situations are not obstacles to be feared, but opportunities for growth and innovation. By fostering an environment that encourages adaptability, leaders empower their team members to embrace change and view challenges as steppingstones rather than roadblocks.

A flexible and adaptable leader understands the importance of staying agile in the face of adversity. They are quick to assess the situation, gather relevant information, and make informed decisions based on the available resources and circumstances. Rather than rigidly sticking to a predetermined plan, they remain open to alternative approaches and are willing to adjust their strategies as needed. This flexibility allows them to navigate through uncertainty and seize new opportunities that arise along the way.

Being flexible and adaptable also allows leaders to leverage the diverse skills and perspectives within their team. They recognize that different team members may have unique strengths and experiences that can contribute to problem-solving and innovation. By actively seeking input and encouraging collaboration, they create a sense of inclusivity and empower individuals to bring their best ideas forward.

Lastly, a flexible and adaptable leader understands the importance of self-reflection and continuous learning. They embrace feedback and seek opportunities for personal and professional growth. By constantly refining their own skills and knowledge, they can better navigate complex and challenging situations, inspiring their team members to do the same.

4. Hustler Mindset:

Being an entrepreneur is not for the faint-hearted. It requires determination, tenacity, and a willingness to go the extra mile. Hustle is a mindset that embodies the relentless pursuit of goals and a strong work ethic. Leaders who embrace the hustle set a powerful example for their teams by rolling up their own sleeves and actively participating in everyday tasks. This

sends a clear signal that no job is too small or insignificant, and it fosters a sense of unity and camaraderie within the organization. Hustle culture can be a driving force behind the success of startup teams. It instills a sense of drive and ambition, motivating individuals to push their limits and surpass expectations. When leaders consistently demonstrate a strong work ethic and a willingness to put in the effort, it inspires team members to follow suit. This collective dedication and determination can fuel a positive and high-performance work environment, where everyone is focused on achieving shared goals.

Furthermore, hustle culture encourages a mindset of continuous improvement and creativity. It pushes individuals to think outside the box, find innovative solutions, and take calculated risks. In a fast-paced startup environment, where agility is key, hustling allows teams to adapt quickly to market changes, customer feedback, and emerging trends. It encourages a culture of quick iteration, where ideas are tested, refined, and implemented rapidly, ensuring that the organization stays ahead of the competition.

However, it is important to strike a balance when embracing hustle culture. While hard work and drive are essential, leaders must also prioritize the well-being and work-life balance of their team members. Burnout and exhaustion can be detrimental to both individual and organizational performance. Leaders should promote a supportive environment that recognizes and values the importance of self-care, rest, and rejuvenation. This ensures that the hustle culture remains sustainable and fosters long-term success. Moreover, hustle culture should not be equated with a disregard for work-life balance. While hustle entails working diligently and going the extra mile, it is crucial to establish boundaries and prioritize personal well-being. Leaders can encourage this balance by promoting flexible working arrangements, providing resources for professional development, and recognizing and celebrating achievements and milestones. This creates a healthy work environment where hustle is balanced with self-care, leading to increased productivity, creativity, and overall job satisfaction.

5. Being Open to Learning and Accepting Help from Others:

Leadership is not a solitary journey. While there is a perception that leaders must navigate challenges on their own, the truth is that accepting help from others is not only beneficial but essential for effective leadership. By being open to learning from others and seeking assistance, leaders gain access to different perspectives, leverage the strengths of their team members, build trust, empower others, encourage growth, enhance collaboration, increase efficiency, and create an inclusive work environment. It is a sign of effective leadership that recognizes the collective capabilities and potential of the team, ultimately contributing to the overall success of the organization.

One of the key benefits of being open to learning and accepting help is gaining diverse perspectives. Each team member brings unique experiences, skills, and insights to the table. By actively seeking and considering these perspectives, leaders can gain a broader understanding of complex challenges and make more informed decisions. This diversity of thought leads to innovative solutions and prevents blind spots that may hinder progress. Additionally, accepting help from others allows leaders to leverage the strengths and expertise of their team members. No leader can excel in every aspect of the business, but by recognizing the talents of others and delegating tasks accordingly, leaders can tap into the collective intelligence of the team. This not only fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among team members but also leads to more efficient and effective outcomes.

Accepting help also builds trust within the team. When leaders show vulnerability and acknowledge that they don't have all the answers, it creates an environment where team members feel safe to offer their insights and ideas. This trust enhances collaboration, as individuals feel valued and respected for their contributions. It encourages open communication, constructive feedback, and fosters a sense of collective responsibility towards achieving organizational goals. Furthermore, accepting help and being open to learning demonstrates a growth mindset. Effective leaders understand that learning is a continuous process and that they can benefit from the knowledge and experiences of others. By embracing a learning mindset, leaders set an example for their team members and foster a culture of continuous improvement and development.

Accepting help also increases efficiency and productivity. Leaders who delegate tasks based on their team members' strengths can distribute workload effectively, allowing individuals to focus on what they do best. This improves overall productivity and ensures that resources are utilized optimally. It also prevents burnout and enables leaders to focus on strategic decision-making and high-level responsibilities.

Finally, accepting help and learning from others creates an inclusive work environment. When leaders actively seek input and value diverse perspectives, they create a culture where everyone feels heard and respected. This leads to greater employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention. It also encourages individuals from different backgrounds to contribute their unique insights, fostering innovation and creativity.

In conclusion, being open to learning and accepting help from others is a vital aspect of effective leadership. By embracing diverse perspectives, leveraging strengths, building trust, empowering others, encouraging growth, enhancing collaboration, increasing efficiency, and creating an inclusive work environment, leaders can unlock the full potential of their team.

Ultimately, this collective effort contributes to the overall success and growth of the organization, positioning it for long-term sustainability and achievement.

9 Conclusion

Throughout this study it became prevalent how difficult it can be to hold a leadership position. Adding the layers of startup and high-performance team environments the complexity increases significantly. Due to the nature of these organizations, the lack of resources and often time, the expectations for leadership are tremendously high. Moreover, the individuals in startup and/or high-performance teams often operate at a highly advanced level, which does not make it easy to lead them. They demand freedom and decision-making powers, thus claiming leadership responsibilities for themselves. Successful leaders in this environment let this happen and hence enabled the transaction of leadership roles between leader and follower. This exchange of leadership responsibilities in turn leads to the blurring of classically understood leadership roles, where hierarchies start to blend, clearly illustrating a more progressive approach to leadership. This poses an interesting opportunity for future research, which is also highlighted by the work of Uhl-Bien et al. (2014).

Further research of followership theory poses several exciting opportunities that may have positive effects on the overall organization. Firstly, follower traits and behaviors could be investigated to define traits and behaviors exhibited by effective followers in different contexts and industries, and how those contribute to areas like team performance, innovation, and organizational success. This could add to the substantial body of work around leadership traits and behaviors, especially investigating the relationship between effective leaders and effective followers including the influence of trust, communication, and support. Examine how these relationships impact follower satisfaction, development, and performance.

In addition, the examination of followership theory in various organizational environments presents an exciting avenue for future research. Specifically, the exploration of followership in virtual and remote work environments is of great significance. As the prevalence of remote work and virtual teams continues to rise, understanding how followership operates in these contexts becomes paramount. The unique challenges and opportunities that arise in distributed work environments warrant thorough investigation. Researchers can delve into the intricacies of followership within virtual teams, where physical proximity is replaced by digital connectivity. How does followership manifest in a remote setting? What are the key factors that influence followership behaviors and dynamics in virtual teams?

One crucial aspect to consider is the role of technology in facilitating effective follower-leader interactions. With advancements in communication and collaboration tools, virtual teams rely

heavily on digital platforms to connect and collaborate. Exploring how technology influences followership dynamics can provide valuable insights into how leaders and followers establish trust, maintain engagement, and foster meaningful relationships in the absence of face-to-face interactions.

Another promising area of followership theory that could be examined is the concept of follower empowerment and voice. Understanding the conditions and strategies that foster a sense of empowerment among followers and create an environment where they feel comfortable expressing their ideas, concerns, and dissenting opinions is crucial for effective leadership and organizational success. Additionally, it is important to explore the organizational conditions that facilitate follower empowerment and voice. Investigate factors such as organizational structure, communication channels, decision-making processes, and feedback mechanisms that contribute to a climate where followers feel empowered to share their thoughts and opinions. Understanding these conditions can help organizations create a culture that values diverse perspectives, encourages open dialogue, and leverages the collective intelligence of the workforce.

In order to enhance the quality and depth of future research, it is strongly recommended that researchers pay special attention to the selection of participants for both qualitative and quantitative studies. The correlation between the years of leadership experience of the participants and the value of the data collected emerged as a significant factor during the interview and transcription process, as well as in subsequent data analysis. To ensure a more comprehensive and valuable dataset, researchers should prioritize selecting participants who possess a substantial amount of expertise and experience in the relevant field. By including individuals with extensive leadership experience, researchers can tap into a wealth of knowledge and insights that are derived from real-world scenarios and challenges. These participants can offer unique perspectives, nuanced understanding, and practical wisdom that enrich the research findings and contribute to a more robust analysis. The inclusion of participants with diverse backgrounds, industries, and organizational contexts can also significantly enhance the validity and applicability of the research outcomes.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the focus on experienced leaders should not overshadow the valuable insights that young leaders can offer. Researching the specific skill-set and leadership behaviors of young leaders can lead to the identification of unique opportunities and cutting-edge ideas that have the potential to reshape the landscape of leadership for both emerging and seasoned leaders alike.

Exploring the leadership capabilities of young leaders can provide fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to leadership challenges. Young leaders often bring a strong sense of adaptability, agility, and digital fluency, which can be valuable in navigating rapidly changing business environments. By understanding the distinctive skillset and attributes that young leaders possess, researchers can uncover new strategies, practices, and frameworks that can be beneficial to leaders across all stages of their careers.

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Appendix

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: A – Founders & Mgmt Team Members, Int_A_01

EH: Good then. As a first question, can you tell me a bit about your professional background? And how long have you been working with startups?

Int_A_01: Okay, so, um my professional background is, always software, software engineering, and I graduated from a university in Ukraine and I studied mathematics there. So computer science wasn't the thing and my first job was in Ukraine. Even before I graduated from the university,, all the halfway through the university I was working already and that was I think it was 2000. Sorry, in 1999. This is where it all began, so it's been a while. So it's like, closing in 30 years and I've been doing this for this long. All of this was software engineering. So I was lucky enough to start working in a startup-like environment. When I say startup, it's more, I guess a startup can be defined by the size of a company to begin with and then the environment that dominates the company. So that environment pretty much shaped what I wanted out of the job kind of next and the following job and so on. So this is my kind of almost northern star. The environment I started working in has, yeah, has become like a goal in life to create. So, and now that was very friendly. So I guess the sort of environment where everybody helps everybody. Mistakes are not punished. It's gonna be positive reinforcement. You know, if you make a mistake, you help. If you achieve something you celebrate. And we would play games after work and stuff like that together and so that was my first startup environment then. There was another kind of startup environment when I moved to the UK. It was 2000. Roughly. That was when I went into another startup, which didn't quite go well. The startup didn't work. I wasn't a founder back then I was a developer transported from Ukraine into the UK like and I had very little experience. That was basically an environment like all of the kinds of positive and negative environments, they are going to shape you along the way. That environment, for example, there was a group of people that would just, you know, decide things and then they would disseminate the information. To me this kind of, you know, environment, that didn't feel right. So there was very little, you know, there's very little you can say then. Look, I was kind of doing this work, I just didn't have the desire to succeed as well. So I was doing pull-ups instead of focusing on work and stuff like that. I, you know, it's just, it's just not a good environment. And yeah, that startup didn't go well, primarily not, because we kind of didn't build software. Ultimately, there's guys who are making decisions they've argued, and the startup

was kind of falling apart. You know, I didn't know how it was, you know, how it came about and I don't quite know why I fell in the park. Yeah, from that point on it was, I guess just normal employment, but it's not the startup environment. But, in big companies. You have teams, you've got smaller teams. If you take any big companies, they consist of thousands of teams and those teams basically operate, I guess some operate like startups in terms of they are given a goal and they walk towards it somehow and there's some kind of operating red tape. So, these processes they need to follow and stuff like that. And I experienced kind of good and bad leadership in this environment, as well. And, and the last startup is, well, this one, we started three years ago, I guess. and this, the leadership is a where we're trying to recreate here is a combination of all of these experiences, I had pretty much. And I think I would say with my co-founder I have, I think I have a pretty good influence on company culture. He is a good guy but what I like, I am almost 47 and he is 30. Right. So I do have a bit more experience so like the quantifiably right that helps me sort of understand the culture.

EH: What role models do you have in mind when you think of leadership?

Int_A_01: Well, those are all models that came from all of my experiences, right? Effectively, all of my bosses. None of them were perfect. So I will just give you an example. There's like, very technically well leadership. There's technical guys and stuff. They absolutely suck at people management. Right there. They will suffocate. They micromanage. They would take control of all decisions and stuff like that. But because they're brilliant, perhaps some things get done well. On the other side basically there is a very relaxed kind of leadership style. Like trusting you do this, I trust you get to somewhere, but no clue about technical kind of direction, right? So it's a little bit, you know, those projects do not necessarily succeed, either, right? So, maybe a role model is someone who is aware of technical things. If you have a technical product, you are aware of the product, where it needs to go, but at the same time kind of you, you've got to let people that work with you, you know, make mistakes and recover from them and trust. Like most people learn from mistakes. And I believe you need to kind of let them make those mistakes, right? It's unavoidable, sometimes painful to watch but it basically pays off. You have to be super patient with this. So ultimately people kind of, you know, learn this stuff. They learn from what they've done and do things better. And ultimately, then you can kind of, you know, it's like riding a bicycle without holding the handle. So just let them go and you know, they'll do the right thing by themselves later on. You know, that's my kind of ideal leadership. It's a bit utopian. Maybe if I talk to you, other people who you know, leaders in the fields, they say this may or may not work well. It may not work at all, but if it does it's gonna be great, you know, and kind of wait wait and see if it works. And also there's this scalability challenge with this as well. You know, if you can, you know, it's like you can have trustful relationships with a certain group of people, but when there are like 500 of them, maybe there's

some mechanics into being involved in building a company at that level. I don't know yet how to run companies of that scale.

EH: Thank you, what are high-performance teams for you.

