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Early-career and positive-deviant leaders in practice - A qualitative study of Sales Executives at CHG-MERIDIAN

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Table of contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS II

ABSTRACT III

1. INTRODUCTION 1

1.1 Introduction to the topic 1

1.2 Research objectives and motivation 2

1.3 Outline of the thesis 3

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND 4

2.1 Emergence of the LAP movement 4

2.1 Leadership in a sales and service environment 5

2.2 The importance of relationships in the leadership context 6

2.4 Teaching versus experiencing 8

3. METHODOLOGY 10

3.1 Research design 10

3.2 Research Context 12

3.3 Data collection 16

3.4 Data Analysis 19

4. FINDINGS 20

4.1 Taking the initiative 23

4.2 Acting solution-oriented 25

4.3 Interacting as a 'team captain' 27

4.3 Supporting as a 'sparring partner' 30

4.4 Striving for continuous improvement 32

4.5 Being authentic 33

5. DISCUSSION 36

5.1 Task-oriented practices 38

5.2 Relations-oriented practices 43

6. IMPLICATIONS 49

6.1 Implications for academic research 49

6.1 Practical implications 51

7. CONCLUSION 53

8. LIMITATIONS AND OUTLOOK 54

9. REFERENCES 56

10. APPENDIX 62

10.1 Appendix 1: Interview guideline for the leaders' perspective 62

10.2 Appendix 2: Interview guideline for the external perspective 63

10.3 Appendix 3: The invitational text of the RBS 63

10.4 Appendix 4: Coding table 64

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Abstract

Given the general importance of leadership in today's rapidly changing business world, our thesis aims to investigate early-career success in the framework of a case study at a company that operates in the sales and service sector. Utilizing qualitative research, we collected data through semi-structured interviews from seven Sales Executives at CHG-MERIDIAN who were recently promoted to a leadership position and are considered as positive deviant within the organization. By enriching the insights from the leaders with external and team perspectives, the research question: 'What do early-career and positive-deviant leaders do that makes them successful?' was approached from a multi-perspective view.

We identify six relevant practices presented in the proposition of a conceptual model that shows the two main findings of our thesis. The first finding states that a strive for continuous improvement and a constant challenge of the status-quo are crucial for the success of early-career leaders. With initiative behavior and continuously evoking personal and team development, the leaders gain acceptance within the team and also contribute to overcoming their lack of experience through the pursuit of improvement. The second finding indicates that collaborating and building trust with and within the team is another major factor of success for leaders at an early stage of their career. Even though CHG-MERIDIAN is an organization that is driven by sales, which is known to be a competitive and goal-oriented landscape, we find that the investigated sample emphasizes collaborative and supportive practices, in order to achieve maximum potential, mutual benefit and development for themselves as well as for their subordinates.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the topic

Leadership is not only discussed in theoretical and academic studies anymore; it has become a topic of contemporary literature that presents leadership in a more and more tangible and appealing way. There is a great societal interest in becoming a successful leader. In particular, for highly educated managers, a leading role is an aspired career opportunity (Jain & Bhatt, 2015). Concerning employer branding, offering leadership development is attracting motivated, young talents and therefore considered an essential factor for companies (Jain & Bhatt, 2015).
Given the mentioned interest in the topic, many alternative ideas for how to grasp and illuminate leadership theory from a more practical side have developed over the last decades. By seeking "to understand leadership activity wherever and however, it appears" (Raelin, 2016, p. 5), the so-called "Leadership-as-Practice" (hereafter LAP) movement has emerged. Instead of centering leadership to the individual, this orientation is based on practice and social interactions between practitioners in the activity concerned (Raelin, 2016). Research on practical examples in the context of LAP has not been conducted sufficiently (Raelin, 2016), and most of the practical studies in leadership base on relatively narrow defined situations (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2010). This evokes the need to observe leadership more in day-to-day activities. By targeting stories and experiences from practice, captured through interviews with early-career leaders enriched by reflections from different perspectives, our thesis responds to this call and promises valuable insights about leadership practices in the sense of the LAP movement.

Since the context for this research is given by a company in the technology management sector that focuses on consulting and financial services, Sales Executives in leading positions are in the focus of observations. Concerning an environment of increasing complexity in professional services, sales leadership is considered as an important topic to address (Ingram, LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2005). While in some reports the sales environment is luridly compared to a 'shark tank' where the most effective salespeople are compared to the most 'aggressive sharks' (Wallace, 2017), alluding to the extreme competitive conditions, it is of particular interest how an early-career leader is able to assert oneself successfully in this environment. In that sense, literature particularly puts a remark on examining interrelationships among different salesperson levels in a practical setting (Ingram et al., 2005). Especially by including several perspectives, our research follows the appeal and aims to provide additional findings for leadership practices in organizations operating in the service and sales environment.

1.2 Research objectives and motivation

The research objective of this thesis is to get practical insights from early-career leaders who are performing on a positive-deviant level within an organization. At CHG-MERIDIAN, several young managers were recently promoted to leadership positions with great success. Therefore, we decided to conduct the research in cooperation with this globally operating technology management company.

By striving for patterns of action within the processual view on leadership, this thesis is anchored in the movement of LAP, as mentioned in the introduction. The literature review sets the theoretical foundation for this thesis and draws from traditional as well as recent literature about leadership.

The motivation for this research is driven by expected relevance for future careers of all business students, especially those studying programs with a major in leadership. According to the professional and educational experiences of the researchers, early-career leaders are assumed to face unique and special challenges regarding authority and respect, for instance, when their team is of higher age or richer experience than they are themselves. Therefore, we are curious to seek challenges, experiences, and successful practices from a sample that is in a position which we aspire too in our careers. Since the research question will directly elaborate on positive-deviant leaders who are in an early-career stage, the outcome could give guidance to future young leaders for how they can motivate their team and bring growth and success to their company.

Another angle of motivation is driven by CHG-MERIDIAN. The company also wants to find out what makes the recently promoted leaders successful, especially compared to more experienced leaders, in order to provide even better training and developing possibilities for young talents.

Driven by these objectives and motivations, this master thesis with the title: "*Early-career and positive-deviant leaders in practice - A qualitative study of Sales Executives at CHG-MERIDIAN"* has the following research question that ought to be answered throughout the thesis:

What do early-career and positive-deviant leaders do that makes them successful?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

In order to address and answer the presented research question, the remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. In the next section, the relevant literature on leadership in a sales context, the importance of relationships within leadership, as well as the contrast between teaching and experiencing, will be discussed.

The methodology section will present the methodological choices of the researchers, including research design and context, complemented by explanations about the two-step data collection as well as the data analysis.

Section 4 presents the findings from the collected data. This section has the goal of providing the reader with information about the interviewees and insights about their most important practices which are relevant to their leadership. The data from the first step of the data collection is enriched by external perspectives from subordinates and two other relevant company members in order to back and supplement the self-perspectives of the interviewees. This leads over to the discussion where the findings are categorized and debated with connection to relevant literature.

In the last part of this thesis, implications with theoretical and practical relevance for future leaders and organizations will be addressed before highlighting limitations and suggestions for future research in the respective area.

2. *Theoretical background*

2.1 Emergence of the LAP movement

Some research (Fleenor, 2006; Herrmann, 2014) puts the focus of leadership theory on the individual abilities of a leader. Other authors (Raelin, 2016; Youngs, 2017) claim to find leadership not in the persons but within their practices. The debate of whether effective leadership can be explained by a set of traits or by the behavior with a process perspective is a relevant discussion of the 21st century (Northouse, 2019).

As one of the first systematic considerations about leadership, the roots of the trait approach were based on observations of social or political leaders who were assessed as great, for example, Abraham Lincoln or Indira Gandhi. It was proposed that several characteristics, such as height, intelligence, extraversion, or fluency, determine the ability to become an effective leader (Northouse, 2019). In particular, the research by Stodgill (1948, 1974) characterized and concretized this concept along the way. Through investigating many other trait studies, Stodgill (1948, 1974) pointed out key traits but also challenged this perspective with criticism. Due to situational factors, the pure trait approach was assessed as too stiff and outdated to explain the emergence of leadership. A leader could neither be considered isolated from his environment nor separated from situational factors. The model by Henry Mintzberg (1973), a traditional approach where the leader is seen as one of ten clearly separated management roles, faces similar criticism. Hence, personality-traits are essential factors, and general roles can be distinguished, but contemporary research (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Northouse, 2019; Yukl, 2013) agrees that this view needs an extension to ensure practical relevance.