Int_A_01: A high-performance team is basically just kind of quantifies performance, right? So its performance, usually is like a serious results driven environment, right? So it's like people who achieve results and a high-performance team means people are able to find problems to solve and correct them. They need to pick the right battles and they need to be able to solve them without supervision. They would do it by themselves and that's what a high-performance team is. And also having a relaxed environment, where perhaps some people will freak out and kind of feel pressure and complexity. The problem of high-performance for me is when people can solve complicated problems by themselves. Identify these problems. And help others to solve them. Help people around to solve problems. Like look at it as if it were humans. So just lucky, take the human body. The human body is like a symbiotic organism of a lot of cells working together, right? And they can achieve things individuals wouldn't. And in a high-performance team to me you create a symbiotic mechanism that would be able to achieve things.

EH: Thank you. And what kind of function does leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_A_01: This is quite interesting. So I think, that's my personal view, by the way, say that this is very individual for different people. So culture, like the culture needs to be right. It is very important to encourage people to do what they enjoy doing. And the other part is the way the team is assembled. So, for example, if you put a team together, it is leadership, responsibility to assemble the correct team. And the correct team in this sense is that I need to see that they kind of complement each other. They need to have respect for one another. And that's the role of leadership to make sure that there's a respect and good culture in the team. I think that's important. And also, I guess the other in any product oriented environment, I think it's also important that there is a vision. You know when people kind of do something they understand, why they do what they do. They understand the process. They need to be told what to do. They just understand why they do. They find things to do themselves, as long as they understand where they are going. And leadership I suppose is to provide this vision as to where things need to go. And one more thing which I find important is to help people communicate in the right way. So as long as communication is working we can solve any problems. If communication is broken. Game over you cannot solve anything. Even basic small problems become gigantic in a broken communication environment. So and and this communication is to work. Well, right, so people need to communicate like adults. And treat one another professionally and with respect and be positive. Um, some things maybe, you know, just maybe

done asynchronously like on chat. And if people kind of assume that other people are out to get them, that creates toxicity. Actually leadership means to eliminate toxicity at all costs. Well the decision needs to be made quite quickly about it. So that's the important bit. So yeah I guess coming back to what our performance team is like is non-toxic, well communicating and with good understanding where they go and your technical ability and the respectful one another, you know, I think that's what it is.

EH: Thank you. And why are startups different from other types of organizations?

Int_A_01: I think that Elon Musk has illustrated this well with his rockets, right? So most organizations, especially old school ones, like if you take NASA building a rocket. They would spend basically five years and a blackboard trying to work things out and see if the rock is gonna fly. While Musk built something that hardly can fly and then tries to fly it, right? So effectively startups are less risk averse and more tolerant to failures. And so you basically, need not be afraid to fail, right? Where's the kind of larger organization that is paranoid about failing. Like they literally want to make every step perfect. But that is exponentially difficult to do with a big organization and initially difficult to learn as well. You know, you could be procrastinating thinking, how you're gonna be great. Or you just can fail. Three times, four times and in the end the fifth one, you're gonna be right and then that process is much quicker. Like that's what makes startups different from other organizations. Basically in another term it can be described as hustling. You just try to do whatever it takes to survive, you know. There's definitely no red tape. There's no processes and stuff like that. They stop you. Oh, we can't do this because there's a process we need to do first. No, we just see right away how to do it. So that's what startups are like.

EH: And in this context, what do you think should be the main focus of leadership in a startup?

Int_A_01: There is no, I'd say there's no leadership role that is well defined. In startup the focus should be on users. So basically look if you focus internally on the team too much, you forget the users you die, right? So if you focus only on users and kind of ignore your team, then the team falls apart. Ultimately, they would not be able to help users as efficiently. So the leadership is a balance between making the team kind of perform well, and also making sure that we are looking after the users who use the product. That's the goal I guess of leadership. In fact, and the one thing in leadership in startups is basically there's one dynamic that is kind of, probably not super apparent from other companies. Let's suppose I'm a developer. I can mention this and now we need to do marketing, right? So okay, I'm not a marketing person or sales or something like this. And, in startups, basically, what you do is you instead of finding a person who does it for you, you actually learn to do it yourself. First right then that's a kind of very well defined characteristic of a startup or founder you kind of need to do it yourself.

And there is no like oh this is not my thing. There's no such thing, everything is your thing, you know, like in the startup everything you know that is not not like kind of not my thing and doing it yourself. What that means basically if you need help with marketing. So if you did it yourself, you give yourself perspective. To just say, okay, I now need this kind of person to help. Whereas oh look, find the person to solve this problem for me. That's never going to work. Nobody is going to come and solve your problems. You kind of need to solve all of your problems yourself, that this is very very startup defining, kind of saying, I'd say And that is not leadership. It's just more like a family. You know, if you start something, you've got to be prepared to solve all of the problems yourself.

EH: What does this mean for your employees?

Int_A_01: I guess it's the same with that. What that means is basically if a new challenge comes up, which is for example, orthogonal to what a team is doing. The good example is like most of us, 90% of the company are developers, right? And developers. I mean to varying degrees, some people are kind of more out there than others. But some people just like to be alone and code stuff, right? And then a problem comes up like okay we need to produce content, right? And within the marketing what that means for employees, they need to learn new skills, too. Like during release weeks, where people speak to other people. People do articles about what they are working on. Just effectively take what they've done and kind of get it out there themselves, right? And we will do it like we say, okay we need to solve this problem, we will do it. Let's try and find the best way for all of us to do it together. So ultimately employees need to hustle and be prepared to do things outside of their comfort zone. And this is one of the key characteristics of like, kind of traits of a personality when you're hiring for a startup. They need to be a bit of a hustler. In a sense, they need to be prepared to deviate from what they do. It's not like I don't do X, right? Everybody does everything pretty much in a startup.

EH: How can leadership contribute to a team's performance, both positively and negatively.

Int_A_01: So basically you should do things to lead by example. So you can ask a person to do something you wouldn't do, right? So that's basically that's what it is. So if you ask people to do what you wouldn't do, then it's kind of you creating negative environments. But if you work just as much and you kind of do as much of work, you know, not only interesting things as everybody else. That's why I'm saying that leadership is not really up to just one person because in a startup everybody does everything.

EH: Have you noticed that your leadership behavior had a direct effect on a team's increased or decreased performance?

Int_A_01: Yeah, I did. So I would say we kind of have a very well performing team. I'm quite happy with the way things are going and at the same time there's some stuff that our Head of Talent was helping me out with some communication skills. Bad communication might affect someone negatively. Sometimes people are feeling not valued for what they do, which is not the case. But just, you know, with async communication on chat, it may be perceived like that. It can be helpful enough to communicate things. But sometimes, we are all human and sometimes, you know, will have emotions and stuff. Sometimes you look at something that you don't like, for example. How do you communicate that back to a person that you don't like? Other than this is really bad. And then the employee spent months working on it and it's bad. I don't think of myself as a leader as such but yeah. Just the way, the way I communicate, sometimes can affect people kind of negatively. That's what I'm working on as well.

EH: Do you change or adapt your leadership behavior depending on the situation you're in?

Int_A_01: Oh of course yeah yeah. Everybody is different. We have people from different cultural backgrounds. You may say something that is normal to you but might be perceived in a different culture as very rude. Yeah. I think you would make mistakes but I think what helps well, helps me personally, is that if I create some sort of trust with people. They know for example I'm not a bad person. Hopefully. That if even if I say something wrong, they don't get angry with me or something. I think it's very important to try to build trust with people. You work with right in both ways so they trust you and you trust them and then that thing is you look easier than in this environment. Whereas if there's a mistrust this is really bad, really bad.

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow?

Int_A_01: I haven't studied these models. I don't know. No, I guess.

EH: So you rather trust your gut when you lead?

Int_A_01: Yes. Yeah, a lot. Yeah, only this I said I kind of trying to learn from experience in the sense, I had a bosses right who I've been at the receiving end of leadership. And I'm trying to avoid things I didn't like on the receiving end and I replicates things I did like. That's my model kind of. And I had a lot of, I mean, I had maybe 10 of them, different ones. You know, what to do, what not to do, you know.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives should know about leadership in a startup?

Int_A_01: Death is around the corner very much when you're building a startup and when you come into the startup world, you don't actually think about leadership, right? You think about not dying but whatever that means, whatever it is and you have to adapt to whatever situation

you are in and that's what people should do. First and foremost is a lot more difficult than it looks and all of the things that happen behind the scenes. If you don't really dig into it, you don't experience it, you just don't see them and you think it is everything you are just sailing right in reality, there's no risks and people cannot put a lot on the line to get where they want to get to. So, it's a lot of I guess it's not about leadership such as risk taking. It's just being prepared to turn up for the worst kind of stuff. In fact, basically when you start the company, firstly, you are trying to build a team. You will need to make decisions. You need to let people go. It sounds harsh, right? So you don't need to be ruthless with people. You just agree to disagree and just go separate ways. If there's something that doesn't work, change it, right? And it's not just a leadership topic as such. It's just the hustling kind of stuff when you start you need to hustle a lot, that's not even leadership as you know, like, coming in to say I'm a leader now. You know that doesn't mean anything. Like you just need to solve problems, like all the time and you are knee deep in mud.

EH: What is something that you would like to have known when you first co-founded your company?

Int_A_01: To be honest. I guess it depends, right? When you found a company, you basically go in the niche first. It's been three years. It's a bit of a blur. I don't know. Every day is very different. I don't even know what I wish I knew. I think. Yeah, I don't know what would be different if I started all over again? You kind of need to know this market niche really well, probably better than I thought I knew back then. Frankly, we did not make many mistakes so far. It hasn't been, okay, well, not dramatic ones.

EH: Last question, what tips and tricks do you have for startup leaders or new founders?

Int_A_01: I guess the biggest trick for you, for a new startup, is to find some sort of community or cohort. So not not doing it alone, right? Because people basically in this world and the startup world especially, at least they use, they tend to be very supportive of one another. That's basically trick number one, is to find some cohort of some sort like some startup community where you just be with other people, share ideas. They should be ready and flexible to your people and for that, they just need to not be alone. So some people cannot think they are going to work at home and do the dishes, probably like the most deluded kind of idea of starting a startup. So you kind of need to go out there. Be with startup people. Talk to investors early, talk to your users early. That's the biggest trick and I suppose, you just kind of need to be ready and enjoy stepping out of the comfort zone. If you just sit there and think, okay, I've done a great product and my product is just gonna sell itself. No, it just will not. There's no way unless you put energy in it talking to other people. So it's probably the biggest topic to find the community. Be part of it and keep learning from others. Fellow founders.

EH: Cool, thank you very much. I'm gonna stop the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: A – Founders & Mgmt Team Members, Int_A_02

EH: So the first question, can you tell me about your professional background and how long you have been working with startups?

Int_A_02: Sure, so my professional background is that I created my own startup back in Portugal. So, while finishing the last year of college, no, sorry, I didn't create it straight away. I went to work for a startup. And I think I stayed there for a couple of years and after that, I created my own company there in Portugal. Yeah, so I started in 2008, worked four years, then had my own company there for two years. And then I moved to Germany and worked with one, two, three, four, other startups. And now I'm with Elucidate for almost five years.

EH: And why startups?

Int_A_02: So in Portugal it started because they were the more interesting ones. The ones I saw that I could have the most impact on as well. It always felt that the bigger, the company, the least impact I could have. And also, the more difficult it would be to actually make any change. The ability to always be able to do something and see the impact of that. This was always very interesting to me and always very rewarding. So I always chased that. In my previous company. I was the lead engineer. So I was the first engineer hired and then I became CTO and I stayed there for four years and I could always say that if I make a decision I would see the impact of that and then I would see the changes of either the product or the business. So after that, I decided that I wanted to have a company of my own, but I would like to have the same type of impact. So I guess that's it. Also that it's a bit quicker, even though I cannot say that we are quicker. Our vertical is still very slow. The previous vertical is also very slow, but the inner processes were quicker.

EH: What are some role models you have? In mind when you think of leadership, both positively and negatively?

Int_A_02: I had a. A boss in my previous company, when I went to talk to my CEO about it and I talked about everything that wasn't working, he said, well now you learned how not to do things. So that was the role model of bad Leadership, so, I guess it was the biggest issue of not going deep enough. And not caring enough about the people in the process. And yeah, just in general have a really rough and superficial knowledge about the process. So I can see how that works in bigger companies, but in smaller companies that doesn't really work. I think my first boss here in Germany was a good role model even though it was very short. And I

think, even though there was like a huge gap in age, it was someone that I could see trying to understand the process. So what I was doing was very different from what he was used to, but he was trying to understand the process. And after I went from that company to the next one, there was a very short gap in age. And I also really enjoyed that because it was, it was basically my sparring partner. So I could talk to him about more technical problems, and have some advice on that. So it was very hands-on. I would say.

EH: What are high-performance teams for you?

Int_A_02: Very independent, with a lot of feedback. And feedback both ways, so up and down as well. Yeah, and you see the output in the team, it's easy to see the output of the team because it's not something that it's difficult to see. I would say usually they work well together. They have fun together. It's not always the need for that. I worked with a high performance team that wasn't having fun because there was someone, that wasn't fun in the team but overall, it was still high-performance.

EH: And what kind of function does leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_A_02: Mmm. I, I think more as the introduction to everything outside of the team. Also as showcasing what the team is doing. So that would be the older, the interfaces between the team and the rest of the company or the client side or even outside of the company. Leadership should always be able to interface between the team either to stop some of the requests, or to increase some of the requests or to stop some of the meetings, or the knowledge and so on or to increase those. So, being able to do that, I think, is a good skill to have. You can go from having a team that complains or not complaints that requests more transparency. To another team that requires less meetings because they're having too many interruptions. So having that balance, I think is important. Because this is what I like to see as well, as a leader is that someone that is able to you know go down but also be able to go above. So it's like this T-shaped person, Right? If I'm talking with someone in one function, I should be able to go down the rabbit hole with him, try to debug something. If I jump to a totally different function I should be able to do the same as well. I feel that if I'm not able to do that, then I'm not helping. So, I think that leadership should be able to do that, it doesn't have to provide the answer for the problem, but should be able to, at least follow and be used as a, as like the industry call is, the yellow rubber duck, just to be there. Be able to talk about it. And then the general advice on the career side or advice on the inner relationships or being able to talk one-on-one about everything. I spent a lot of time not doing one-on-ones with a team and I spent a lot of time doing one-on-ones with teams and I see a big difference just being there and saying this is a meeting for you. You can do whatever you want. I think it's very, very useful. It's not like I have to have an agenda on those. It's more giving up the time and giving up the space so that they

can take whatever they need. So not just be there to give but let the other person actually request for something.