The focus was extended from the single leader to the surrounding people, and conceptions such as ‘distributed leadership’ emerged (Parry & Bryman, 2006). Gradually, a processual view replaced the stable modeling, and appeals were made to analyze leadership emergence in social contexts (Denis et al., 2010). From this point, LAP has developed as a movement that, to some extent, overlaps with relational leadership by decentralizing leadership from individuals to processes. The distinctive characteristic, though, is that LAP strives for “recurring patterns of action, that is on already stabilized patterns of action” (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016, p. 35). Rather than examining the leader as a person, leadership work is reflected with regards to when, where, why, and how it is done (Raelin, 2011). LAP values social interactions and collective activities of all engaged people more than analyzing the two-part leader-follower relationship (Raelin, 2011). Consequently, the understanding of leadership in LAP is rather tied to a collective approach instead of individual considerations (Raelin, 2011). Thus, the idea to see leadership in its practices "allows everyone to participate," and the "practice becomes the engine of collaborative agency" (Raelin, 2014, p. 141). Transferring the collective thinking to agency that can be described as an influencing process where one person supports others in realizing their potential, LAP grasps agency as "intersubjective collaborative process that can reproduce and transform social realities" (Raelin, 2011, p. 203).

2.1 Leadership in a sales and service environment

Since CHG-MERIDIAN is considered a sales company in the technology management sector that focuses on consulting, financial, operational, and remarketing services, it is essential to set a common understanding of a service sector organization in this thesis. A definition provided by Wilderom (1991) states that service-sector organizations are defined as work units that provide services (mostly related to intangible outputs) and which are in direct interaction with customers or clients and providers of the services. Since people are considered as "[…] the greatest competitive weapons in many service industries […]" (Wilderom, 1991, p. 6), leadership and management activities play a crucial role in a sales context. Beyond that, sales managers have a significant impact on shaping and influencing the behaviors and attitudes of their salespeople (Rich, 1997). As Wilderom (1991) concludes, a sales or service organization requires a different style of leadership than a non-service organization. Therefore, it is valuable to discuss different aspects of leadership in the service and sales environment.

Although the sales literature often uses the terms leadership, management, and supervision interchangeably, there are substantial differences. In contrast to management and supervision activities, sales leadership addresses the long-term perspective with general strategic directions (Ingram et al., 2005).
Among extensive discussions about leadership styles in the sales environment, the transactional and transformational approaches are two of the most present ones

(MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Rich, 2001). Transactional leadership encounters its followers with a give-and-take exchange mentality. Rewarding and punishing are key factors for motivation, and leaders consistently instruct their subordinates on how to execute their job (Ingram et al., 2005). On the other hand, the motivation in transformational leadership is grown from trust, admiration, and loyalty (Yukl, 2013). A leader's behavior with a transformational style was initially captured in three types (Yukl, 2013). 'Idealized influence' refers to increasing identification and dedication between leaders and followers. The behavior to challenge an employee's view by including several perspectives or creativity is summarized in 'intellectual stimulation'. Furthermore, 'individualized consideration' describes coaching and supporting activities provided by the leader (Yukl, 2013). Since providing a common vision is also seen as concrete action of transformational leaders (Schwepker & Good, 2010), 'inspirational motivation' was added as an extension to the three original types (Yukl, 2013). Within an optimal setting, the employees' mindset is shifted from self-interests towards the overall vision and mission (MacKenzie et al., 2001).

Although studies contrasting these styles deliver mixed results, there is a tendency towards the benefit of the transformational style (Ingram et al., 2005). Besides increasing performance in sales, other positive effects on people's attitudes and role perceptions were observed (MacKenzie et al., 2001). However, rhetorical illustrations still portray the sales area, mainly in a negative light (Wiid, Grant, Mills, & Pitt, 2016). The perception of particularly sales as a field where selfishness, goal orientation, and a certain give-and-take mentality dominate is still present (Wiid et al., 2016). Additionally, studies on reward systems of salespeople (Futrell, 1975) show that this environment is indeed likely to evoke and support performance-oriented characteristics (Farbrot, 2012). Having this said, the discussion of successful leadership in a rather competitive sales area is raised again and will be picked up in this thesis from a perspective of recently promoted Sales Executives.

2.2 The importance of relationships in the leadership context

Following the tracks of success, other research on leadership examines the importance of relations instead of focusing on a specific leadership style. The leader-member exchange (LMX) focuses on the quality of the relationship between each salesperson and his or her sales manager (Ingram et al., 2005). In that sense, LMX is applying the idea of high-quality connections, which is conceptualized by 'emotional carrying capacity', 'tensility of the tie', and 'degree of connectivity' (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Previous studies in this field argue that leaders only develop high-quality relations (HQR) with a few selected subordinates due to timely resource constraints (Graen, 1995). In order to avoid treating some employees more favorably, Graen (1995, p. 229) suggests that leaders "[…] should provide all employees access to the process of LMX by making the initial offer to develop LMX partnerships to each subordinate". Thereby it is upon the subordinate whether to accept or decline and profit from the HQR. In cases where the subordinate declines the invitation, the relationship between leader and salesperson is likely to remain contractual and is analogous to the transactional leadership model, where the leader makes requests based on the hierarchical status, and the follower complies based on the formal obligation (Graen, 1995). This is considered as low-quality LMX.

If, on the other hand, the subordinate accepts the offer, the relationship can move to a new stage that stands out by an enormous breadth and depth of exchange of work-related and social contributions (Graen, 1995). These HQR's between sales managers and salespeople have a tremendously positive influence on mutual trust, job satisfaction, satisfaction with the manager, and general job performance (Yammarino, 1997). It is important here to note that while the conception of positive connections quality originates in relational theory, the foundation of HQR's emphasizes the positive, mutually developmental experiences of being in a connection, rather than the exchange of resources and rewards (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011). "LMX is thus a model of individual perception that is initiated in the minds of actors rather than as a capturing of the social interactions among the parties without a privileging of any one single actor […]" (Raelin, 2011, p. 201), which to some extent is in contradiction to HQR and LAP, that cannot be reduced to a specific individual or distinctive relations (Raelin, 2011).

Among other empirical studies that show the relevance and benefits of HQR in a work environment (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Aaarrestad, Brøndbo & Carlsen, 2015), an investigation of work teams in eight large service firms (Brueller & Carmeli, 2011) indicates the positive effect of both internal and external HQR's on team performance. Therefore, the power of connections is also seen as a source for organizational efficiency. It is argued that building HQR's is like forming partnerships (Dutton, 2003). This transformation towards a partnership between leader and follower is accompanied by a movement of subordinates from their own self-interests to focus more on substantial mutual interests, which is analogous to the goal of transformational leadership (Graen, 1995).

Similar positive effects on trust, job satisfaction, and job performance have also been found in studies concerning role-modeling. In order to be a credible and effective leader, Rich (1997) emphasizes that sales managers have to proactively set positive examples through their own behavior and therefore serve as role models to their subordinates. He highlights that role modeling is especially crucial in a sales context since the job of selling is particularly challenging, because salespeople (usually) work alone and outside of the boundaries of their organization and have to deal with a vast number of unanticipated requests and demands from each of their unique customers (Rich, 1997). Moreover, since salespeople tend to emulate work practices, goals, and positive attitudes of their managers, it is crucial that Sales Executives lead by example. Salespeople "are less likely to go the 'extra mile' if their supervisors are not willing to do the same" (Rich, 1997, p. 319).

2.4 Teaching versus experiencing

Referring back to the LAP approach, which sees leadership not in persons but in their practices, the general question arises whether leadership can be taught or has to develop from experience.

Besides customized courses or fellowship programs, many business schools have introduced full-time study programs focusing on leadership. Over the years, these educational measurements have become significant expenses for companies that are willing to yearly invest billions of dollars in nurturing new leaders (Gurdjian, Halbeisen, & Lane, 2014). However, in most cases, the results are not satisfying, and the initiatives lack efficiency (Gurdjian et al., 2014).

Also, many scholars (Doh, 2003; Gunn, 2000) agree that the possibilities of teaching leadership are limited. Relating leadership to a high-performance sport, a tennis player does not become extraordinary by studying strategies – practice is considered the key element (Doh, 2003), which is in line with the LAP approach. LAP is not striving for teaching leadership in the sense of traits and lists; this approach instead intends to make lessons of experience available (Raelin, 2011). Also, the fact that our brain is likely to remember only ten percent from traditional teaching lessons compared to nearly two-thirds when doing a task confirms the relevance of practice from a psychological perspective (Gurdjian et al., 2014). Derived from this, methods for teaching are suggested to be real-life oriented with the focus on experiencing.

This relates to the theory of experimental learning, which is seen as the process of learning through experiences and, more specifically, as learning through reflection on doing (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). It focuses on the learning process for the individual and emphasizes that one makes discoveries and experiments with knowledge firsthand instead of reading or hearing about others' experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). While experimental learning has a strong foundation in the educational area, it is also applicable in business contexts. The main difference between this and rather, academic learning is a more real-life experience for the recipient. This includes practical examples such as experiences gained from networks of business leaders sharing best practices, or leaders being mentored or coached by a person who been in a similar position or faced the same challenges (Lee, 2007). Since leaders typically operate without close and direct supervision of their work, this concept may have particular relevance, especially for early-career leaders since it can exist without a teacher and relates exclusively to the meaning-making process of the individual's direct experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). However, in order to gain genuine knowledge, the individual must have four abilities: The person must open to be actively involved in the experience; The person must be able to reflect on the experience; The person must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; and the person must possess decision making and problem-solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2008).