EH: Why are startups different from other types of organizations?

Int_A_02: I think it's another topic, the concept of startups changes a lot, right? You can have really big startups. Really old startups. To me the concept is that you start with a really flat hierarchy or you have much less hurdles to try to achieve something. That plus, the quick iteration so that the quick feedback loops I think is what makes a startup a startup. Usually, either you spend your time trying to disrupt or trying to create something new. That's also something that is appealing.

EH: What tasks does leadership in a startup entail?

Int_A_02: I think it can be from pure people management to everything right now. I still do some coding. I still take on some tickets, some tasks that could be done by anyone else in the team. I do that type of interaction and interfacing with the other teams in the company and outside of the company. And then do the internal feedback as well. So, I think in general, it can either be a well-established startup, that it can be just a pure management position or not and do everything.

EH: And what do you think of leadership in a startup in general? Like what, what should be the main focus?

Int_A_02: I think the main focus should be trying to, to deliver the value that the company's trying to deliver. I try to really focus on that and achieve that every day. So, if the company has a mission, leadership should try to achieve that mission and deliver value as quickly as possible. And always trying to do that on their day to day.

EH: What does this mean for the employees?

Int_A_02: To have this type of guidance somewhere to go. So it's difficult to know where that is. Once you're on your day to day. and if you have someone that is trying to achieve that, at least you can look and see. Okay, that's what we are doing. Then we'll go that way.

EH: How can leadership contribute both positively and negatively to a team's performance, maybe you have some examples?

Int_A_02: So positively is the, you know, be the change you wanna see in the world, as cliché as it is if you want something to happen and you start doing it and people will notice and we'll start doing it as well. So we can drive a change by doing it. You can show that it's possible, you can show how to do it and then you can show that it is expected from them to do the same

thing. Sometimes it takes longer than others but it's possible. Negatively as I guess, everything that is bad with management that is either caring more about your own role than the company or the team, or trying to pursue your internal politics over procedure or internal needs.

EH: Now, have you noticed that your leadership behavior has direct effects on a team's increased or decreased performance?

Int_A_02: Yes, as it should I guess.

EH: And how was the performance affected?

Int_A_02: Both bad then, and and good. So, if I was not spending that much time with the team, I noticed that the team also is not using that guy. So it's them either going into their own direction. If leadership is split between more than one person, It's also problematic. So we have that for example. And on the other side, if I'm able to focus 100% of my time on the team, I see that change. I see the, you know, our burndown chart going down because people are focusing on that and trying to achieve that and know that if they have any issue, this issue will be solved and then they'll be able to achieve that.

EH: Do you change your adapter leadership behavior, depending on the situation you're in?

Int_A_02: Yes. But I would say not not enough. I think that's a skill that it takes time to get or sometimes you might feel that it's not needed. The other part will bend according to you and sometimes it happens. Sometimes it doesn't

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow? Or do you rather trust your gut when you're leading?

Int_A_02: I think I rather trust my gut because it's always this every framework out there can work with a set of parameters and then when you try to do that in your own specific company you will have issues because not everything will go by the book. But it's good to know what are the best practices. So you try to integrate them. I think we follow a lot of those industry best practices and we try to do some of those techniques like being able to do a retro or be able to do a post-mortem really helps a lot finding issues and trying to debug for those issues. This creates a loop where you try to get feedback as quickly as possible because we are running a two-week sprint and are able to quickly plan out something, try to work on it, see the results and then improve the next sprint. And if we see issues, then we're trying to resolve them instead of waiting or instead or not having that. Now where we can look back and say, okay, we did this wrong. What can we do to improve it? So, yes, but it's never by the books.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives in a startup should know about leadership before beginning this adventure?

Int_A_02: New founders and new leaders. I think it's two different things. At least I feel that these are two different things. So as a c-level or as a leader in a company, I think it's mainly that people expect a lot from you and you should be able to perform that way. So, It's really to try to understand what is your place and what you need to do. Where can you get? How can you get there? The founder part I think it's a bit different because it's much more like, the skin in the game is much higher than a non-founder.

EH: What is something that you would like to have known before you started as a founder?

Int_A_02: Specifically for leadership, I think it's how to say certain things in a nice way and not to let others take too much time off my team, maybe. We're spending too much time of my team, because if this happens, then I basically let someone else lead the team.

EH: Do you have any tips and tricks for founders or leaders in a startup?

Int_A_02: I would say to run the company as you would, this is very engineering focused I guess but to run the company as you would run a sprint. So everything if everything is towards speed and is towards getting feedback try to incorporate that into every single process, like it's difficult to run a sprint in a sales team but it's possible and I think it can improve or just take some of those techniques into your process and try to take some benefits out of it.

EH: Cool. Thank you. These were all the questions already so I'm going to stop the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: A – Founders & Mgmt Team Members, Int_A_03

EH: So, um, can you tell me about your professional background and how long you have been working with startups?

Int_A_03: Uh yeah. So, my background is software engineering and I started here in Vienna at the TU Vienna and went from the bachelor to the PhD in software engineering. And then during my PhD, I started to work at the Economics University in Vienna, the WU. And yeah, there basically I was working there for three years and before that I was working at the TU for two and a half years, each time as a project assistant. I was basically always working on different projects and software-oriented projects, software in general but also more in the direction of business process and business process execution. And yeah, during the time at the WU, the Economics University, I was working on a project and the project was about process mining. Basically, what process mining is it doesn't matter, but it's special field of business processes management. And during this time, we basically realized that there's a big gap with the current tools and there ss potential to do something better or different. And then we decided basically during this project time that there's a potential and we started to develop something. And this went then basically into this ppin off company or startup company. This started like the company, we founded the company, I think around one and a half year ago, one and a half to two years on that. Yeah, basically since then I'm working in in a startup and before that, I was working in the research area and academia.

EH: Cool. Thank you. And what are some role models that you have in mind when you think of leadership?

Int_A_03: I think one role model is my father. So he was, he's now retired, but he was a CEO. The last, I don't know 10, 20 work years, he was CEO. And quite successful. And yeah, he is definitely one of my role models. But also, so he was, he actually also did technical study, so he came from the technical side. But then he was a CEO. And on the CTO role model side, it's more like Wozniak, Steve Wozniak from Apple, maybe. Yeah, so it's more like the CTO side.

EH: Thank you. What are high performance teams for you?

Int_A_03: Like, In general, like, or what?

EH: In general, how would you define it or how do you understand it?

Int_A_03: Um, I understand it in the sense that, so, I mean, I'm from the technical background and have a software engineer background. For me, high performance is basically, not only like producing code fast, but producing it fast and in a good quality. So that without many bugs, or preferably without any bugs. I would say fast and high quality.

EH: And what kind of function does leadership have in high performance team, in your opinion?

Int_A_03: I would say it's a good question. Yeah. Maybe encouragement, so that yeah, you encourage employees. Like what I don't like is this Waterfall approach, like were in the beginning, everything is planned, and then like the employees are basically just coding it down. So, what I like are agile approaches where all the employees have their own responsibilities and can make decisions. What, how he or she is doing something, is coding something and all that. Yeah, responsibilities and stuff like that. And in my opinion, a good leader enforces, this and supports the employees to deciding things on their own, and not pushing them down and saying that, like, nice that you try to think but don't think just do what I say. I think that's important.

EH: Why are startups different from other types of organizations?

Int_A_03: The benefit in startups, or smaller companies, is that most of them have has a low hierarchy. So, it's like basically everybody's on the same level more or less. And in bigger companies, you often have the problem that you're just one of the gears in this whole big company. And that is stricter, and plans are fixed and come from above and the employees or everything below this level have to basically do what the higher people say. But I mean, in a big company it's like I think you cannot do it differently. You have to have some hierarchies there. But I think that's completely different. I know some people that have worked in bigger companies, and they basically changed now to startups or smaller companies because of that problem because they said, okay they run a lot of money in the companies, but they are not happy because they just are, in software terms, there's this saying that you are code monkey. So, you code what the upper guys are telling you. They didn't like that, and they accepted a smaller salary but like, more responsibilities in the smaller companies. I think that's one of the big differences.

EH: What you think of leadership in a startup?

Int_A_03: As I said, for me, it's important that every employee can say something. So basically, I mean the final decision, more or less, it depends on the size or impact of the decision. In our company basically every employee has their own responsibilities. So, in cold term, this means that everybody is basically responsible for one or two features. They can decide how they

implement stuff. So, I mean, we are basically, so, my co-founder and I are basically guiding the direction because we're saying, okay, the next thing is this feature. For this feature, we need this code piece and this code piece. But it's very in a high level. And the employees then who is responsible for this piece of software. Can then basically decide how she or he is doing it. I think it depends, of course, what kind of employees are working in the companies. But our employees, I think, they're quite happy with this approach. And yeah, I think that's at least something when I would work somewhere else, I would hope that it is structured the same as in our case.

EH: How can leadership contribute both positively and negatively toward a team's performance? Do you have some examples, maybe.

Int_A_03: Yeah, I think, it either again, depends on what the employees like. So, for instance, I mean, this is not now in our company, but something I realized during my PhD time. So, I said, I was first working at the TU and then at the WU with two different professors. And the first professor, He was actually one that was giving a direction, in which the PhD students should work or can work on. And I have to say for me especially at the beginning, this was correct. So, because I mean as a PhD student you come into this big field of software engineering in my case. And like thousand different directions in which you can go. And there, there's the gain of the direction was good. For a friend of mine it was actually not that good, I think. He was more like this free guy, and he wanted to be like not directed. Then I was changing to the WU. And the professor was actually the other way. So, he was really like you can do what you want. Back then, for me, I was already mature enough. It wasn't a problem for me. But I realized from some other people that when they started with this professor, and they had problems with this. They were like they needed guidance, but they didn't get guidance at the beginning at least. For them, it was kind of negative that they weren't lead. But for other people, it was again a gain and on the other side at the table, it was the other way around. So, there were some positive effects of guiding and some negative effects of guiding. I think is really depends on the company style and all the employees.

EH: Have you noticed that your leadership behavior had like a direct effect on your teams increased or decreased performance?

Int_A_03: We started already from the beginning on with this agile approach and everybody has their responsibilities and its basically kind of free. I mean, the only thing that we are guiding them in is which feature we want or need. And if they have questions, we are always there to answer and help them. And also make decisions if they are unsure in which direction they should go. So, we already did this from the beginning on and we are actually quite successful in this direction, so, we have a high performance, I would say. Our output is quite good. But I

don't have any comparison to that. So, we didn't do any change. It was from the beginning on positive this decision to do it like that.

EH: Do you change or adapt your leadership behavior depending on the situation you're in?

Int_A_03: Yes. Yeah. So, for instance, this year, we got a new junior developer and at the beginning I told her quite a lot, what she should do and how she should do it. Because, I mean, at the very beginning we said, Okay, we need this feature and kind of your responsible for this feature. And she was like, Well, that's too much right. Which I can totally understand. And then well, yeah, I did a lot of it with her together, a lot of tailoring and breaking it down into a smaller pieces, and then told her to start with this, then do this, then do this, and that worked quite well. Um, and now since last month, she started with a new feature and there she got less guidance from my side. So maybe that was a change. Yeah, I think, I think it worked quite well until now.

EH: Nice. Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow, or do you rather trust your gut?

Int_A_03: I mean what we are doing is like Scrum so it's project planning but that's actually the only thing and the rest is just yeah trusting our guts and talk to the people. Yeah, I think it so we don't have any role model that we follow. Just talk to people and adapt to what they like.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives in a startup should know about leadership in a startup?

Int_A_03: I think the most important thing is to be flexible. Especially also in a startup because there are so many things that you need to do, not only leadership in the direction of leading your employees to write software. But also, like, do hiring stuff and do all this document filling out stuff and talking to different people. Not only like the employees, but also a lot of the tax lawyers and different other lawyers, and all the stuff. Yeah, and also it changes from week to week so one week, I was like, concentrating more on writing software and coordinating and talking to the software team. And the other week it was more like talking to customers. And yeah, try to get new customers and stuff like that. So, you really have to be flexible. In a bigger company, when you are a CTO, you're not in the direction of like getting a new customer or something.

EH: Um, what is something that you would like to have known before you founded, the company but then kind of had to learn the hard way?

Int_A_03: I kind of expected that but what I learned is definitely that talking to customers and getting customers is quite hard. I kind of expected it but I didn't expect that. It's so hard. Yeah.

EH: Yeah, do you have any tips and tricks for people who are interested in founding a startup?

Int_A_03: Um, I think one good advice is always to get good co-founders. Find somebody who is like not in the same direction as you are but like, what's the English word contrary? So, he's like the other direction. So, in our case, we are basically three founders. One is the professor, so he's more like the research guy and he's like always two years before us all the ideas are like, yeah, sounds good, but we can do it in two years. And then the other co-founder, he's more like the economics guy. So, he likes all this talking to investors, talking to customers. Like he always knows, which startup was bought by another company and stuff like that. And I am not into, not so interested in this, but I'm more on the technical side. So, I think he's also very interested in getting like the yeah, getting the money basically. Applying to grant and stuff like that and project work. And yeah, I'm also not that interested in that. But he's then not so interested in doing the software stuff. So, I think for us, it works quite well. And I think it wouldn't work that good if both of us would do like only the software stuff. Yeah, startups. So, there's basically necessity to see everything. Um, yeah, I think that's quite important. If both would be the CTO stuff or CEO stuff, then nobody would get the money or nobody would develop something. That would definitely be a problem there.

EH: Thank you very much. This was already my last question.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: A – Founders & Mgmt Team Members, Int_A_04

EH: Okay, so we are recording. So, first question, can you tell me a bit about your professional background and how long you've been working with startups?

Int_A_04: Yes, so my initial background is investment banking. After university I was working in investment banking for six years, across different departments and then after investment banking, I wanted to move to a more entrepreneurial type of job. So that's when I moved to startups, which was six years ago. I worked in three different startups in Berlin.

EH: And why startups?

Int_A_04: Why startups? Because I wanted to, work in a job that is as a bit more varied and that I can have more impact in general. I tend to get bored quite easily if I'm not challenged. So, even investment banking, I changed three departments, three four departments when I was there in two different offices in Europe and then in the end after investment banking, I had the chance to move to Amazon to another big company. But then I decided I didn't want to get into a more repetitive job where I'm one of 20 people doing a similar thing. I wanted something where I can problem solve, find my own solution, where I have some space to implement my solutions.

EM: Thank you. And what are some role models you have in mind when you think of leadership?