Given the above controversy about teaching and experiencing leadership, it could be deduced that leaders who are older and longer in a leadership position are more likely to succeed. A previous study investigating leadership generativity, relating to age and success with a sample of German professors (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, & Frese, 2011), supports this statement. It was found that the leader's age is positively related to generativity and a higher ability to obtain satisfying levels of success. Older leaders, in this case, professors, were observed to invest more time and effort in guiding their members. However, one essential weakness of this study was that only eleven percent of the participants were considered as young leaders, which might not be representative (Zacher et al., 2011).

Since these assumptions contradict the recent experiences at CHG-MERIDIAN, this present case is an especially interesting object of investigation. In the light of positive organizational scholarship, leaders who have little experience but are nevertheless successful in what they currently do could be seen as unexpectedly positive, exceptional phenomena (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Often, positive organizational scholarship refers to positive deviance, a term that is mentioned in the title of this thesis. To set a mutual understanding, positive deviance is understood as unusual behavior that does not correspond to expected norms but would be considered as positive by a referent group (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2014).

Given the present case where all participants are leaders of sales teams, the understanding of positive deviance is supported by practical criteria. In addition to the turnover volume as the most intuitive and logical criteria with informative value about the success of the sales team and the sales leader, gross margin and the new customer rate were also taken into consideration. More information about the research sample will be provided in the following methodology section.

3. *Methodology*

3.1 Research design

In the field of leadership studies, the LAP movement is considered a recent research approach. Given general difficulties, such as theorizing interactions between people, this thesis draws from the methodological framework suggested for LAP researchers by Kempster, Parry, and Jackson (2016).

Ontological thinking and the question of what is being researched should be clarified first (Kempster et al., 2016). Summing up the ontology for the thesis at hand, it seeks to understand the phenomena of successful leaders who are rather young and inexperienced in the setting of a sales organization. Due to its ability to give elaborate descriptions of how people experience certain situations as well as providing the human side of a research issue (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005), we chose a qualitative inquiry for this research. Qualitative research is also effective in identifying intangible and underlying factors, such as social norms, certain behaviors, specific personalities, leadership traits, etc. (Mack et al., 2005), which is particularly beneficial when investigating interactions between people. Some of the most common qualitative methods are in-depth interviews, participant observations, and focus groups (Cassell & Symon, 2004).

Second, the framework of Kempster et al. (2016) recommends applying a more holistic approach by using multiple techniques. Since the credibility of a qualitative study can be improved by applying a concept named the triangulation of qualitative data sources, our thesis includes "perspectives of people from different points of view" (Patton, 1999, p. 1195). Having this in mind, the research design is constructed to gather data in two steps (Figure 1). While the first step can be summarized in capturing a leader's perspective, the second step aims to collect insights from an external and team perspective, as it will be concretized in the following.

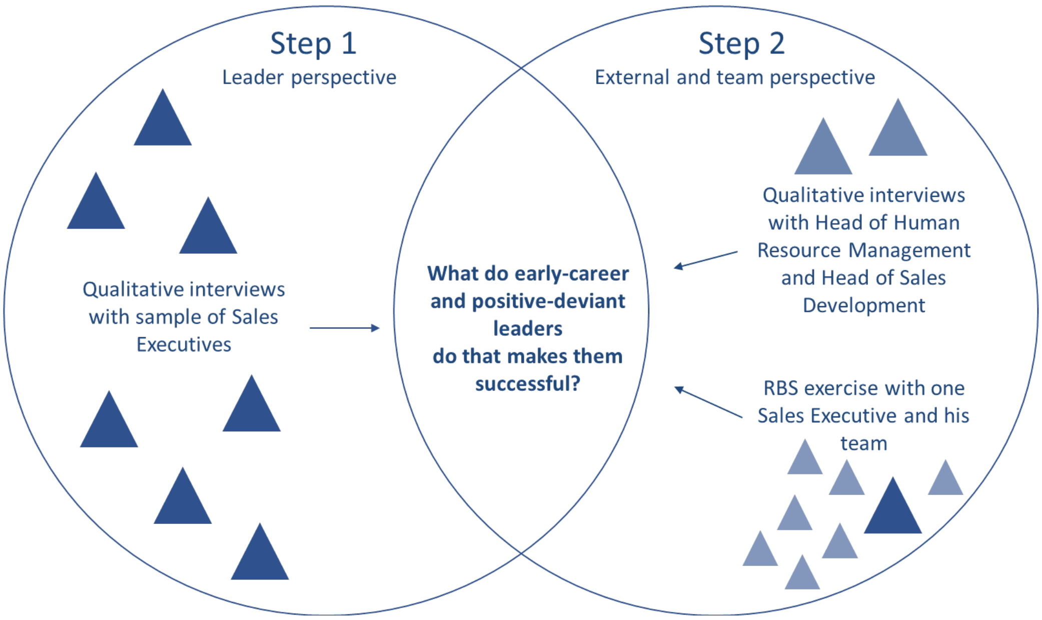

Figure 1: Research outline of the thesis (own representation)

For the first step, we selected the method of qualitative in-depth interviews. Qualitative interviews can provide compelling descriptions, detailed experiences, as well as connections and relationships towards others or a specific topic (Kvale

& Brinkmann, 2009). Given these advantages, in-depth interviews are considered suitable to grasp insights from the daily lives, routines, and experiences of the Sales Executives at CHG-MERIDIAN. Usually, qualitative interviews have specific characteristics, such as low degree of structure imposed by the interviewer, focus on specific issues and situations in the world of the interviewee, open questions, and space for additional iterations of the participant (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Semi-structured interviews usually contain a series of questions that go alongside an interview schedule, but the interviewer has the freedom to vary the sequence of questions and has the latitude to ask further questions in response to significant replies (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since we are especially interested in specific episodes and at-hand experiences regarding the leadership career of the Sales Executives, semi-structured interviews enabled us to interact with the interviewees more naturally and freely.

The second step of data collection followed after the interviews with the sample of leaders were completed and reviewed. It has the goal of validation towards the practices, experiences, and unique features the Sales Executives described as vital and which were the reasons for them standing out and being successful. In order to validate the collected data from an external perspective, we conducted two more qualitative interviews with the Head of Human Resource Management and the Head of Sales Development. To additionally capture the team perspective, a Reflected Best Self (RBS) exercise was performed with one leader of the previous sample and his team. This RBS exercise, as well as the two additional interviews, will be described in more depth in the data collection paragraph.

3.2 Research Context

The research of our master thesis was conducted at CHG-MERIDIAN, an international, non-captive expert for technology management in the areas of IT-, industrial-, and healthcare equipment (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2018a).

The customers of CHG-MERIDIAN are small, medium-sized, and large companies, as well as public-sector organizations (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2019a). The company manages and finances technology investments in the areas of IT-, industrial, and healthcare for over 10,000 customers worldwide (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2018a). In 2019 the company increased its turnover by 32% to €1.99 billion and had a profit of €87.4 million (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2019a). Around 50%

of the turnover volume was generated outside the company's home market of Germany (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2019a). The central regions of the company's operations are Europe, North and South America as well as Australia and New Zealand. In 2019, the company was active in 27countries and had approx. 1,100 employees (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2019a).

Since the interview sample solely consists of Sales Executives, it is vital to understand the sales structure of CHG-MERIDIAN. The sales structure of the company refers to the regions of operations and is under the direction of the CSO. Currently, there are three Sales Directors who have a direct reporting line to the CSO. The Sales Directors have the supervision for the areas Europe, Americas, and Germany (Germany, has a special role here since it generates around 50% of the turnover volume of the company and its sales structure deviates from all other countries). One level below the Sales Directors are the Executive Vice Presidents Sales (EVP Sales), who hold responsibility for regions of certain countries (e.g., EVP Sales Southern Europe is responsible for Italy, Spain, Austria, and Switzerland). Each country the company is active in has a Vice President Sales (VP Sales) who is responsible for the sales activities in a specific country. In Germany, there is no Vice President but rather Regional Managers who hold supervision for particular regions within the country. In some of the regions, there are also team leaders in place who have a functional leadership position for parts of a region and report to the Regional Manager. In the internal hierarchy, the Regional Managers within Germany are on the same level as the Vice Presidents of the other countries. Within each country (or region in Germany), the Account Managers report directly to the Vice President (Regional Manager or Team leader in Germany). Figure 2 provides an overview and illustrates the above explanations of CHG Meridian's sales structure.

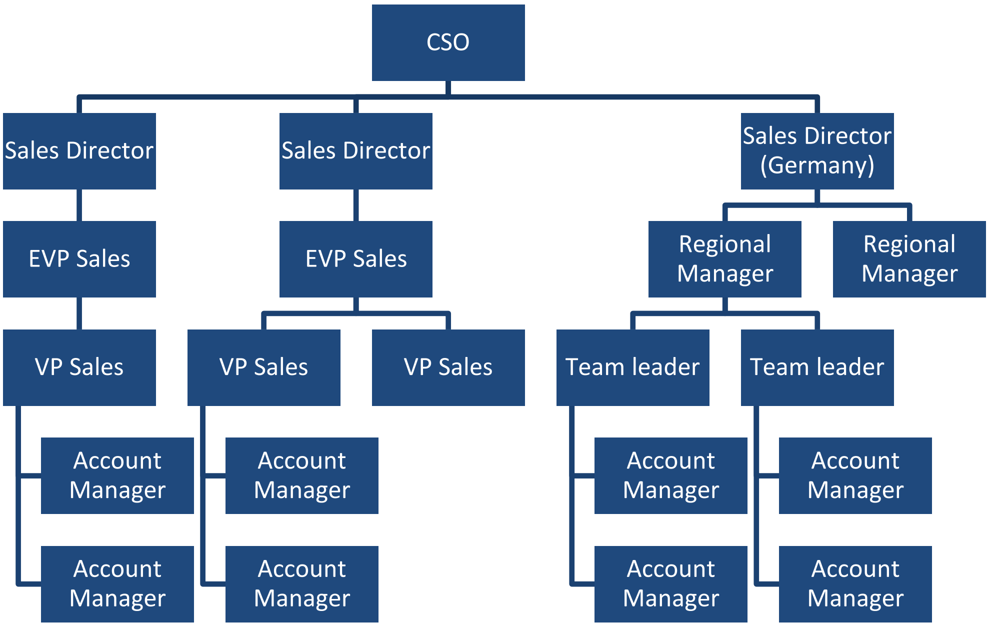

Figure 2: Sales structure of CHG-MERIDIAN (own representation)

Besides the sales structure, it is also of importance to understand the sales process of CHG-MERIDIAN, in order to later be able to link leadership practices of the interviewed sample to specific parts of the process and identify how they provide guidance and support to their subordinates during the acquisitions.

As already mentioned, the company is active in the areas IT-, industrial- and healthcare equipment. As an example, in the area of IT, CHG-MERIDIAN offers products such as mobile devices, printers, laptops, desktop PC's and also software products to its customers. Throughout the lifecycle of these assets, there are usually offerings of several other additional services, e.g., consulting services, financial services (usually through leasing), and remarketing at the end of the product's life (Figure 3). An important note here is the fact that the company is operating independently of any manufacturer or supplier in order to give the customers the freedom to choose the devices they want. Therefore, the sales process is highly individual in each customer scenario, and the offerings need to be tailored to the customer's demands.

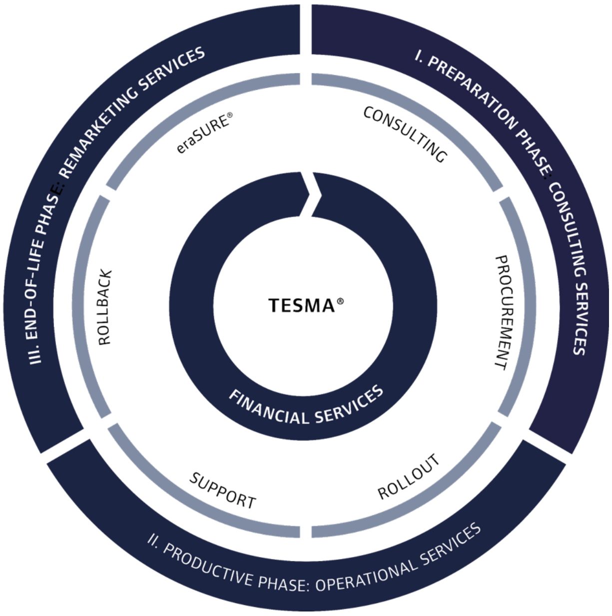

Figure 3: Product lifecycle of CHG-MERIDIAN (CHG-MERIDIAN, 2019a)

After the first contact with the customer has been established through, e.g., cold calling, networking events, social media, etc., the acquisition usually continues with consulting the customer on identifying and refining his needs and showing him the ideal solutions that meet them. This is accompanied by consulting the customer towards an ideal financing solution, identifying the right leasing model, and selecting the appropriate leasing terms. As figure 3 presents, besides extensive technical and leasing specific knowledge, the acquisition also requires comprehensive research and preparation of the customer and its needs, in order to adequately consult the client. Usually, customer acquisition is the sole responsibility of the Account Manager, and the task of the Sales Executive is to approve the acquisition after being filled in on all the details. However, it is often the case that the leader is involved more deeply, giving direct support to the Account Manager, discussing specific leasing terms, or different possibilities to approach the customer meetings. After all relevant terms have been agreed on, and the contract has been signed, the leaders usually do not have any further involvement in the specific deals, unless there are complications throughout the lifecycle that need their attention. Their involvement returns at the end of the contract, when the Account Manager and the client discuss what is going to happen with the assets that are in use. Here the leader often gives support in decisions whether the contract should be extended, or assets should be returned and refurbished while starting a new contract with renewed equipment. Giving support to the Account Managers in this phase with restructuring contracts and maximizing the margins at the end of the contracts, is crucial for the company in order to increase its profitability.

3.3 Data collection

Referring back to the two steps of the research presented in figure 1, the data collection process will be described accordingly.

The sample for the first step consisted of seven Sales Executives from CHG-MERIDIAN who are either leading the sales activities of a certain region or a country the company is active in ((Executive) Vice President Sales, Regional Manager or Team leader, see Figure 2).

Step 1: Leader perspective			
Notation	**Position**	**Years in a leadership position**	**No. of subordinates**
M1	Regional Manager	3,5	7
M2	Regional Manager	1,5	6
M3	Vice President	1	10
M4	Team Leader	<1	4
M5	Vice President Sales	<1	4
M6	Executive Vice President	4	5 (17 indirect)
M7	Executive Vice President	3,5	2 (13 indirect)
Step 2: External and Team perspective			
I1	Head of Human Resource Management	8	16
I2	Head of Sales Development	3,5	3
RBS1	Account Manager	-	-
RBS2	Account Manager	-	-
RBS3	Account Manager	-	-
RBS4	Account Manager	-	-

Table 1: Information about the selected interview partners (own representation)

The participants were actively selected by the following criteria: having a leadership position for <5 years and an exemplary performance record with the specific region/country based on factors turnover, gross-margin, and new customer rate. Table 1 provides an overview of all selected leaders who currently lead teams between 4 and 17 employees and are working in different regions/countries of the company.

As part of the initial preparation and testing of the interview guideline for the leaders, we conducted two pilot interviews and reviewed theory about ethnographic interviews as well as high-quality connections. In an ethnographic interview, the questions are built around one grand theme but leave space for the interviewee to elaborate on specific episodes and experiences that are especially compelling (Spradley, 1979). We chose this approach since we wanted to facilitate the participants to share experiences, stories, and challenges from their leadership career and be able to grasp what they are doing in their daily routines. Accordingly, six main questions were designed openly to capture practices and actions, supplemented by sub-questions that allow the researchers to go into more detail if needed. We oriented the questions towards process research (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013) and aligned them to an interview guideline with a four-phase structure (see Appendix 1).

During the whole interview, we were focusing on creating a comfortable atmosphere building upon high-quality connections by incorporating elements of respectful engagement, especially conveying presence, active listening, and authenticity (Dutton, 2003). The first situational experiences of the pilot interviews gave us security and trust in our role before subsequently conducting seven semi-structured interviews with the sample of leaders presented in table 1 (M1-M7). The interviews had an approximate length of 30-45 minutes and were conducted in either English or German, depending on the native language of the participant. A recording device recorded the interviews, and the data was transcribed in the language it was recorded.

With the approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), this research is in line with GDPR guidelines and fulfills ethical considerations appropriately. The participants were informed about the objectives of the research project and asked to sign a consent letter to allow the researchers to use personal information during the data collection. The sound recordings, as well as the transcribed interviews, were deleted after the completion of the Master Thesis, as agreed with the interview partners, the supervisor, and NSD.

The data collection for the second step included two semi-structured interviews with the Head of Human Resource Management (I2) and the Head of Sales Development (I1). The interviews were guided by a few open questions (see Appendix 2), building upon themes that arose throughout the first-step interviews. Since the Head of Human Resource Management was involved in almost all promotion decisions of the sampled Sales Executives and the fact that she is in close collaboration with them for staff and recruitment topics, she has profound knowledge and can evaluate their described practices and performances. The Head of Sales Development is also working closely with all of the interview participants regularly and provides support in topics of sales strategies, sales data analytics, and performance reviews of the subordinate account managers and themselves. Therefore, also, the Head of Sales Development can provide detailed insights about the interviewees from the sample and evaluate the described practices from his perspective.