Int_A_04: Oh, I'm terrible with names. So, I don't know because from my past experience I had a few in banking a few managers that are very good. I have to say that I really like don't remember the names but like in the way they handled things on one side, like the management of their team on a one-on-one basis and trying to like make somebody grow, giving a path to grow and opportunities but at the same time, being a good leader in terms of liability. And then I listen to a billion podcasts, but I'm not sure what to mention right now.

EH: Um, what are high performance teams for you?

Int_A_04: For me it is like, I mean, I would say people that always try their best and collaborate with each other individually. Try to do the best they can and have the interest of the company in mind and can work together as a team.

EH: And what kind of function does leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_A_04: Definitely enable people to grow. I would say, like being motivated or like maintaining a level of motivation, but it's not just up to management, but I think it helps, so, giving them whatever they need to continue to be motivated to perform at their best.

EH: Why are startups different from other types of organizations?

Int_A_04: Many things, generally speaking one which is not true and at the beginning I thought because of the lack of politics, the lack of this big structures that require quite a lot of politics to move and to do things in any case, but it's not necessarily true. Because being a startup, even in a small environment you find this thing. So that's not the case. I think in general, a level of uncertainty, on the outcome. So, many times, I think it's necessary for people to find motivation in other things. It's not necessarily the performance of the company at all times, or knowing where we're going or having a path, but finding motivation into how they work together, collaboration, the mission, the things that they are doing how they're developing. So, uncertainty not everybody can handle it. Another thing is many times, especially, I don't think startups necessarily the best place for junior people because there are a few people, and they need to do a lot. So, there is unfortunately not that much time to train and to teach things. But what I found also, what I struggle sometimes is that I also don't have an answer. I also don't know how to do things because it's the first time I'm doing it. So, I cannot teach somebody. I can guide them through my thinking process but I'm the first one who needs to think how to do it. So, it requires people that have initiative. They put themselves out there, they try to find solutions. They try to problem solve and they kind of have to find their own tools to do it. And the last thing I think I would mention, a big thing in startups, especially early stage, the company culture, and the internal environment is very much dependent on how the management is, how the founder are. Like, there is a very strong link in larger organization. You can have an asshole as a CEO and their opinion here in between. So, you can find your own environment where you're still happy within the company, depending on the team and your manager, but in a small company, the values and how the management in particular, the CEO are behaving it has a big impact.

EH: What tasks does leadership in a startup entail?

Int_A_04: For me like everything. It entails managing the team and keeping them high-performance. I personally, I make sure that things are delivered, that we achieved the goals, that we understand the direction we are going. Then we give enough structure, like understand what type of structure people need like, Is it okay if I give you a goal for the year and some people are able to, you know, find their path through that or some people need more guidance. So, managing this and giving a path towards a goal and depending on the time horizon that is

needed. To me it is more like managing more closely or leaving space to people to find their own way.

EH: What does this mean for employees?

Int_A_04: It means that they need to find their own way. But also, I think, for employees, I think it's important that they can express what they need in terms like to perform because, again, like going back to this in the topic of some people need more, some people need less, some people like having the space and having an impact in finding their own way and jumping on like different things because they understand the common goal and like to have an impact on different things. Some people want structure, they get lost and they get confused. So, I think for employees is important to understand what they need and to express this because not all the people are the same.

EH: How can leadership contribute both positively and negative negatively to a team's performance?

Int_A_04: Negatively. I can say what I think. I sometimes negatively impact the team. Sometimes I micromanage a bit. But it, yeah, this is not great, but it depends because I'm ultimately responsible for stuff. And it's very much related to the level of trust or like knowledge I think people have sometimes or where when I think they're lost. But micromanagement especially for some people can be very demotivating. MI think actually maybe not following through on some things, like, for example, let's say just developing people. We talk about development plans. We have a discussion then I'm not following up too much if it's being done or not. I don't know if it's motivating or impacting negative, but sometimes it's like we talk about the topic and then nothing changed. And if it happens a couple of times then it does not have a great impact on the people to get the motivation because I we talk about this and it's not happening or you forgot about this. Positively, I give them guidance and give them space to grow. Understand what they need to grow. I think an important part of my role is also sharing a little bit more of the big picture and trying to put things into a context. So, especially the team is not just focusing on their own tasks and their own function but have a bit of a bigger understanding and put things in context of what the company is doing, what other people are doing, how they can contribute. So, I think sharing in general and communicating more about what's going on in different area.

EH: Do you change or adapt your leadership behavior depending on the situation you're in?

Int_A_04: I don't know. I need to think. I think, yes. I think sometimes, what I struggle is, my role as a team leader a role model and as employee of like, you know, reporting to someone else myself. This mix between I have my own space, but I also report to a person that is above

me and even without wanting to be much hierarchical, that's a situation and that's normal. And so, the mixing of what I want to do and how I manage the team and the things I want to know what I have to do because it's somebody else's decision.

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow when leading?

Int_A_04: Let me think. I mean, every time I read about something, or every time listen to live things that are related to leadership and how to have a high-performance team. I like the idea of like being in a place where I can give as much space as possible for people to bring ideas. So, for example, I really like the book about Pixar. I also I really like empowering people as much as possible and I know you don't love it and I know we spoke about Netflix because I think I mentioned before I also don't love some parts. But this idea of like okay if you have a really good team, then try to empower as much as possible on all levels. This is what I would like to do. And that's why what I say when I go back to micromanaging, sometimes I don't like it because it's in the opposite direction.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives in a startup environment should know about leadership in a startup?

Int_A_04: The fact that is important, I think, that one of the main problems for startups, but probably everywhere is like, though people might get to certain positions because they know stuff rather than being manager or being able to manage teams. So just acknowledge the importance. That being a manager is like it's another job almost and you need to get the tools to do this. I think it's important because especially in startups, whereas in a large company the manager of a team is the manager of the team. Yes, they do some work, but they do a very different work. In a startup where maybe, the CTO actually needs to do operational stuff. So, the technical knowledge, sometimes is much more important because they don't have many people to do the things, so they need to be able to do it themselves. But that means that the knowledge of the subject matter, like this, the subject is much more important sometimes than being able to manage a team.

EH: What tips and tricks do you have for startup leaders?

Int_A_04: Don't know, I'm still learning, but getting a coach. Getting a coach is definitely good. It's getting some external point of view. From somebody external to the company, which is very helpful. Especially on how to navigate conflict.

EH: Cool. Thank you very much. These were already all my questions. Yes, so stopping the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: A – Founders & Mgmt Team Members, Int_A_05

EH: Okay, we are recording. First question, Can you tell me a bit about your professional background and how long you've been working with startups?

Int_A_05: So, I've been working in startups in Berlin since July 13. So almost 10 years, I worked for three different startups, One was Omio. That was like, um, like a really cool experience because I joined the company when the company was only two months alive. Most of us, the employees, we were like interns. And my boss also had no idea how to be a manager and evolve. So, it was like, it was a learning curve for everyone. And I like after six months being there's an intern, I was made a trainee and then after being a trainee for, like, I was supposed to be a trainee for a year and then after like, eight months of being a trainee, I was made the team lead directly so, I never met the step of being like an SEO manager. I had two people first and then three. Then I had five people and then I had six and then the team was growing at some point and I had nine people. Three people for the Spanish market, three for the Italian market and three for the French market. Um, so that was like a for me, was a learning experience because yeah, like I had no idea so nobody, nobody told me how to be a team lead, so I had to do learning by doing and yeah and figure out things by myself. And after that I worked at another startup for three years. There I was Head of Marketing. And they're like, the team, in the beginning, was super small. So it was like me and three people and I had to fire someone like during my first month because this guy was really bad. So I don't know how they even hired him. So I had to, yeah. I had to let this guy go after like my first month and then I formed the team which was cool. Because I would grow the team and I could hire for my team. So, I usually chose the right people, some people didn't work out. But in general, I think I'm very happy with how it went. Yeah, and I was there for three years and then I was fired. The situation was very particular. I couldn't stand them. They couldn't stand me. And then, I joined Skoove. Again, I was going back again to a small startup. I was Marketing Director. Anyway, so there I was, I had one person in my team only at the beginning and then I had a lot of freelancers. And then I had one guy from the customer service team lead also under me. And yeah, I mean there it was like more like it was much more freelancers, so it was not the kind of leadership I like because I was like just working with freelancers. It's not the same as a team, the guy who I was working with, he wanted my position. So he didn't make things easy. He was nice, but like he was there. And then I had, I had two more people in the team but well the company didn't work out so they had to let me go with another guy from my team and more people from development. And now I'm like, my own boss.

EH: And why startups?

Int_A_05: To be honest, it's easier to get a job because like living in Germany, working for a well-established company in marketing. It's harder if you're not German. So in the end startups are more likely to look for foreigners and then at a big German company for marketing, probably they usually look for Germans or German speakers.

EH: What are some role models you have? In mind when you think of leadership? Positive and negative.

Int_A_05: Okay, so negative. I have like one of my former managers. Like that's the guy like, he's like, okay, he has read some books about leadership and like, okay, that's why you have to do something and then he goes by the book, but he's not feeling it and you can see this disconnect of what he thinks he has to do and what he wants to do. Because yeah, he would like to rule with a whip, like you have to do it, without giving options. And like every time I was talking to him in a meeting he was like a robot. It was horrible. Then I would say, like, CEOs. For instance my past CEO's are big bottlenecks because they want to decide everything and they think they know better than anyone. My my boss at my first startup, she wasn't really nice. I mean she was, when she joined the company, actually at the same time as me. We were kind of growing together and she became team leads. We got in at the same time and in terms of knowledge we were very similar. Anyway, you learned a lot, I don't know. I think for me actually, like the best experience with a manager, she had to be like the best one. And she was like, okay, like really like, um, working with me and we're working hand in hand and listening to me. And I felt like, maybe because she was a woman, I don't know. My experience with male leaders is not the best.

EH: Thank you very much. What are high-performance teams in your opinion?

Int_A_05: I think it is a team that can work without some of the pieces of knowledge, you know, That it's that. If someone is not there, you can still work. It can still work out. It's teams that work like a clock, you know. Everything gets set in motion very quickly. People react quickly if something or someone is not there. They know how to bypass obstacles. They don't need the team leads constantly so they can work on their own.

EH: What kind of function do you think leadership has in a high performance-team?

Int_A_05: Well, they should enable their people, you know, and they should identify and prevent future roadblocks. They should not stand in the way of the team and the team should be able to function alone. As a leader you should just be there in case there are questions. Make sure that your team is going the right path with the best business interest in mind. And enabling the team with whatever they need, acting as a facilitator, kind of.

EH: Why are startups different from other types of organizations?

Int_A_05: Because you have to be very fast, so things change so fast. Like, for example, I remember when I was at Omio, um, So, I was there for five years. We changed the guidelines in marketing, like every six months. And we're changing the seating plan every six months. I was like, okay, now the team is going to work like this and now we are changing it to this. We changed so many times so often because you need to add yourself to the growth. Often it is reacting to something that happened.

EH: What tasks does leadership in a startup entail?

Int_A_05: So, I think you need to be able to adapt and change things very quickly, depending what's needed. What else? So, I think like also like trying to stay ahead of what competitors are doing. As a startup you need to test many things.

EH: What do you think should be the main focus of leadership in a startup? Make sure that there's certain objectives so that the team works on the right things to accomplish objectives. So in a startup probably objectives are different and they are under a lot of pressure because it's like if you cannot manage to deliver the objectives then it's like okay then you don't get enough funding etc. But then yeah it's like you need to make sure that that your team is working in the right way to meet certain objectives.

EH: What does this mean for employees? Do they take over some extent of leadership?

Int_A_05: They should yes. Like at least they have to take the ownership and I mean, depending on seniority. If you have senior people in your team, they should take part in it. So that's part of being a senior, right? Like you can work completely autonomously without your manager. And making things easier for your team lead.

EH: How can leadership contribute to a team's performance, both positively and negatively, do you, maybe have some examples?

Int_A_05: I mean, like, Micromanaging, everyone. Telling everyone what to do, that would be negative or not giving clear directions. Also, like, for example, not having a clear structure on how the team works and who's owning what, creating an even bigger bottleneck. So everything has to go through you and you have to make all the decisions and not let your team decide. So I think that's going to have a negative effect. Keeping high quality and enabling people also. And giving them feedback. Help them. I mean, be there so they can ask you any questions if they need. You need to be there for them and from the leader's perspective make sure your team is not blocked by anything and they can work and you can show the direction that they need to take. And from the team's position.

EH: Have you noticed that your leadership had a direct effect on the teams that you were leading?

Int_A_05: I think so, I would guess so. Yes, I hope I had some positive effects on them.

EH: Do you change or adapt your leadership behavior depending on the situation?

Int_A_05: Yes I try to.

EH: And how and in which situations?

Int_A_05: So that's the question. Usually in situations where you are required to be a bit more like being on top of everything and and like actually checking in with people if they have done something. And you may have to be more pushy if you're in a crisis mode or something like this or a project needs to be done and the deadlines are there. And then when things are going well and smooth, etc, then you're gonna be more relaxed.

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow when leading?

Int_A_05: I would like to say, yes, but there is none

EH: So you trust your gutt?

Int_A_05: Yes.

EH: Okay. What do you think new founders or executives that are working in a startup for the first time should know about leadership?

Int_A_05: That you don't know everything. And that you need to hire people who know and you have to trust them that they know.

EH: What tips and tricks do you have for startup leaders?

Int_A_05: I don't know nobody ever asked me for a trick, who knows that? Yeah, maybe you should set more realistic goals, I don't know. Then again then you you won't get the funding if you don't set like crazy goals. Also that's why I'm not, I'm not going to be like a startup founder because I think.

EH: Cool. Thank you. These were all of my questions. I'm gonna stop the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: B – Investors & Coaches, Int_B_01

EH: Thank you very much for participating today, can you tell me a bit about your professional background and how long you've been working with startups?

Int_B_01: 24 years ago, just off finishing my PhD, actually three of my colleagues and I founded one of the few startups back then. We grew it from obviously zero to an IPO in 2007, then being acquired by a bigger company in 2009. We took that company public in 2012. And eventually I left the company in 2018, after leading Europe. Then the company had 400 employees and more than 100 million revenue. Recently, the company again got sold for some 4 billion revenue. Five years ago, I restarted my startup career again. We invested and participated in building six startups and half of them are still alive. And I've I think I've invested into other ones but without being operationally involved, then I still am managing director of two of them. Yeah. And watching the others sometimes stumble and also grow.

EH: What are the role models that you have in mind when you think of leadership?