In addition, and as described earlier, we also performed an RBS exercise. This RBS exercise enabled us to collect practices and situations in which the leader was seen at his/her best (Roberts et al., 2005) from the perspective of subordinates. An RBS exercise can assist leaders in evaluating their current actions and help them develop a plan for more effective practices in the future. This exercise also brings light into unrecognized and unexplored areas of potential and can improve the performance at work (Roberts et al., 2005). The RBS was conducted with one leader who was also interviewed during the first step of the data collection. He sent out an E-Mail asking his whole sales team (15 recipients) to participate in the exercise, resulting in 4 responses (RBS1-4) that completed the data collection. The invitational text of the RBS can be found in appendix 3.

We are of the strong belief that the validation through the two additional interviews and the RBS exercise rounds off the method of data collection and allows them to critically evaluate the gathered insights from the interview partners through different angles of perspective.

Because of active employment in the investigated company, Tim (one of the researchers) was positioned as an insider to the case. This was particularly beneficial in the preparation process due to an already established network and the interview conduction. In line with what literature discussed (Padgett, 2016), the insider position was facilitating easier access to the field and a broader understanding of interviewed participants. However, in order to prevent the risk of imposing own perceptions and bias from the familiarity (Drake, 2010), Paula (the other researcher) was unknown to the company and brought an outside perspective to the topic. In the interview situation, for instance, Paula took a more active role by asking questions while Tim was mainly listening carefully and sometimes intervening with follow-up questions. The common danger of an insider to be guided by the lens of experience towards a certain direction and potentially unconscious filtering or ignoring of information was reduced by involving Paula to the same extent in the interpretation process and debriefing of data collection (Padgett, 2016). As research theory of Gioia and colleagues claim, having an insider as well as an outsider perspective on the data optimizes the depth and gives access to the richness of data (Gioia et al., 2010).

3.4 Data Analysis

Referring to the last step in the methodological framework of Kempster et al., (2016), theorizing should be the primary goal of the research. However, the thought process should not be directed towards generalization, it should instead strive for illustrating "plausible explanations for the manifestations of LAP at higher levels of abstraction, and that this resonates with practitioners" (Kempster et al., 2016, p. 245). In the context of this thesis, this means providing a theorized explanation and descriptions of practices exercised by young leaders at CHG-MERIDIAN and the following implications, rather than trying to generalize the findings.

Overall, the analytical approach of our thesis was inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968), that aims to remain faithful by presenting the reality from the informant's point of view. Applying this approach led to a repetitive linkage process of empirical investigations and theoretical sources.

For analyzing semi-structured interviews, coding is described as a common method to use for linking the collected data and their explanation of meaning (Charmaz, 2001). In the first cycle, we used initial and open coding to break down the data into fragments that could be examined more closely (Charmaz, 2006). Many codes were created in line with descriptive coding, which summarizes the content of a paragraph, usually in one descriptive keyword or short phrase (Saldaña, 2013). Examples are 'Feedback', 'Initiative', or 'Flexibility'. In some cases, we adopted 'in vivo' codes, by utilizing phrases used by the interviewees (Charmaz, 2006), examples are 'Sparring partner', 'Team Captain', or 'Extra mile'. We attached a detailed overview of the coding process (Appendix 4: Coding tables). A high consistency across the participants' statements became visible, and we discussed selected material regarding its value and overall contribution to the research question, as it is recommended by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003).

Similar to how the grounded theorist Gioia (2004) used to proceed in his research, it was required to take a step back and review the theory before continuing with the next analytical step to seek for conceptual similarities of the codes to enable categorizing in the framework of focused and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Through further comparison of the so far categorized data, we arrived at a limited number of themes that mirrored the key explanatory concepts, analogous to what Gioia (2004) called 'aggregate dimensions'. Again, before and after writing up the findings and proposing a conceptual model in the discussion, we looped back to theory. Throughout the process of interpretation and making sense of the findings, we collaborated closely. In order to support the readers memorability, known as 'cognitive stickiness', as well as underlining the most important points, several key stories that were assessed by the authors as highly informative are included in the findings section ('sound-bites') (Gioia, 2004).

4. Findings

Through analyzing the data, we found that the interviewed sample has very similar behavior patterns with regards to their activities and daily routines as leaders. From these identified patterns, we derived several practices that are described and exemplified in table 2. It is important to note that the topics summarized in the practices were picked up in every interview. While there were differences in the extent to which individual participants commented on the individual points, a high level of agreement was found on the fundamental importance of issues that go in this direction. This findings chapter will review these identified practices thoroughly by summing up the most informative statements from the date enriched by direct quotes of the participants.

Practices	**Description**	**Examples of actions**
Taking the initiative	Taking first steps to initiate processes/decisions and identifying/realizing opportunities when they arise.	• Openly communicating career goals and motivations • Showing drive, commitment, and flexibility to the company
Acting solution-oriented	Actions and practices of the leaders are directed towards finding solutions to imminent problems or conflicts.	• Engage conflict discussions with concerned subordinates • Prepping for performance reviews with employees or complex client deals • Giving feedback to the team
Interacting as a ‘team captain’	Establishing team spirit and motivation and working together with the team to accomplish common goals.	• Creating a positive atmosphere • Initiating and participating at team and social meetings • Representing the team, e.g., at external events
Supporting as a ‘sparring partner’	Individually supporting each subordinate and considering all concerns of the team members.	• Being reliable, caring and available for private concerns of employees • Supporting subordinates in client meetings

		• Linking subordinates to other departments of the company for special requests or complex deals
Striving for continuous improvement	Continuously evaluating their experience with the aim of understanding criticism and using this input as a source for self- as well as team-improvement.	• Demanding feedback from the team or more experienced leaders • Taking criticism seriously and use it positively • Questioning and challenging the status quo
Being authentic	Spending thoughts on one's own personality and actions. Reflecting this towards the leadership position and striving for authenticity.	• Not trying to hide flaws • Sharing their personality with the team, e.g., by being connected on social media

Table 2: Identified patterns and examples of actions (own representation)

Before considering every practice in detail, some general information of the sample is given in order to set a foundation for the following findings. Looking at the background of the seven interviewed Sales Executives, while the educational backgrounds differ in the forms of degree level, study program, and location, the overall pattern shows an academic career with a business or economic context. The educations vary from apprenticeships, over dual studies with corporate partners to Masters degrees taken abroad.

For four of the participants, the journey at CHG-MERIDIAN began with a two-year sales traineeship as preparation for a career in sales. The other three joined the company via a direct entry as Sales Development Manager, Account Manager, and Executive Assistant. A similarity between the sample is the fact that all of them were working with the company for at least two years before taking over a leadership position, and all participants had at least one year of practical experience in sales, either within the company or externally.

4.1 Taking the initiative

The first practice of the sample we identified is related to a certain pursuit of initiative exercised by the leaders. Always sitting in the driver seat, being active rather than reactive, and taking first steps to initiate processes or decisions are key characteristics here. This comes in hand with always having a sharp eye for occurring opportunities and a precise realization when a chance has been identified as an opportunity. This practice already became visible at the beginning of the interviews. Direct communication of goals within the company is one commonality that was captured. During all interviews, the clear expression of the desired career goals was mentioned. In some cases, those ambitions were communicated very directly, while in other cases, they were formulated as the desire to shape the organization and being able to participate in the process of the company's future development.

"I always had an internal motivation and drive for leadership. I remember a situation during my first seminar at CHG, where I was asked which job I would take for one day if you could choose. Without any doubt, I was answering that I would choose to be CEO since it is my desire to be in the management board one day." (M3)

It was, however, not only the communication of the goals that gave the participants the opportunity to become a leader. Taking the initiative further and showing drive were the given answers when being asked why they believe they were selected for the leadership positions.

"The perceived motivation and showing that I am willing to go the extra mile and always being available gave me the edge for getting the position." (M4)

Taking the initiative also meant taking big steps and commitment towards personal changes for some of the participants. One interviewee shared that during his second year of the trainee program, he spent several months working at an international office of the company (which will not be named here), which had a massive influence on his ongoing career. Seeing a lot of unutilized and growing potential for the company in that specific market, he expressed his desire to be located in that foreign subsidiary at the end of his traineeship. After two years as the most successful Account Manager in this country, he was promoted to Vice President Sales of the subsidiary. This was not the only case where taking risks has been rewarded. Also, for some others showing a willingness to change was opening the door to career opportunities in leadership.

"Without showing flexibility and commitment, I would not be here today. I had to move twice for my career, and when I got offered the Regional Manager position, I just had bought a house with my family, and then I had to move again. You have to make sacrifices if you want to progress your career." (M2)

The demonstrated flexibility of the leaders is also observed by other members of the company. The Head of Human Resource Management also highlighted the move of one of the interviewees who went to a subsidiary abroad as a trainee and who is now the Vice President Sales of that country.

"He started with us as a trainee and went abroad. He had the courage to believe in himself, to take risks, and to realize the opportunity he was given. Although one could have waited a little longer to promote him, the company also realized the opportunity and the risk he was taking, so he got the chance to become Vice President." (I2)

Throughout the interviews, it also became evident that the realized opportunities often were not the easiest option (e.g., the story of M2 who relocated twice for his job opportunity) and that certain risks were associated with them. However, it was also stated that this willingness to takes risks often entailed the desired outcome. It was pointed out by the Head of Sales Development as:

"Another aspect that differentiates these leaders is their courage and the will to take risks in order to come to decisions that are off-track. There have been many cases where this courage has been rewarded." (I1)

4.2 Acting solution-oriented

The leaders' solution-oriented behavior summarizes their practices aimed at finding solutions to upcoming or present problems or conflicts. In the same manner, as it was described in the earlier section about taking the initiative, the leaders show a preference to tackle issues directly driven by a problem-solving mindset.

"Nevertheless, we are a sales team in our region, every salesperson is fighting for deals and customers on his/her own, and there are sometimes overlaps in acquisitions where two Account Managers target the same customer. I had several of those conflicts during the past years, and my Regional Manager always solved those conflicts with the right balance and the needed fairness. Even though some decisions were against me, they were always comprehensible and done in a correct, solution-focused, and transparent manner." (RBS3)

As this employee's story indicates, the leader was addressing conflicts directly instead of avoiding them. Especially in connection with cultural differences, it was said that conflicts are tackled at an early stage, preferably in open and direct communication with those affected. A standard procedure is a meeting initiated by the leader to discuss the reason for the conflict and possible solutions together with the involved parties. Further evidence for engaging conflict discussions with concerned people was given when some leaders elaborated on the challenge to cope with uncomfortable situations due to internal competition in the application phase for the leadership position. In particular when being chosen from a pool of candidates that included more experienced colleagues, some participants experienced a lack of understanding and criticism towards their abilities. It was most challenging to handle the situation when the leaders met the other applicants again as members of their team. In order to resolve and prevent potential conflicts that could arise from this prehistory, addressing this issue by direct communication in the early phase of the team building was perceived as relieving. When thinking back, some participants would have even preferred to seek an open exchange about this at an earlier stage. In the context of internal competition and doubts from competitors, the company's trust was clearly pointed out to strengthen the confidence of the early-career leader, with the potential of even further improvement at CHG-MERIDIAN.

We found another dimension of the orientation towards solutions. The action to prepare properly was found to be one strategy to overcome the challenge of being accepted as a leader. While it was for some more demanding to positioning themselves as a leader in front of clients and partners, others rather referred to experiences with their internal subordinates. Especially due to prejudices regarding their age and little experience, the barrier of acceptance, as well as expectations, were perceived higher.

"When being invited to seminars where leaders of different companies were present, I felt like an intern. In the middle of experienced and older leaders, it was hard at the beginning to leave a confident impression." (M3)

Half of the participants see preparation as a crucial way to compensate for lacking experience in the process of mastering acceptance issues.

"'Luck favors the prepared' is my leading principle. I compensate for my little experience with proper preparation. Of course, when holding year-end meetings or performance reviews several times, you get a routine. In the initial phase, however, I had the feeling that preparation was necessary and very advantageous in order to give a competent impression as a manager." (M4)

This shows that the leaders engage besides general leadership training or seminars also in daily preparation activities such as planning and structuring team or client meetings. As time passes, this process becomes more and more routine, and the need for extensive preparation is stated to decrease. Particularly seeking exchange with more experienced leaders as a continuous practice was mentioned to be valuable with regards to proper preparation. In order to facilitate, engage, and promote prepping as a joint team practice, the leaders also support their employees in their individual preparations, e.g., for negotiations with clients.

"We had a deal where the client was to drop-out since the buying agent revised our offer and found that buying equipment would be cheaper for the client. Just reducing the price of our current offer would have left us with an unprofitable deal. Through intensive collaboration and the coaching from my leader when preparing

the negotiations, we found an intelligent way to restructure the deal, making it attractive for the customer and profitable for us - and that was without my leader being at the customer with me." (RBS3)

Since analyzing the customer and its needs is a central task of the sales process that was described in the research context, appropriate consultation benefits from proper preparation. As the RBS story of one Account Manager clarifies, his leader was involved in this process by supporting from behind the scenes in the stage of preparing the customized offer.

In the context of how preparation is continuously encouraged, it is a striking similarity that the feedback culture has been noted in the majority of the interviews. While the aspect of receiving feedback as a leader will be discussed at a later stage, the aspect of giving feedback to their team on a regular basis was stressed to support securing preparation among employees. Besides planned feedback circles such as years-end meetings and jour-fixes, there may be occasions when short feedback talks happen spontaneously or even in conversations in the corridor.

4.3 Interacting as a 'team captain'

A 'team captain', an in vivo term, creates team spirit, spreads motivation, and works together with the team to achieve common goals. This understanding is expressed by a metaphor that was mentioned by one interviewee.

"From my point of view, a successful leader is comparable to a team captain in soccer who is on the field with his team, pushing and motivating his teammates to give 100%. But he can also score a goal himself if needed and can defend if things go bad to avoid conceiving a goal. That is in contrast to the coach standing on the sideline telling the team what to do and blaming them if they fail." (M1)

Throughout the interviews, the leaders emphasized that, by formulating and communicating common goals and showing that they are part of the team working with the team members to achieve those goals, they were able to create this team spirit and build a trusting relationship. In this context, it was often mentioned as what the young leaders believed to be one of the factors that distinguish them from older and more experienced colleagues who have been in a comparable position for several years. This comes along with the fact that the leaders not only realize but also embrace that their personal success is depending on the performance of the team. Focusing on development and collaboration within the team are, therefore, seen as crucial aspects and emphasized by almost all interviewees.

"I constantly try to induce the development of my team, and I try to motivate by spreading positive energy and creating a positive atmosphere. But what my team values, even more, is the fact that I follow the 'pulling on the same rope approach'." (M2)

Some of the participants also described a trend towards stronger collectivity, where the leader shares responsibility with his team, and decisions are taken with the team being involved. It is assumed that offering space and autonomy strengthen the team's development and empowerment. By allowing, for instance, home office or flexible working hours, independent working was encouraged. Not all interviewees fully agree on the positive effects of the trend towards more independence. The two participants who lead a foreign team were pointing out that a certain degree of guidance and control is necessary to secure efficiency due to challenges that arise from cultural differences.

Besides the mentioned opinions, we found that a general focus on collectivity, mutual appreciation, and giving the impression of 'pulling on the same rope' instead of being 'a patriarch' is seen as impactful to commit people not only to the team but also to the leader. The mentioned involvement and cooperation does not only cover the workplace but also extends to joint free-time activities.

"My team is enthusiastic about the same topics and spends a lot of time together besides work; some even go on vacation together. We also host and participate in many events together, for example, after-work drinks. Spending time together besides work connects employees, creates trust within the team, and sets the foundation for good collaboration." (M4)

While all interview partners agreed on the ongoing trend towards flatter hierarchies and more intense collaborative leadership practices, one participant brought up an interesting controversy. He pointed out that there is an important balance to keep between involvement/collaboration and authority. For young and early-career leaders, this is of emphasized relevance since they, as described above, focus on a more collaborative and involving approach and therefore need to be careful to maintain their authority and power as a leader. The participant continued saying that there might be certain risks for these young leaders to be seen and treated more like a buddy or friend rather than a superior and that they need to be careful with balancing a collaborative environment while also being solution-driven and maintaining authority as leader. According to both interviewees from the second interview round, the early career leaders are primarily characterized by keeping this balance between giving clear guiding instructions and still encourage the team for honest opinions and participation. Everyone knows how far they can go, and professional matters seem to not be influencing the personal relation. Exactly this balance was stated to be a particular distinguishing factor of the sample compared to senior managers who often tend to prefer hierarchical structures. A concrete story from a team member within the RBS exercise verified this point from another angle. The employee remembered a situation of intense discussions about professional topics among the leader and the whole team during lunchtime. It was highly appreciated that the leader was open to other opinions and got involved in challenging each other's points of view. Another remarkable memory was that although the criticism led to conflict discussions among the group, it was possible to go for a beer with the leader in the evening.

One more practice that was emphasized by the interviewed Sales Executives is connected to networking. The leaders participate in different events in order to maintain and broaden their internal and external networks while staying up-to-date on current market trends. Especially being connected to other sales regions of the company or the headquarters was stated to be very beneficial to support the team.

"I want to give my team a voice also within the company. I want to ensure information flow to other departments and the headquarters." (M4)

The necessity to represent the team not only at company-internal events or meetings but also at external business gatherings was pointed out further to be a crucial driver to establish and sustain a valuable network.

4.3 Supporting as a 'sparring partner'

Building upon the last section about how the participants interact and collaborate with the whole team, this part will highlight their practices and actions regarding individual employees. Acting as a 'sparring partner' entails supporting and considering all concerns of each subordinate. Professional, but also personal issues are treated with importance and considered individually.