Int_B_01: My advice to first-timers is not to have role models. Don't read books, because of the bias. There's a more precise way of explaining it. If you ask a lottery, a lottery winner how to become rich and he says to buy a lottery ticket, that's not good advice. When you want to become an effective and successful leader, actually, if you want to be successful, we need a lot of luck. If you want to force your luck and become an effective leader then find your way to become an effective leader, don't copy and paste. If you copy and paste, there's a good chance that you will end up as a kind of cargo calculator. Just copying behavior, not understanding why things work, or what, cause and effect relationships are, won't work. This pattern actually repeated itself a lot, not just in startups and you see these managers pretending to manage. But essentially they are just copying some weird behavior. But effectively the task is not copying someone else's behavior, but, but really understanding what teams expect. And the second thing, what the future expects, especially in startups, rather than in more established organizations that don't change a lot. And if they talk about change, they typically speak of a change process, which was guided by external people. After that, they install some rituals because everything can change. In a startup you have to guide change because if you grow that is natural change. And so, you have to focus. You have to focus on the future, so anticipate what a team should look like. What the team should be prepared to do to be effective in one year, two years, three years. Not more than three years, because then it becomes so diffused that you can easily get lost. But you should anticipate how things will evolve into the

next one, and one or two years to become an effective leader in your environment. You have to understand your environment and your capabilities but what you need and not read books and say, oh well, Tim Cook of Apple, did that so it will work. But he didn't do it when they were five people at Apple. In a real early stage startup the thing is, you will have to build this company, no one else will. And you can't you can't copy others. You have to generate behaviors. And that's the biggest challenge for startup founders, especially when you do it the first time is to generate your own style. Your approach, and the best skill you have to grow, is your self-critical assessment. And to learn that most of your ideas are wrong. And you have to eradicate them before they become effective. It's actually an important part of leadership. I mean to invent your own categories of leadership. Generally, you see, three types of leadership approaches in early stage high growth companies one is the toxic bucket. One is the ineffective market and the last one is the effective market or at least the guys who try. The toxic guys can be easily identified. Those are these self-loving, look at me narcissists. Actually you find them a lot in startups because, if you're a narcissist, the one thing you have is a far too high level of self-confidence. So, their ideas are great. They are natural, born leaders, but what they do is they create a team of followers. They think they're a Messiah. The Messiah has followers. But eventually that becomes toxic because the early stage followers don't let the later stage followers approach the Messiah. As the first generation of followers are picked by random, when they eventually look for talent, nobody lets the Messiah talk to new talents and replace them. So, that's actually a toxic start. Astonishingly, it doesn't kill every company where you have narcissist leaders leading successful startups. In a startup, the team always comes first. And if you have an excellent team, everything can happen. Yes, still. Yeah, sure, you can still feel everything and it can happen. There are bad teams. With success. If you have a unique product market fit and you are lucky to be at the right time a toxic company can be successful. Then there are always the inexperienced leaders. Inherently insecure. Trying things out, go back. Don't want to make decisions because it could be the wrong decisions and eventually become very ineffective. Leading to nowhere. What a team needs from leaders is eventually you have to make decisions. Decisions based on incomplete information. The thing about inexperienced and ineffective leaders is they haven't been in that situation, there is no pattern recognition and so, they constantly try to explore the space around them. Eventually, you have to decide to move into a certain direction.

EH: What is a high performance team for you?

Int_B_01: In early stage high growth environments I always try to avoid the word startups, because especially in certain regions, where there are not many, every guy with an idea runs around and says I'm a startup. So with early stage, high growth companies, they need to reach a certain critical mass to become successful. So they are doomed to grow. And if they don't

grow fast enough in the early stage it can be a problem. Typically, you have a sustainable business model sometimes with 30 or 40, 50 people. And high-performance teams do not perform in the present. High-performance teams go through stages. And that's actually probably the biggest challenge for building early-stage high growth companies is to build teams with high potential. If you are adaptable and engaged and are able to invest into yourself and into your own future, then you will make your way especially if you will make a proper contribution to an organization. So you look for, but those black belts. It's super difficult to identify them. It took me about 10 years to be able to identify those people. That's the biggest challenge of having a high-performance, high potential team. And it's actually not just the leadership of the people in the spotlight. It's essentially managing to have tough people willing to perform or focus on performance. But also being able to think not just embrace change or tolerate change, but actually create change.

EH: That's very well said, Yep. What kind of function does leadership have in a high-performance team ?

Int_B_01: Leadership, by example, is by far the most promising one. You're not big enough, often you don't have the time to be mentoring because you have too many hats on. In these startup communities that I had, the biggest challenge eventually was to let loose of your daily job and be a more visionary leader. Try to talk with your team about the future, about the present and the future, at the same time. Be resilient. Talk about frustrations and learn to tolerate them, talk about stumbling, talk about falling down and standing up again. Also, leadership starts before. Before somebody enters the team, you have to be very open about it. Don't white wash or pinkwash your environment and say Hey you know it's a fancy startup world and we have this workation bullshit and don't do work. Goals matter. If you want to achieve goals, if we want to build things that don't exist yet, if that is something that satisfies you I do want you to be my companion. Not a follower. Companions.

EH: And why are startups different from other types of organizations?

Int_B_01: It's a speed of change. And the other one is unpredictability. What happens is that the change of goals, that's something, most people are not really prepared for. Of course, 20 years ago, it was different. Companies 40 years ago were very different organizations, but nevertheless, the pace of it, as impressive as it is, it's pretty smooth. Startups are never smooth. There are a few examples, but more often than not. You have to have people that embrace change, that actually like change. It's very much like growing up in the first 10 years of a human life. You forget your past pretty quickly. So if you're 80 years old, you don't know how it was at the age of five or six, kindergarten disappears within three or four years and that's normal. And so you don't want to have elderly people constantly talking about their past

success. If I constantly talked about what I have done 15 years ago, really who gives a fuck? I wouldn't be accepted as the leader. But talking about the unknown future and how you see it and asking them how they see it and whether you adapt your wait. That's a startup.

EH: What should be the main focus of leadership in a startup?

Int_B_01: The question is more what not. First leadership, by example second recruiting and identifying high potentials. And maintain a balance between expecting and living. High performance and hypertension.

EH: What does this mean for employees? What is expected of them?

Int_B_01: The same. In the earliest stage, there is no hiding place. You can't wait until things happen. The lack of structure is not, it's not the bug, it's a feature. It's not a. It's not that we are not yet there to run a proper company. It is a proper company. Like children, proper human beings, they learn almost everything quicker and better than adults. It's not an achievement if you tolerate change. It's even not enough if you embrace change, you have to create change. And if you're not a creator or a contributor. Don't do that. If you go to a startup because they have a kicker table that's the wrong choice. Kicker tables don't scale. It's always about change and goals of the future. These are things that drive you, that give you reward. That makes your team happy.

EH: How can leadership contribute to a team's performance?

Int_B_01: In many ways, but in startups, instead of, I would say, almost exclusively, by example.

EH: Have you noticed that your leadership behavior had direct effect on an increased or decreased performance of the team?

Int_B_01: I've seen companies failing because of leadership. So really going bankrupt. I've seen companies almost going bankrupt. I have seen founders or managers stumbling and falling down. And then reinvent themselves eventually, especially first timers realizing after a few years, what's really expected from them. I don't have overwhelming evidence, how leadership quality influences success. But having my own ancient history, I was a terrible leader the first time for at least a couple of years. I think it took years until I eventually realized what's expected from me and probably only after many, many years. But I'm a big fan of getting the people and culture aspect right. Because that's the thing you can control. Market mechanism is something that's most out of reach. So you need luck there. You don't need luck in developing your offerings. That you can control. Also people and cultural aspects. Leadership is getting that part right, when they are recruiting the right people. For example, what I mean by

leadership, by example is, if you expect your team to focus on the right things to, to welcome new members, to be kind of hyper-inclusive, meaning hyper open to new members, which is completely different from what psychologists or sociologists tell us of natural human behavior. If you start at a startup, you are part of the team from day 1, even from minus 1 month. You have to, as a leader it is your responsibility that people feel part of the company from day 1. You reinforce team behavior instead of individual brilliance. You go to customers, even if it's sometimes inefficient, even if you think you have something better to do, but you go there. As you expect everybody else to do that as well.

EH: Do you adapt your leadership behavior depending on the situation that you're in?

Int_B_01: I hope so.

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you follow when leading or do you rather trust your gut?

Int_B_01: I'm thinking about actual behavior, I usually trust my gut. We have established a kind of leadership or people and culture framework for startups. We try to avoid the mission and purpose stuff because it's often too abstract. What people need or what an organization, not people, needs a constitution. um, which allows it to take decisions at every level. If you put three people in a room, forcing them to make a decision, it's okay if they are not sure but they should be able to have an informed discussion. Almost all purpose vision and mission statements right there. They just don't help you. It's a nice thing to talk about. What we do instead is try to operationalize it a bit more and so we have the right to discuss it and you can spend two or three days on it trying to establish four or five so called basic principles. Think about it in three dimensions: What do you want? What you want your product or your service to be described? What do you want your customers and partners and suppliers to describe you? That's not rocket science. But It gives you guidance. And these basic principles, your operationalized mission, it is actually on you as a leader. You can never violate it, again you have to lead by example. These are things you have to internalize and live. If you want to build a startup, you should help each other. You must help each other. You can't afford people working as an island. That's not how you build rapidly growing teams. The second one is you have to be international from day one.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives should know about leadership in a startup?

Int_B_01: Before they start. The most difficult thing is, you always underestimate how difficult it really is. Nonetheless, we try to educate the founders. The typical eye opener is the realization that you are not a small company, you're an early stage high growth company and that's

the opposite of a small company. You're a big company. Yeah. You're a mid-sized company that has not yet emerged. And that's how you have to approach it. Don't do things that work in a small team and don't work in a bigger team. And then, everything else follows from that. If you have realized that there are non-trivial things that contradict the the usual startup ecosystem, bullshit which is nice. Most of the talks about this very early stage things are lead into the wrong direction.

EH: Thank you very much. So let me stop the recording.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: B – Investors & Coaches, Int_B_02

EH: Okay. Thank you very much for your participation. As a first question, can you tell me a bit about your professional background?

Int_B_02: I'm coming from Human Resources. So I worked as a Vice President, Senior Vice President Human Resources in an industry group for almost 15 years. And 10 years ago, I started my own consulting business and we are working with different kinds of organizations. So from industry groups, to universities, to non-profit organizations mainly about leadership. So what does leadership mean helping leadership teams during transformation processes. So that's a strategy or reorganization where we help mainly. So how can we align them with purpose and dedication, so that they can contribute? Sometimes it's also about organizational structure but the main focus is on the human side, things like collective potential and creating an awareness where people can trust and and bring their potential and talents in.

EH: And how much experience did you do you have with startups?

Int_B_02: Let me think about it. I worked in a startup myself in the industry group. We had a new technology there and they decided that we needed to create a new organization and there I was responsible for human resources. But not so much with clients.

EH: What are some role models that you have in mind when you think of leadership, both positively and negatively.

Int_B_02: The negative is always easier. So at the moment, Elon Musk. So when I think about how he dealt with the Twitter acquisition and how he dealt with the team and making people redundant by sending emails and these kinds of things. So, really things, where I hardly can believe that we're still acting like that. Positive is not so easy, I think you always think about the big ones because, you know, I don't want to name customers but I think people like to see Patagonia. I think they are steps ahead and they say, okay our main stakeholder is Mother Earth and not customers or capital. So it really matters and everything we do needs to support that. We have an environment where we still can live in and still have a future and not just a certain percentage of the public. There you need a completely different business model. And that, you know, I think has a lot to do with leadership and envisioning and painting what our future needs.

EH: What are high-performance teams for you?

Int_B_02: I feel that I don't like the world anymore, high-performance. Okay, is this really what we need? But yeah what is it? It's a question of definition, I think. For me, a well functioning team, where everything is based on trust, so that they have a foundation of trust where they can interact and talk about everything which they have in their mind. So there are no barriers or any political things going on. So that's it. It's a base of trust. They are able to deal with conflicts in a positive way. So I think a conflict is important and that they have different perceptions and positions and that they can communicate about this. And even if they have different opinions, they are coming up with a good solution and that they are also challenging each other. So, in their own growth and development. So, for the purpose of how can my team colleague and myself, how can we grow together, so to say. Well, they have a clear vision so they know what is their purpose or whatever you want it to mean or to name it. So I think they need to have a picture of where they want to go together. So what is, what is it, why are we working together? Why are we doing that? So this is important. And that everyone, you know, that they know how we are functioning together, so which are the strengths of every one of us and how can we use that potential best? And then in which world can I bring this in? But I don't see roles as a fixed thing. So what is it? This is our purpose. What is needed? And can I be self-motivated, intrinsically motivated, so I bring in my talent in a certain role or issue of things. So, not very well defined in detail, what my role is, and this belongs to me and it belongs to the other. So I don't understand this high-performing team. How can we bring our knowledge and talents to a place where we use it for a higher purpose? And I also think it's important that we have at least, I think we should have different competences and knowledge but a value based which is aligned within the team.

EH: What tasks does leadership do or what kind of function does leadership have in high-performance teams?

Int_B_02: It's not so much the traditional managing thing, like controlling, planning, all these things. I think it's giving guidance in uncertain times. I think we know we have multiple crises, so we don't have a lot of answers and solutions in place. So, I think leaders in this environment need to have at least, how can I say? At least an understanding of problems and challenges and want to understand the best and take the team wisdom in this process of getting solutions. So I think it needs to be someone who is able to have processes which allow people to get involved. That's quite different to how leadership was understood and in the past where there was a leader and one person was taking the decision. So I think it's a collective process and that's intense and you need different capabilities for that like, like an external coach. So, to say, or any current coach variety. The setting and planning of the process of where, which stakeholders need to be involved in the process could be external, could be internal stakeholders. And then, how can we build a setup so that they feel free and safe so that they can

share their thoughts with us? And then finally certainly also taking decisions. So I think this is still a leadership responsibility. Once we have the full picture. What do we do with that? That takes a lot of courage, I think. So the step before could be listening and communication skills and the next step that takes a lot of courage. The intention of doing something so really to bring a new thing alive. And then having the courage to start with these prototypes. So it's small things. I think not just big solutions with small things and learning out of that and then starting the process again. So this is how I understand leadership.

EH: And now when we think of startups and leadership, what do you think? What kind of tasks or what should be the main focus of leadership in a startup?

Int_B_02: I think it's again, the purpose. So what is our service? What is our product for? Is this contributing to the well-being of all or just of our ecosystem? So what is really our purpose and value? What values are driving us? And I think one of the main leadership tasks is also how do we find the right people who are able to share these values and who are really fitting, not just competency wise. From their knowledge and skills but also to the value set. So how can we invent new procedures of recruiting to really find out if these people are fitting also to our culture? As I guess in a startup there might be even more uncertainty in regards to how the financial situation is? Can we, do I have a job for a long time? All these kinds of things need to be considered. If there is a difficult situation to make it transparent, to be as open as possible to the people, not creating fear, but not to, to minimize it. If there is something that people can rely on, okay? If there is a difficult situation, I will be told and we have the time to think about it together. And I can contribute because I think this is you know that this is lowering or decreasing the fear in the system.

EH How can leadership contribute to a team's performance, both positively and negatively? Do you, maybe, have some examples in your mind?

Int_B_02: Yeah, positively I work a lot with managers where I can see this quite clearly especially when they are working. As you know, the best examples are to say that what they preach they live, this is always where as they, okay, you can make mistakes, even as a leader. You're just a human being. But if people see, you are trying to give your best and you are also showing this with your own daily work then that's always a good thing. You know, where the employees understand, as we said before, leaders are making decisions even though they are hard. I sometimes, in companies, I see that they have some difficulties in really making heart decisions but I think again, if people see, okay, it's done in a fairly and human way, even if it's difficult and it's respectful and the communication is respectful and clear, then everything is possible, you know. And they can accept it and they can live as it's done in a respectful, and trustful way. And I think it's so much about how we communicate to the people, how we

express things and here to have their awareness that it's human beings on the other side and everything I do has an impact on them. If I have leaders in front of me where I think, okay, they have learned and it's working normally and the other side is, there is a lot of ego. You know that the leader doesn't want to have, doesn't want to show weaknesses. That's a problem of money. So self-controlled sometimes and then it's difficult for the teams, for team members because they don't know how to interact. They don't know what the person is really thinking and then if they are not authentic so to say you know then like it's difficult for the people to interpret their actions and behaviors and then it's getting more difficult, then political. Political plays are coming up and these things. I think the more authentic the persons are the more they know themselves. The more reflective they are and understand their own strengths and weaknesses, the easier they are at working with teams.

EH: When you think about your own leadership behavior, do you or did you change or adapt the way you were leading depending on the situation that you were in? And how was that?

Int_B_02: I don't know if it was so much about the situation. I think in my case it had to do with age. And so, my self development, I think, when I was a young leadership person, I had my first responsibility when I was 28. I was a woman in a male dominated environment and there I felt I was not myself. So I was very much at that thing to what I thought was needed or expected from myself and there sometimes I think with some decisions I was a bit, let's say not really the real person. I played a different role so to say and while getting older and working more on my own development, I'm much more myself. I only can say that the person I am with all my talents and also, my disadvantages and I don't have to play a certain role anymore, so it makes it easier and it may also be more relaxed because I know difficulties are always there. It's never that you have a plan and then you achieve it. There are always obstacles and we have to deal with that because nobody's perfect. And that's the same for the people. And certainly, if you have more advanced team members, you can do more. They need a bit, maybe less coaching, but on the human side. You know, I felt it's not so much about the age because they always need people to talk to, someone who they can trust.

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow?

Int_B_02: When I'm talking about leadership, and I'm talking about transformational leadership. So instead of transactional leadership where I think we are coming from and today, in most companies we are working with it's a kind of a mixture. Sometimes they are not even aware of what kind of leadership ideal they follow. Using it transformative is really more than the coaching approach that is mentioned. So to give people real appreciation and targets, coaching them to really lift their potential and helping them in their personal development.

Making decisions which are based on a holistic view. So this and this is a leadership which is more based on having good questions than good answers.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives in a startup should know about leadership?

Int_B_02: I can imagine that they are very much focused on products and services and to build up the business models. So that Instruments can help. So sometimes I feel that they are asking for a toolkit so to say which is the sexiest or the latest? What I am saying is that it's just an instrument and you have to lift these instruments and that's the first thing I would recommend. Maybe Start with yourself. So how well do you know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses. Get some help, get some coaching or whatever just to get time to reflect on these things. Because with whom, do you talk about your also about your fears, you might have. So create a kind of network where you can openly talk about everything. And yeah and also ask about feedback so talk to your employees and ask them questions or how do they perceive you and what is working well, and not and how could you do better? So I think I would start with this kind of things and then build up from them and say, okay what kind of organization do you want? What kind of leadership do you want to create in this organization? Because that doesn't mean just for you. It's also for, you know, team leaders and the next levels. How is your common understanding of leadership? Because I think as we already talked, there might be different definitions and experiences from the past. So what is our understanding of leadership in this organization? And how can we bring this to life together? Mmm tips and tricks. I don't like it so much because it sounds like it's an easy solution and I think it's a process of development for people to say I want to work with myself, I start with myself and then I can work with others. I would like to have a trick, but there are none. I think what I always find important is that we can also acknowledge what people have delivered so far. So if you start, don't start to change everything at the same time. You know, if people can follow you just in small steps and maybe this is a bit of fun. An advice to give is, that if you want to do the changes, do them step by step, and make sure that every change really has the time and the chance to settle in. So people, it's not about multiple changes, it's not possible for the human brain and sometimes they don't understand these things. You can achieve more if you do it slowly, than if you want to change the whole world in a year.

EH: Okay, cool. Thank you very much. These were already on my questions. I'm going to stop the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: B – Investors & Coaches, Int_B_03

EH: Good first question, can you tell me a bit about the professional background and how long you have been working with startups?

Int_B_03: Okay, my professional background. I am a psychologist and business coach. And I've been working in the sector of executive coaching, team development, counseling consulting for 25 years now. Yes, that something about me very briefly.

EH: And why startups? Why did you start working with them?

Int_B_03: I think they really show that entrepreneurial spirit. There are excellent ideas. And a lot of them are kind of suffering, because bringing an idea into reality is something I find first, very challenging and then I really can help them and support them on their journey. And that is something that challenges a lot of startups and that's something where I like to help the most to be able to support them.

EH: What are some role models you have in mind when you think of leadership, both positive or negative?

Int_B_03: That is a saying or a quote in leadership coaching that a leader has a four times higher impact than an average employee and that impact can go into obviously two different directions. It can have a positive direction in order to be an energy multiplier and to make somebody, not only a person or employee better, but it also can go into a negative dimension. If I actually make somebody worse, and if I create a culture of unsafety and toxicity and that I pretty much demotivate my employees all the time. So it goes into two different directions and I think nowadays leadership counts more than ever. In order to get the right people on the bus, but also in order to keep the right people on the bus and along the road, make them even better because what is an organization without employees? And that's a high demand and high task of leadership.

EH: What are high-performance teams for you?

Int_B_03: I mean, normally there are a lot of criteria if you speak about high-performance teams. But if I cut it down, I would say number one, there has to be the factor of psychological safety. People should always feel safe. But not comfortable and that's all about psychological safety. If I create a culture where people can speak up, where people feel appreciated and where people feel they are in a surrounding, there's a really good, honest, feedback culture.

And I can bring in my idea and I don't get punished in any way and they say, really say the word punished. I think that is one very big contributing factor. The second one, I would say, is peer accountability. What I know from high-performance teams is if a team within themselves holds each other accountable for their actions. I think that is a huge factor because as a leader you can create that environment. But on the other hand it is somehow limited. So if a leader can induce that culture that people hold each other accountable, I think that is another very, very contributing factor. So these are two main factors, amongst clear roles, clear responsibilities. I also think that I don't only have a common goal, or a common direction and also a purpose. I mean, right now, everything is about the why, about the purpose, but the purpose that it really is appealing to me, and that is something where people follow, and they really can stand behind it. And I think that is super important too.

EH: And what kind of function does leadership have in a high performance team?

Int_B_03: I would say it has, first of all, a controlling function. Because leadership, they are just setting the groundwork and the framework and they just install the rules and they have to make sure that the rules are lived by. Secondly, I think it's about finding the right talents and having a strength oriented leadership approach. Just let people grow and make them better and if growing is not possible, be direct, be honest. And say, we just need you for that job. You can develop in that kind of framework, but more is not possible right now. I think there is a very honest approach. And also empowering people. So show them, you are a human being when it comes to leadership right now. I think vulnerability has a major effect. Because you are a human being too and really show them that you are vulnerable and empower people. And for me leadership always takes place on two axes, number one, building up a really, really good emotional connection to your people. And secondly, being able to hold people accountable, I always say tough love. That's like the easiest explanation for me, for me. Leadership is tough love.

EH: Why are startups different from any or from other types of organizations?

Int_B_03: I mean, the magic of startup is everything is new. There is a different kind of spirit. And they have an idea and they are conscious about the fact that if really, they can make it happen and bring to realization and they have to stay curious, but there is always that factor of uncertainty involved, there's big uncertainty involved. If you no longer have uncertainty, if you grow into a grown-up, or if you go into a corporate sector, that is something where bureaucracy kicks in. And I call it business theater, so what does business theater mean? Okay, you have to play your role. It's all about, it's getting more and more about power. You have to position yourself. Status kicks in. And the more that goes into a corporate level, the more that status and restraining power, and bringing yourself into position counts, that at least in my

experience, and that's the major difference between startups. So, I would say If I do the comparison, what can startups learn from the corporate sector? Okay, clear processes and what can corporations learn from the startups? That's the mentality and the factor of spirit. And not so much bureaucracy. That's what I think, where they can meet.

EH: You know, when we look at leadership and startups, what do you think should be the main focus or what kind of tasks does it entail?

Int_B_03: I would say first of all the factor when it comes to the founder. So to the leadership team and the factor of self leadership. So how do they keep themselves in control? How do they keep themselves in balance because they're constantly, not only need to create ideas, they need to empower people and they need to multiply their energy. And secondly, I would say, Okay really counts on the things that matter the most and that can rule your own impact. Because once you are, In the daily avalanche of to-do lists, you have to do this and can no longer divide between important and urgent. That happens pretty often, so you always have to keep yourself in check and invest your work and your energy in the things that really matter and that brings the whole organization forward.

EH: And what does this mean for employees?

Int_B_03: I think for employees, it means there should be a constant exchange, a constant exchange of perspective that they also go into the role of the founders and the executive team, asking themselves why they are doing certain things? But the change of perspective, I think is also needed from the executive board, always to make the change because quite often I see or I hear the phrase: don't understand why people don't do it, or don't stay longer. Why are people not more accountable and then always say okay, see like this, they've chosen a pair they don't want to be owners of a company or founders of a company. They just want to work in a good way and they just want to also take care of your work balance, that's totally understandable. And if you expect things from them, I mean, don't expect things. You do because you are the founder and that's an employee. And that I think affects the change of perspectives. And not thinking about what I am doing. The employee should do or demand it, and I think that is an important factor.

EH: How can leadership contribute both positively or negatively to a team's performance, you may have some examples?

Int_B_03: I think, if I see the corporate sector and if I come or like the corporate significant compared to the let's say, professional sport factor. Basically, what really is the case, it's a big deal about the leader. So am I setting the standard of excellence? Do I have the willingness to go the extra mile and especially lead, by example. Do I have the understanding and can I

create an environment like I said, where everybody feels safe but also empowered. A leader sets the standards and he lives it daily by example. If you do that I think people will follow those people and those who won't follow, they will have to make the decision if it's the right team or the right culture or the right company. And that's basically what I see, you know? It's big time for the leader. But nowadays it's also a big time about getting the right people on the bus and recruiting the right people in order to develop them. But also in order to be fair and straight and say, okay, that's something I need from you. That something I see inside you, that something I want to support you with but also be honest and say that something I see you want to have, but with this role I can give you that thing. It's just the right, not the right fit for you. And that honesty, I think. Because in most organizations, I see, okay, people get higher, that's good for six months, then they want to develop, or they want to do the same or whatever, and then there is a mismatch and then infection happens, so that's all basically the role of the leader.

EH: Have you noticed that when you were leading people or your leadership behavior in general, that it had a direct effect on your team's performance?

Int_B_03: Let's say direct effect, I think if you have the expectation like okay, I do something and I get a response immediately that doesn't happen. You get very rare feedback from your employees and that's something you can't demand, I think but I think it can have a direct effect, but don't expect it to have to happen immediately. Because I think employees read the behaviors of their leaders quite well. They would never underestimate an employee, so they really can say, okay how that person is ticking.

EH: Do you change or adapt your leadership behavior? Depending on the situation you're in?

Int_B_03: Yes, and no. The core always stays the same. But I know depending on the person I'm speaking to if to go more into that or this direction And in that case, I adapt it. If I am stressed or if I'm under stress, I adapt because I know under stress I can communicate differently. So it's kind of a mix. That's why I said yes and no.

EH: Are there any leadership models or concepts or frameworks that you try to follow yourself?

Int_B_03: Yes, there is one. I mean, there are many models out there and I would say, okay from each model, I can take something. But I think as a matter of fact, right now, okay, leadership is obviously situational. That's what I think and you have to as a leader, you have to know your core. Your identity where you're coming from. And my favorite model is just a pretty simple one. Okay leadership is about building up a high emotional connection to your employees. It shouldn't be too high. You are not best friends. On the other hand it's about setting that standard holding people accountable in an appreciated, but very clear way. I think a lot of

leaders are lacking clarity. And within finding that mixture, I think if you are good at both dimensions for me, you are a hundred percent leader. And then there is a third challenge. And the third challenge is not only make it on a daily or weekly basis, make it consistent over time. Model this behavior over time and that's the third challenge. That is kind of my pretty simple model.

EH: What do you think should founders or new executives within the startup world know about leadership in a startup?

Int_B_03: Number one, and if I think they have that attitude, I think everything is good. If they know that leadership is not something you learn or you can take from your academic degree. That you have to constantly refract, reflect work on yourself. Get better at and knowing that is something that's just not an innate skill. Something you are not born with. I think that is the most important factor because then you are able to get feedback, then you are able to continuously develop yourself and then you are only able to look for advice and feedback.

EH: Do you have any tips and tricks for startup leaders?

Int_B_03: Yes. Number one, I would say find a peer group. If you are lucky to have a peer group who are in the same situation, if you are really having bad luck, then that is something I would promote. So have constant exchange and speak with people who are like-minded. That's number one. Number two. Definitely find a good sparring partner or coach where you feel comfortable and challenged. That's number two. Number three, get the right people on the bus. Definitely, that's, that's number three. And number four is self leadership and never forget, you might be the CEO in your company. But you are not the CEO at home. So there is a difference in keeping your roles in check.