"My leader stands out by being a 'coach' who gives me a supportive feeling when I'm on the right track but also helps me find the right ways in difficult situations. This doesn't happen from a hierarchical position but rather from dialogue and discussion on the same level." (RBS3)

Independently from each other, several participants mentioned the term 'sparring partner' as a description of how they want to be perceived by every single team member. It was said that every employee differs in his/her professional level, personal strengths, and weaknesses, need for guidance, and in his/her expectations of how to be led. Almost all participants were surprised by how much time they spend on providing availability for employees' concerns compared to handling their own business activities. Managing internal conflicts and practicing an open-door policy was prioritized by the leaders, but this also led to time scarcity. The majority of participants emphasized individuality in leadership and their aspiration to adapt to every employee. The time consumption was underestimated and led partly to challenges regarding inefficiency. However, to hold back with their own obligations, to listen, to advise, and to be reachable for personal concerns are practices that have a positive impact on the employees and the work itself, according to all interviewees.

In this process, most of the interviewees state that a good knowledge of human nature, as well as a strong sense of personal judgment, are beneficial. Beyond the professional expertise, the participants emphasized that a leader should, therefore, be curious and interested in understanding different characters and personalities. In order to fulfill the role of a 'sparring partner' as best as possible, all agreed that actions should be consistent with the communication. This means that promising support needs to be underlined with presence and availability.

“If someone approaches me, I take every concern seriously and try my best to contribute to a solution right away. Everyone in my team has the possibility to contact me, and I prioritize their concerns, also the private ones. I try to empty my email inbox every evening.” (M3)

This is further supported by the insights from the RBS, where one team member highlighted the support from the leader while she was doing her Master’s degree besides working.

“Without the trust and the backing of my leader, doing my degree while working would not have been possible. This support motivated me, even more, to give 100% at work”. (RBS1)

Being visible, reliable, and caring in situations that require individual backing are assessed as important to give proof for the role of a ‘sparring partner’. Showing presence was meant to be crucial in as well as outside the office.
Beyond the individual support, the leaders see even more effectiveness of the measure to join external meetings. Having a regular exchange with clients and being involved in the current business activities keep them up-to-date to the market and let them gain direct impressions that are relevant for future strategic decisions. Often it is also understood as a sign of mutual appreciation, especially when the clients’ management is joining the meeting as well.

"If it is desired, I join my employees at customer meetings. It is often asked from employees that are new in the company or new to sales, and I am always willing to show them my support and assistance. I am convinced that actively participating in those meetings makes them more secure in the future.” (M3)

What was already made clear in previous explanations regarding internal network relations also applies to the individual. The leaders emphasized that it is important to realize where certain connections need to be made and which other departments or people need to be involved in order to find an answer or a solution quickly.

"If one of my team members has a complex deal, I help to connect to other departments, for example, treasury or legal, or even involve our CFO if it is necessary to have him in a client meeting. This gives security to the Account Managers, and we are usually able to find the best solution together." (M4)

4.4 Striving for continuous improvement

The topic of self-reflection, self-criticism, and individual improvement was mentioned on various occasions in almost all interviews. Therefore, this section frames the leaders' strive for continuously reflecting on what has been experienced with the goal of demanding criticism and using this as a source for self- and team improvement. This drive for improvement becomes visible in several instances, for example, also at customer meetings.

"When I enter a room as the youngest person, I still feel that people tend to underestimate me. But I got used to it and with the time, I started to like the situation more and more. Being underestimated is a good starting point to impress others and to turn low expectations into recognition." (M7)

Several interviewees also emphasized to regularly seek the exchange with every subordinate in private conversations and to use these conversations to give and receive feedback. The researchers observed that the participants were particularly elaborating on how useful they evaluate the input of their employees. It was the most common way to ask employees directly and individually in meetings, such as performance reviews, about any feedback, wishes, or improvement suggestions related to their leadership. Having people around you who are eager to provide constructive feedback, share their honest opinions, and who are unafraid to give criticism was assessed as the best ground for personal improvement. Therefore, especially negative feedback is welcomed and turned into the best possible chance, not only to arrive at outstanding solutions but also to develop personally.

"*Building upon the feedback I got from employees, I identified empathy as a personal area of improvement. I am aware of this weakness and try to improve it by taking courses that provide supportive tools and recommendations for practical actions." (M2)*

As this concrete story illustrates, criticism is not only demanded but also taken seriously and could be translated into concrete improvement measures for the leader. Not only feedback but also episodes of failure and mistakes are turned around to have a positive impact

“I emphasize a learning-by-doing approach, an environment where small mistakes are not judged. It is especially vital for the leader that there is a tolerance for his mistakes, and this should also be practiced for the team. Failing should not be judged, but the mistakes should always be used for improvement.” (M1)

In this context, the Head of Human Resources shares an interesting insight grounded by her years of experience in recruiting and developing leaders.

“I believe that making mistakes, falling down, and getting up again is much easier as a young manager. The reasons could be that the environment might be more tolerant and understanding for them or their general nature to be more open. I perceive that constructive, hard feedback is rather accepted by younger leaders in comparison to older leaders who often fear to lose their face.” (I2)

An additional angle on continuous improvement was given by the Head of Sales Development. Challenging current ideas or sales approaches during team meetings was only one action mentioned in this context in order to generate better solutions and increasing the success rates of the acquisitions.

“Our young management team in particular, has a certain mindset for innovation. They never cease to question, challenge, and improve what already exists, to bring in new ideas and to sometimes do things in a completely different way.” (I1)

4.5 Being authentic

Striving for authenticity in their actions and spending thoughts on their own personality and behavior is another practice utilized by the interviewed sample.
The necessity of authenticity was highlighted by the sample in the context of getting acceptance, winning the commitment of the team, and influencing the own sense of

well-being. The common tone was that a leader should stay authentic in his/her acting and appearance in front of the team. How this can be done was commented with the recommendation to ‘stay who you are’. Being authentic requires confidence and courage to reveal their own personality. One participant supported this thought with the image of a young and sportive leader wearing sneakers to his suit. He perceives this as totally fine and even desired when the choice of clothing is in line with a person’s character. Authentic leadership can also be found in another story.

“Once, an employee told me that I was her first boss so far, who has honestly admitted a lack of knowledge. She remembered one incident when I could not help her directly. I was surprised that she remembered the whole story and me saying: ‘I have absolutely no clue about this.’” (M6)

By simply being honest and making confessions, the leader was giving an authentic impression to the employee. Pretending to be someone else and worrying about their reputation were pointed out to be the main obstacles to authenticity.

“I try not to act like the smartest guy in the room, I don’t have to explain a CIO at the customer how his IT infrastructure works, and I don’t want to tell a guy who has been in sales for 20 years how to do his job.” (M6)

In ongoing conversation, the participant highlighted that, especially when being young, it is relevant to show recognition to the team members and value their competence. Giving an example as a leader of being humble and expressing vulnerability supports an environment where tolerance for mistakes is lived and not only communicated. Several interviewees mentioned this aspect as a major distinguishing factor between them and leaders from an older generation, who tend to maintain their hierarchical status.
The process of self-reflection that was mentioned goes beyond evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses, but also comparing them to the requirements for leadership.

"It is important to reflect if I really want to become a leader and if I have that intrinsic motivation. If someone is not authentic and 'plays a role', it is hard to build a connection to your team. I recommend to self-reflect about your own skills and whether they fit the role of a leader. Many salespersons, for instance, are great at their job but would not be good leaders." (M1)

It is an additional note that the researchers had a very authentic impression of the young leaders in the situation of the interviews. This manifested in little gestures such as body language, eye contact, and the tone of the voice which fit the conversation. While this authentic behavior became visible throughout almost all interviews with the Sales Executives, it was also brought up during an interview of the second round, which shows again that the young leaders are staying true to themselves even after being promoted. The Head of Sales Development added here:

"I find the humanity of the young managers, particularly outstanding. They manage to bear a great responsibility and still be so close to the business and the employee. You are clearly perceived as a manager, but also as a buddy with whom you can go through thick and thin." (I1)

Also, the Head of Human Resources gave insight towards that matter:

"When I think about what distinguishes this group of leaders, the inspiring effect of their particular charisma comes to mind." (I2)

These external perceptions can be complemented with the voice of the leaders themselves. It is seen as a particularly distinctive factor compared to more experienced leaders that they have a greater willingness to share their personalities with their colleagues.

"I think what I do differently is that I let my team be part of my personality to a greater extent than other leaders. I am open and also share private matters. I am not scared to show who I am, and I like to have this personal connection with my team." (M7)

While all participants focus on being present in the office and being open for informal corridor talks, some also highlighted their willingness to talk about personal related topics in an off-work context. Among others, this openness was shown by being connected with employees through social media such as Instagram or LinkedIn. Also, social gatherings, for instance, engage the building of relationships on a personal level. In these ways, the leaders let the employees get closer to them.

5. *Discussion*

Through the analysis of the data, we identified six relevant practices and described them throughout the previous findings section. Concerning the overall orientation of this thesis towards the LAP movement, which seeks to understand leadership through practices rather than skills or traits (Raelin, 2016), we will now discuss these findings towards the research question:

'What do early-career and positive-deviant leaders do that makes them successful?'