EH: Very good. Thank you very much. These were already all of my questions. Cool. So I'm going to stop the recording.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: C – Employees, Int_C_01

EH: Now, maybe as a starter, can you tell me a bit about your professional background and how long you have been working in startups?

Int_C_01: Okay, so my experience in startups starts in 2014. When I co-founded my own startup. It was called Social Academy, an educational platform. We met at a startup weekend and won the third prize at the conference. Then we applied to an accelerator. We didn't go through, we didn't get admitted to the accelerator, and then I left but the company is still running today. They collected around € 500,000 of investments in total over those years so they are doing okay and this is my first experience. Then I did my Masters and worked in corporate consulting. In 2019 I got back to startups. I was in a SME lender company, which is called Lydia, I was leading the sales team in Poland and I led the company in Poland for a while.. And then I left the Polish market for working with the CFO to raise capital. We couldn't raise capital because of the war in Ukraine. They exited the market in September. Then I joined my current company, which is also a startupö

EH: And why startups?

Int_C_01: Why startups? Because I really like entrepreneurship. When I was at my first job, I mean my first job was as a barman in my hometown. And, and that was very fascinating to work together at 16 years old with the owner of a small hotel. He was, you know, defining the, I mean, in his own way, he was managing his company and I found it inspiring. This guy was an entrepreneur and so was more interested in that. Also, my grandfather was a small entrepreneur. He was a farmer but he had his own business. So that was inspiring too. And because of this, you know, the environment where I grew up, which was, you know, like this city of tourism with a lot of hotels and stuff like that. So there were a lot of small businesses. That's why.

EH Okay, thank you. When you think of leadership, what kind of role models do you have?

Int_C_01: I think of two people. One of them is actually the former CEO of Libya, one of the former co-founder. He's a great leader, because he is a very inspiring person. And he is also very good at execution. He is a very hard working man. So, together with the fact of being inspiring and hard working. I think that just gives to his style of leadership, you know, something different like, it's very hands-on. He's very hands-on and he is very pragmatic but because of the empathy that this person has, you know, it's just It's very unique, I think. And

yeah, I really enjoyed working with him. So his one person and the other other example of leadership, I mean, this first example is was it was more, you know. It was more of an abstract example, not because it's based on the figure of this guy, but based on the soft skills that he has that made him a charismatic leader. The second example, I'm giving you is more as a bit more, It's a practical example. So this was not the CEO. He was one of the country managers of the former startup I was working at. Before joining that company he was the CEO of a Czech startup. Once a colleague described him as a bureaucratic animal, you know, he's one of those people that in a bureaucratic environment is just like the best, you know, he feeds extremely well, that's his world. So he's very, you know, a corporate person. He was extremely structured, extremely experienced. He had always something to say because of his experience, obviously, he always had something to teach and he had a very clearly structured approach and methodological leadership. So, you know, he was not the leader who was leading by inspiring people. It was leading by making sure that everyone is satisfied professionally. He was very good at understanding what you want. And then what you really want as a person as an employee. And then getting the best out of you to achieve his goal, which will be the company goal. And he will do that in a very structured way. Simply because of his experience he had. The empathy that he had, you know, he was just extremely good at being liked. And the other one. Because of his experience of his structure, he was extremely structured and he was and was extremely good at leading not by inspiring people, but by just making them feel successful within the organization-

EH: Thank you. What are high-performance teams for you?

Int_C_01: A high-performing team is a team that actually is quite autonomous and highly successful in what they do.

EH: And what kind of function does leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_C_01: Okay. First of all, being very clear about what the goal is. Only then a team can be successful, they need to know what the objectives are. Then knowing how to use the people within his team to make sure that they together would work as a team to achieve that goal. But it is also necessary to explain expectations not only in terms of numbers and KPI's but also in terms of what are the mid steps in order to reach that KPI. And then simply making sure that the team collaborated well together. Another thing is to be good at rewarding, so when someone does work hard, that's when we succeed, we celebrate. And we make it very, very clear who's doing well. We also make it very clear who is not doing well because if we have to lay off someone, he doesn't have to complain. This is what the leaders should make sure that they do in order to have successful teams.

EH: Thank you. And So what place or value does leadership leadership have in a high performance team?

Int_C_01: I believe that it's possible to have a high-performance team and I think leadership is very important for that. You know, leadership gives structure and gives a vision to the team. And if a team that knows where they're going and has a methodology to follow in order to achieve that goal, it is going to be more likely to succeed. So a team with a great leader is more likely to be a successful team than a team without a leader or with a bad leader. I think that the role of the leader becomes more quiet at some point. So, a good leader ideally should not intervene too much because when things go well you shouldn't hear too much from the leader. So the importance of the role of a leader in a highly successful team increases as it increases the complexity in which the team operates. Okay. So the more the complexity grows, the more the need for a leader to lead the team. Once a team operates in a situation in which the team is consolidated. Everything is stable. Everything is flat. You could potentially remove the leader. And place it somewhere else and the team will still function perfectly. You know but in order to achieve that status I think it's very important to have a good leader you know that leads the team.

EH: Thank you very much. Let's talk about leadership in startups. What do you think should be the main focus of leadership in a startup?

Int_C_01: I mean, it's the same. I mean, I wouldn't say it's much different. I will say that it's the same with the fact that startups operate with more uncertainty. The need for a leader becomes even more important. But what I told you before, when you are operating in an environment which is more dynamic and more uncertain, the necessity to have a good leader is higher in a startup. And then also, with the other difference, is that usually early stage startups, smaller startups, are simply smaller communities and because they are smaller communities there is more emphasis on people on culture, sharing the same values. And so I think because there is a strong emphasis on the people I think it's important in a startup that the leadership is strong, but also charismatic and inspiring. The first type of leader earlier, the charismatic one, was ideal in an early stage startup especially. So to have a leader, which is more inspiring. And I mean, of course, it's still very, you know, very structured and very hard working and everything and, you know, I mean, he would lead that but to have that charisma and to be sure to and to be able to inspire people as a leader is more important than in a big at a big corporate.

EH: And what do you expect from your leader, or the leadership team in your organization?

Int_C_01: Yeah, from the leaders. I mean what I expect from the leaders is simply someone who is trustworthy. It's important that you can trust your leader. I mean the leader is the person

to whom the owner of the company is delegating how to manage you and how to manage your job. So he has a responsibility for you to work in this company. If tomorrow you're gonna be laid off or if you tomorrow, you're not gonna deliver the results that you are to deliver. And the leader is also to blame because there is always blame about the success or failure of his colleagues, then that's a problem. For me, as an employee, I want to have a leader that I trust, that I know that he's gonna do everything to make sure that I succeed within the organization. That's why it needs to be someone that I trust because I'm giving him my, you know, in a sense he has my professional and financial stability in his hands. He has to be someone that I can learn from an employee. And that's why I'm saying in a startup, it becomes more important to have this charisma, and this ability of inspiring people because, you know, us in an employee that joins, a startups joins, the startups also because they want to learn because of the people because of the value. And so, you know, having someone who is inspiring becomes more important. But anyway, he has to be someone that can learn from his team. Also I believe that a leader has to have ownership over things that do not directly depend on him. So let's say we have a demo for our client and I'm not preparing properly. The leader is responsible for giving me feedback, but because I'm a member of his team, he also has to take accountability for my actions. A good leader never says he was not accountable for something or that something is not his problem. He is the one to blame, but he never blames his employees.

EH: And how can leaders or how can leadership contribute to a team's performance, both positively and negatively? Maybe you have some examples of real life experiences.

Int_C_01: Positively, because they are adding value to the team. They bring positive change because of everything I said so far, you know, a leader has all of the right attitudes and is experienced. I'm sure that he will have a positive impact on a specific matter or the entire team. Of course, they can also have a negative impact for instance if they don't take ownership or if they are not inspiring. It's not someone that I can learn from. Someone that is grumpy or unfriendly. Someone that doesn't want to understand, then of course he is going to be unsuccessful.

EH: Have you ever noticed leadership behavior that had a direct effect on a team's performance?

Int_C_01: Let me think for a second. Not really. I mean. You know, like I cannot tell you an example in which, there was a change in leadership and then I saw like an instant change. But of course there are positive way and there are negative ways of leading people. Like for instance in my past experience I had a leader who acted as a role model and that had a positive effect on the team.

EH: Considering your current and past leaders that you have/had, did they or do they change and adapt their leadership depending on the situation there in?

Int_C_01: Ah, yes. Of course.

EH: How and in which situations have you observed that?

Int_C_01: So, you know, as a leader assembling the right team is extremely important. It is also important to be empathic. They need to be able to read other people. I mean, at least figuring out how they can talk to a person. What could this person be sensitive about? I think that's an extremely important quality of a leader. He has to know how to talk to different people and of course he way you talk and the way you discuss changes. A good leader changes the approach according to the situation, I think. Every situation requires a different approach, depending on the urgency and KPI's.

EH: Last question. What do you think new founders or new executives of a startup should know about leadership in a startup or in this kind of organization?

Int_C_01: They have to take ownership they have to have some kind of charisma and the ability to inspire people. Create structures, especially in a startup it is extremely important to have structure because without structure, it becomes, everything becomes extremely disorganized. So, having a methodology and structure is useful. Being open I think is important. Being open to ideas, being open to pivot to change. Also having the ability to communicate difficult things and have difficult conversations.

EH: Oh, thank you very much. This was the last question. I'm going to stop the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: C – Employees, Int_C_02

EH: Yes. So thank you very much again for attending. My first question is, can you tell me a bit about your professional background and how long you have been working with startups?

Int_C_02: Sure. So I have been working in this company, which is a startup, since December last year, about a year now, and I am working as a senior software developer there. Before that I was team lead in the development team, in another company. That company, I was there basically since I started working. So after my university degree, I started as a software developer. So I think six seven years, I'm not sure.

EH: Thank you. And what are the role models that you have in mind when you think of leadership both positive and negative?

Int_C_02: oh, I don't have really specific role models. I would say there are few people that I take ideas from but I don't have that one role model I would say.

EH: Cool. And So what are high-performance teams for you?

Int_C_02: Um, for me that will be a team that is basically working quite independently if they are allowed to and if they are allowed to, then they can perform the best. I would say if they know the goal, they find a way where to go, they find their own way to get there and they do that in a fast, and also from a quality perspective in a very good way.

EH: And what kind of function should leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_C_02: They need to be enablers. They need to enable the people so they can do their job in their best way.

EH: And what do you think of leadership in a startup?

Int_C_02: I think it's usually a lot more flexible. At least from my limited experience there. Usually it's like you have this kind of people that you're working more closely together with. But you also don't have that many people. Usually let's say, everyone is working towards the same goal. They all want to see the company succeed. Therefore, I think, usually, you get more enabled like that and therefore I think it's at least in the beginning natural that you have maybe more high-performance teams than if there are more strict boundaries.

EH: What do you think should be the main focus of leadership in a startup?

Int_C_02: Well, again, to really enable the people, make sure they have all the information they need. Make sure that the communication is good, which can be tough. Yes.

EH: And what does this mean for employees?

Int_C_02: That means they also need to make use of the freedom otherwise, they will not really perform. So if you get a lot of freedom, you you're asked for something in return and you need to deliver

EH: What do you expect from your leaders in your organization?

Int_C_02: I expect from them that, first and foremost, I get all the information that I need. And I get clear answers around what the goals are or what is expected. So that we can then figure out how to get there. I expect all the freedom, but I also think that we need to, like, as I said, only then we can really deliver. If we don't know where the road goes or what we need to do, what is really important at the moment, it's going to be tough to meet their expectations and we will be working on things that might not be that important because we have different ideas in mind.

EH: How can leadership contribute, again positively and or negatively to a team's performance, you maybe have some examples in mind?

Int_C_02: So, one example is, for example, I had a situation, not that too long ago, where we were working on some stuff that we had planned to do. And suddenly, there was a message: Hey, where do we stand on this and that topic? Now, that topic was raised one or two days ago as like between sentences and it wasn't clear that this is something that is actually urgent. So we were working on completely different things and suddenly had to change the focus completely to get on that. Now, luckily, that was not that big of a thing, but if you would have been a bigger topic, that would have been a problem because we would not have been able to resolve it. So I think it really, really falls down to communication transparency. And actually telling, what is urgent or not. And also give reasons why it's here. It doesn't work out if you set it without real reason because people will not follow those deadlines. So it needs to make sense. And yeah, enforcing rules that don't really matter like doing things the scrum way just because it needs to be scrum. Even if it's two people or I don't know, it doesn't make sense. So those will be things that definitely killed performance. On the other side, doing the opposite of that, allowing employees the freedom, allows people to try out things and change things when they're not working. I will be working better. I think transparency and definitely having clear goals. Those are definitely things that people need. And also buy the tools that are good for the team and don't save money on those things.

EH: Considering your current and also past leaders, did they or do they change their leadership style depending on the situation they are in?

Int_C_02: Mmm, I'd say yes. I think of this situation. It's also hard to say. I guess what is the best way to deal with the situation? I mean afterwards, you usually are smarter, but I think if there's a situation you should adapt to it. But it's not always certain, if you adapt to a situation that you're going to nail it.

EH: What do you think new founders or new executives should know about leadership in a startup before joining?

Int_C_02: I think the very first answer that comes to my mind is value. They need to know what they expect and if that expectation changes over time, they need to be able to communicate that. So a lot of it is going to be how do you communicate. If that's not working, if your communication is the problem, then everything else is going to be a problem as well.

EH: Okay, thank you. This was my last question. I will stop the recording.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: C – Employees, Int_C_03

EH: Can you tell me a little bit about your professional background and how long you've been working with startups?

Int_C_03: I have studied engineering and economics, and firstly worked for a machine manufacturing company within process optimization. Then I did my masters and also worked in industrial engineering and then for a production company, um, planning the production lines and for startups, I have worked for two and a half years.

EH: And why the startup world?

Int_C_03: Because you can have a more direct influence on how it is going and you have a bigger influence than when you work for a bigger company. So you see your actions' output.

EH: And when you think of leadership, do you have any kind of role models?

Int_C_03: Yeah, in the past, I had a very, very good leader and he's kind of a role model for me.

EH: Why?

Int_C_03: Because he was very honest and he did a really good job and kind of empowered and educated me instead of forcing you to do something. So this was like, like I had the feeling that I learned a lot and it was, yeah, it was empowering. And I liked it and of course what's important for me is also that I get a certain amount of freedom.

EH: And what do you think of leadership in the startup?

Int_C_03: Mmm. I think it's important and I think it's even more important than t people think about it and especially in startups. The problem is that most of the time people don't don't take the time to do a good leadership because this takes time and you don't have so much time available in a normal startup setting. So yeah, this is something which comes too short a lot of times. But this is a cultural thing, if you have, I think, if you focus on your values as a startup, then you don't need that much leadership and also it depends on the people of course. If you have highly skilled people on board and they understand the purpose, then you don't need so much leadership. Because they work more autonomously, and towards the overall goal of the company.

EH: What should be the main focus of leadership in the startup?

Int_C_03: Mmm, the main focus should be I think to make clear that everyone understands the goals, what the company wants to achieve, Understand and make sure that every employee has the tools or the information or skill sets that are necessary for him or her to achieve this. so, it's also about identifying strengths and weaknesses and then working on what you need, like it's your personal tool set. I would say this is very important.

EH: And what does this then mean for the employees?

Int_C_03: I think they need to be, how should I say? I think in the startup world, they need to be more proactive, do things on their own. They have more responsibility, also more responsibility in pointing out what they need, if they need some additional information or like education. Because it's not, like, in a big company that you have a big HR department, which sends you to training courses and stuff. And you don't have fully standardized processes in most startups, so, you need very mature employees in my, my point of view, or if you don't have them, of course, then it's even more important to have a good leadership. But leadership consumes much more time and you need to plan with it.

EH: What do you expect from your leader or the leadership team in your organization?

Int_C_03: I expect that he values my work. Yeah, for me, there are different points that are very important. So one thing is that if I have questions or if I want a meeting that he takes his time for that. Because sometimes you have important meetings, you need decisions or something. And yeah, then the other person should take time for you. Then it's about flexibility. Of course like in startups, I want flexibility on my holidays and I want my leader to respect my holidays. And on the other side, I want to be informed and I need to be informed about the strategy. If Strategy changes take place I need to be informed, so then I can change my actions according to the new strategy into the new goals of the company. And I also felt how it is like, if you, if you're better, informed about the goals and then you can much better see a greater sense in your actions because you know why you're doing this. So transporting the why to the employees, I think, this is a very, very big and important part of leadership.

EH: How can leadership contribute both in a positive but also in a negative way to a teams' performance?

Int_C_03: Yeah, of course but it depends also. How can you be a good leader if you don't understand the personality of your employees? And also then acts on that? Like they need it kind of know their employee's personality and understand what in their behavior could make them feel unvalued. Not every employee will react to a certain behavior the same way. Does this answer your question?

EH: Yes, it does. Thank you. How do you think can leadership contribute to a team's performance in a positive way?

Int_C_03: So if we now look at what motivates you, I think this is also very different from person to person. For me, like I said before, it's important to know the overall strategy. Oh, and I also want to see the impact of my actions. If I get this, I'm more motivated. If I get freedom and I can make my own decisions, how I want to solve things, when I want to work. This also motivates me. But of course, this does not work with everybody because some people need more closed tasks that they can deliver on because otherwise they struggle.

EH: Considering your current, and also your past leaders, do they or did they change their leadership behavior depending on the situation they were in?

Int_C_03: Here, like what? Like their situation they were in like or how they were acting?

EH: Adapt, how they would deal with the situation.

Int_C_03: Mmm. I mean they adapted kind of I think when they get to know me better, they adapted their leadership style. So we met each other somewhere.

EH: Yeah, so for instance this is about situational leadership. And there in a nutshell situational leadership, says a leader adapts to the situation they're in and changes their behavior. Around that there, of course, are some core principles that they always keep on. But depending on the person it is about, or depending on the severity of the situation, they will adapt, how they lead.

Int_C_03: Ah, I understand. I mean, not too much or I didn't experience it too much, so it would be then, like, if something goes wrong then you should be a more strict leader or more loose leader or kind of. What do you mean with this?

EH: A flexible approach to leadership. Like, for instance, they can adapt to hard times, but also, when hard times are over, they can let loose again and let people do their thing.

Int_C_03: Yeah, but I didn't experience that to the extreme that I could say.

EH: Very interesting. Interesting point for me. What do you think new founders and/or also new executives coming to a startup should know about leadership in a startup from an employee's perspective?

Int_C_03: Just an addition to the previous question, because, I mean, it doesn't really depend on the situation, I think. But if you come to me and you, you put pressure on me without explaining why or just pushing it. I won't be motivated. So I need a specific style and I think it's

not like really on a situational basis. Because even in hard times, you have to explain to me the hard times then. Okay. But if you well. Sorry, the next question was?

EH: Um, so what do you think, in your point of view, from as an employee in a startup, what you think, new founders and also new executives coming into the startup landscape, what do they need to know about leadership in a startup?

Int_C_03: I mean, from my point of view, it's important that they know about leadership in general. It's not just specific for startups. I think if they are good leaders in bigger companies with a really good skill set, and then they understand how the startup culture works, or even if they have worked with more agile teams before. I think it's good. It's better than having some really innovative, crazy startup guy trying to lead this. Yeah, and this can really crash entire teams.

EH: Yep. Yep. I agree. It can. Thank you very much. This was already last question. I will stop the recording now.

Qualitative Interview - Transcript

Category: C – Employees, Int_C_04

EH: Good, thank you very much Thanes, again. My first question is, Can you tell me about your professional background? Can you give me a little bit of an overview, of what you've done so far?

Int_C_04: Um yeah, so thank you for inviting me for this interview. Professional background, since 2005 I've been in the retail industry, I've been working in various markets in London, UK. Up until 2011. That's where I decided to come back to Berlin. My home country, or my home city and start fresh. And with well, in the customer service sector but for booking.com in 2012. and I worked there, until 2018, moved a few ranks up and then I just told myself customer service or customer faced jobs are not it. I'm done with it. It was nothing I wanted to pursue for the entire length of my career, and I decided to look for an office management job, to kind of balance my life. And yeah, so I ended up with Elucidate. This was actually a reference through the previous Office manager, who recommended me to the CEO. I went to the interview, passed it and you know, I'm here.

EH: Very cool. Thank you very much. And so how long have you been working in a startup now?

Int_C_04: Two years. Two years and three months now.

Eva Hagen: And why did you take this decision to go into a startup?

Int_C_04: The thing was that it was between the public sector in Berlin or something new as in startups, let's say or well-established companies. Yeah, I just well, I put some applications through also for the public sector. Didn't receive any feedback before I got it from Elucidate so it took a while for the public sector to get back to me, but yeah. The the previous office manager told me it's a very diverse and challenging job, and it's interesting on a daily basis. So, it's nothing like what I had before in customer service or whatever, you know, that, that is something that every day is the same. So, I said, Okay, let's go for a challenge, for something like a startup. I've been in established corporations before. So, this is something new. And I could actually do something that I learned, put my experience into it from the beginning and do it the way I want to do it. That was like, do something in the way I want to do it with people that accepted and expected it from me as well, like to use my experience, to use my learnings and give me some kind of like a free hand on it.

EH: Thank you. Now, when you think about leadership in general, do you have some role models that you think of, when you think of leaders, both positive and negative.

Int_C_04: Yes, I do. So, a positive one will be my first ever department manager back in 2005. He actually told me that, you know, it's always called the extra mile, you know, I'm just for the customer's sake and to be happy in the job that you're doing and if you have not been happy in a job, then it means serious in the wrong place. And, you know, and just take no shit. You know, as I'm, well, voice yourself, just don't be a number. That's what he said. You're a human being, you know, the corporation might look at you as a number but you're not. That was one thing and negative but also positive one was from my store manager later in the second job, who told me well, you're a manager. Now, that means you need to sacrifice for the company. Your contractual hours are 40 hours a week, but we expect you to do more than that. We expect you to show passion, commitment, you know everything. So, if the work is not done, you can't go home. Even though you've got your backup, you could schedule that. So, it was more like, um, that you micromanage your own people. Even though that wasn't really the thing, and it's kind of told me, like If you go down that path, you might lose a humane ability or your ability as being a human. Because you go to another path, and it affects you and will affect your colleagues as well. We try to start treating them like expendables.

EH: Thank you. What are high performance teams for you?

Int_C_04: High performance teams are that where a manager delegates stuff works along his colleagues and stuff. And there are no blockers. And everything gets done on a daily basis, there's no backlog. And everyone's happy in the team. Yeah.

EH: What kind of function does leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_C_04: In a high-performance team it's really all about, what I think it is all about, delegating, leading, and teaching. So, it's not really like you have to show the work to them. It's more like give them the right tools and show them the right way to do it. And then you just teach along the way, just make sure if there's someone not doing it right, you teach them and obviously they are certain whether it's someone who wants to learn. As long as you see that someone is learning, you should be there to teach them and try to keep communicative as well.

EH: And what place or value does leadership have in a high-performance team?

Int_C_04: A very high place. so, I would when I used to be part of a team with a manager. I used to think that why do we need to manager, we can do it on our own. But then I didn't look into the back of it, like behind the scenes at what a manager does. And that showed me that my previous manager wasn't a really good one because he wasn't really in the forefront. So, he gave us this kind of a feeling that we are doing all the right things, you know he's just a

surplus but, in the background, he was doing all the things that are necessary not to be seen well. That's why a great value of leadership would be the team runs by itself, and Like I said, the manager sits in the background.

EH Thank you. What do you think of leadership in startups?

Int_C_04: Very crucial. Very crucial because what I've learned now is that in startups, you have, you don't really have much of a blend of experience and newbies. It might be different in other status but what I'm going through now is yes, we have some experienced people like when I'm coming from the current job now but they haven't been in a leadership position before and I think it is quite difficult to transition from a high-performance employee to an actual leader. And it is quite visible in our company at the moment, where we do have people with leadership skills, not showing it or not knowing how to show it, how to actually use these skills and I think we would be way above where we are at the moment. If you would have these leadership skills set in place and with the right people. But overall, in startups leadership is a is very valuable. It's very needed to guide your sheep. Yeah. Otherwise, you could have ten people being excellent in what they're doing but without the leadership knowing what has to be done, like it's this little bit of this inkling that's missing the leadership brings in.

EH: What should be the main focus of leadership in a startup?

Int_C_04: The main focus should be not how the team performs because that's what you do from the interviews. So, you always make sure that you hire the right people. So, if you hire the right people, there's no need for you to micromanage them or you know, to check up on them all the time. It's more like what is your experience as a startup leader or in startups? Can it be shared with those people? Can they get any games from it, like anything of your knowledge is it shareable and do people get any gains from it? So, share, teach and I think delegate really well. Make sure that the team works without friction, everybody knows where their position is within the team, and everyone knows what they have to do. So, even though you've got two high performance people, one as the senior, the other one thinks he's senior. You got to put them in place.

EH: What are your expectations to your direct leader and the leadership team in your organization?

Int_C_04: That she always has an open ear for me because she's my go-to. So, in this case where would I go first? My manager. They will need to actually be approachable, and they need to have the trust in us whether that I can approach with anything to talk about. It could be a stupid thing, but they are no stupid questions. There are only stupid answers so anything I can ask her. She will let me know. She would put me at ease. Anything that I don't know. I

can't always expect her to have the answers but somehow guide me to the direction of it. A leader should always stay positive. Even though they might only be able to give me a negative answer.

EH: Thank you. How can leadership contribute both positively and negatively to a team's performance?

Int_C_04: Positively, like I said, they are knowledgeable or what they've been through with their experience, could give the team like a heads up and put them into the next stage. Negatively, I would say micromanage where the leader does not at all trust the team, a) dysfunctional team and b) how long this is going to go right if they keep on doing the workload or if they keep on the wrong people. So, if they have to keep on two or three hours longer or do an extra day to correct, what other people may have been able to solve. This team is messed up. There's something wrong with it.

EH: Have you noticed leadership behavior that had a direct effect on teams increased or decreased performance.

Int_C_04: Current or past or any? Yes, I had, you know, some experience with these kinds of things. Um whether it was positive or negative. Yeah.

EH: And how was the team's performance affected if you think about it?

Int_C_04: The morale decreased, and people started talking behind their backs. And even though it was very obvious to assess in the management team who the person was, nobody there took her to come forward to any of us, as in the leadership team to talk about it. We just had like hearsay from others around. It was like some kind of ghost telling. People started to expect us to hear this, these unofficial rumors and act upon it which we can't. So, then it came to a stage where people thought the whole leadership team is behind it. They are backing up the one person and nobody else is caring about the team. People start calling in sick, people did not perform at all. Thinking it's like management versus staff. We actually brought up the matter like unofficially talking to people ask is this a problem. We do hear the rumors, but it has to be official. Why, why wouldn't you, why didn't you trust and come forward to talk to management. There are always the same excuses, like I heard this and this person, they're close, and if you come forward, anything can happen to us. You know, my job needs to be safe.

EH: Thank you. Considering both your current and past leaders, do or did they change and adapt their leadership depending on the situation they were in?

Int_C_04: Past leadership's, I wasn't fortunate enough to have younger managers like, say more about the old age, mainly old men. There were just about to retire, you know, it's very hard to teach an old dog, new tricks. So, it was always the experience, and it was more like where my experience came from. Yep, I'm working with this person. I cannot change their mind so I adopt and go with it as much as I can. What I can see from the leadership, in my current job is that they're very eager to be leaders. They do lack a bit of this leadership skills. But I can see that there are people that actually are able to adapt as well. So, once they're up and running as leaders, they would be able to adapt to the situations. I don't think any of them is stubborn or a dickhead to not do it yet.

EH: Thank you. And already the last question, what do you think new founders or new executives that are working in a startup, should actually know about leadership in a startup?

Int_C_04: It's nice that they have a product or vision to actually create a startup. They do need to understand, I hope everyone does, that without the team you're going nowhere. So that's imagine if you've got your vision, you've got your product, but it wouldn't be food. Well, it doesn't fruit because you don't have a team and that's what it is at the beginning, it's just some fantasy. It's an idea you had because you don't have a team around you. Once you have a team appreciate it. And go from there, and just be open to yourself as founders. If you don't know something, you don't know something. It doesn't mean it shows any weakness and it just shows you that you're just a normal person like the others because any one of us can be a founder but to be a leader, it takes that extra.

EH: Thank you. Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Int_C_04: No, thank you.

Statement of Affirmation

I hereby declare that all parts of this thesis were exclusively prepared by me, without using resources other than those stated above. The thoughts taken directly or indirectly from external sources are appropriately annotated.

This thesis or parts of it were not previously submitted to any other academic institution and have not yet been published.

Dornbirn, 07.07.2023



[Eva-Maria Hagen]