Having analyzed the findings, two major points for discussion stand out. Firstly, as we pointed out in the theory section about the discussion on experiencing versus teaching, experience is indeed a key factor that impacts a leader's success (Doh, 2003). However, after reviewing the insights of leaders who are positive deviant, even though they are at an early stage of their careers, we identified six practices. Accordingly, we evaluate the absence of experience as not an insuperable obstacle to achieve success in leadership. Instead of hiding missing experience and seeing it as a disadvantage, turning around the situation into a positive one can majorly be traced back to the leader's strive for continuous improvement.

Secondly, as we debated in the theory section, a sales environment tends to be performance-oriented due to high internal comparison, strong goal focus (Futrell, 1975; Farbrot, 2012) and is as well likely to be characterized by a high exchange mentality (Ingram et al., 2005). The findings, however, indicate several successful actions of the leaders that do not point in this direction. Collaborating and building trust unify the attached practices in one term and represent the leaders' sense for mutuality without having an exchange in mind.

In order to structure the discussion of those two main outcomes, we propose the following conceptual model (Figure 4). The model aligns the practices to each other and relates the major findings on striving for continuous improvement as well as collaborating and building trust that, in combination, generate early-career success for leaders.

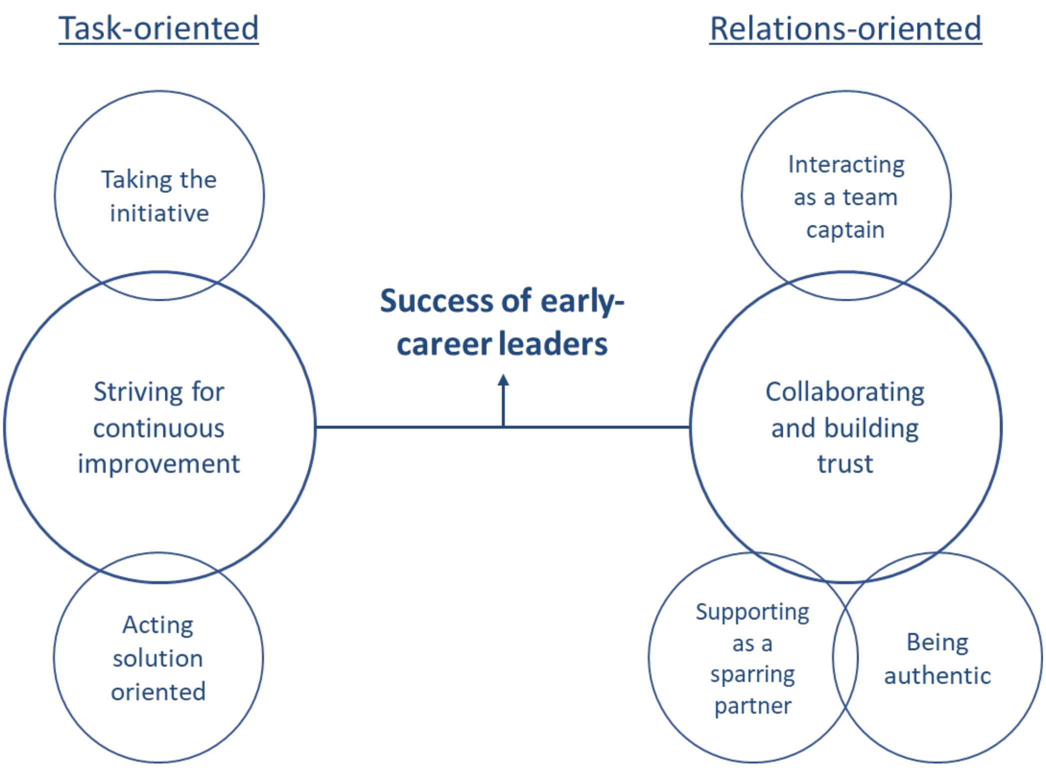

Figure 4: Components of early-career success (own representation)

The sides are also separated with an overarching categorization in 'Task-oriented' and 'Relations-oriented'. These categories are mainly drawn from Yukl (2013) and inspired by Forsyth (2019), who used two very similar terms in his two-factor model of leadership, aiming to capture what leaders do. "The […] model assumes that leaders, despite their widely varying methods and styles, tend to do two basic things when they lead others - they coordinate the work that the group must accomplish, and they attend to the group's interpersonal needs" (Forsyth, 2019, p. 269).

5.1 Task-oriented practices

'Task-oriented' behavior focuses on the group's work and its goals. In the common theoretical understanding, the leader initiates structure, sets standards and objectives, develops operating procedures, defines responsibilities, gives evaluative feedback, plans and coordinates activities, proposes solutions, and stresses the need for efficiency and productivity (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Forsyth, 2019; Yukl, 2013). While some of the identified practices can directly be related to the original understanding and concretely point out the importance of certain 'task-oriented' activities, some others extend the classical definition to another context.

Starting with **taking the initiative**, in order to execute all the mentioned example activities for 'task-orientation' such as structuring or giving feedback, it is required to behave actively and not reactively. Beyond the objective activity to initiate, the stories of the leaders tackle their whole mindset to activate and get things moving, which they also applied in their earlier career stages.

For instance, it is argued that employees are often engaged in career development, as work performance is one of the key factors in career planning (Salthouse & Maurer, 1996). But, most ultimately, they do not communicate their goals to the relevant people around them in order to advance their careers (McAvoy, 2003). The interviewed sample, however, showed their initiative in this setting by using clear and, in most cases, also direct communication to actively pursue their career goals. Expressing their desire for leadership and throwing themselves in the ring to fight for the wanted positions disclosed how stable and anchored the initiating mentality is.

Valuing the given opportunities from the company is another aspect where initiative becomes visible. Theory suggests that employees have a high willingness to relocate if the move offers them a new career opportunity (Landau, Shamir, & Arthur, 1992). Some of the leaders were given a chance to start their leadership careers in another country or region the company is active in. Realizing and using these opportunities was done without much doubt for most of them, even if the decision implied moving to another place with their families. This willingness to relocate is an indicator of leaders' commitment and trust in the success of the given opportunity and that they act in the meaning of the company while making personal sacrifices (Landau et al., 1992).

Having this said, the leaders' readiness, willingness, and courage to take a path that deviates from the norm somehow reveal their strive and openness to make experiences. In that sense, their initiative behavior enabled, accelerated, and enriched the experiencing process, which had beneficial effects on balancing out their lack of experience. The positive correlation between someone's drive resulting in increasing motivation and success is related to the research of Amabile & Kramer (2011) on the inner work-life system that shows parallels to striving for continuous improvement as well as the 'relations-oriented' side and is explained accordingly.

Since classic 'task-oriented' behavior also implies resolving problems immediately that could disrupt the work (Yukl, 2013), the identified practice of **acting solution-oriented** is discussed within this side of the model. While a conflict itself is at times an unpleasant situation in a team, a leader's conflict avoidance may not mitigate the circumstances and could reinforce negative perceptions such as injustice or tactical maneuvering (Yang, 2015). Instead of preventing and going around the original conflict, leaders are recommended to be more sensitive for team affairs and to "engage in communication with subordinates to understand the situation and decide which handling style should be used" (Yang, 2015, p. 290). As presented in the findings, the interviewees independently confirmed their proactive approach towards conflict management. This aspect was highlighted throughout the sample, and further was found to receive positive reactions regarding conflict resolutions from employees.

Another angle of solution-oriented behavior that is less covered in the classic 'task-oriented' perspective is the prepping activity. One could argue that preparation, with respect to 'task-orientation', is reflected in planning general activities. However, the preparation that was found in the case of the sample specifically pointed out situations where prepping had an even higher beneficial impact for early-career leaders. Practicing preparation, in the sense of carefully developing and revitalizing knowledge (Carlsen, Clegg, & Gjersvik, 2012), was found to support the leaders themselves in order to gain security in their leading position and also to overcome knowledge gaps from too little experience. Spending time to prepare and gather information beforehand was claimed to be rewarded with increased self-confidence and personal well-being in the situation. Further, the findings on preparation indicate that also the team benefits from joint preparatory actions. Relating back to the customized sales process, the findings constitute that the leaders' support is needed, especially in the consulting phase that calls for individual and situation-specific solutions. According to an employee's statement in the findings, intensive prepping has already led to successful turnarounds in client deals.

Referring to the findings on how the sample promotes prepping within their teams, the aspect of giving feedback, which is considered as 'task-oriented' behavior (Forsyth, 2019), will be discussed in the following. Hawes and Rich (1998) emphasize in their study about sales coaching that supervisory feedback is a significant construct to enhance the performance of salespeople. Beyond the importance of expressing critical feedback, salespeople can be highly motivated by positive feedback (Hawes & Rich, 1998). Due to the feeling of being appreciated and recognized, sales employees can get increasing confidence and potentially perform better (Hawes & Rich, 1998). This could be confirmed by the interviewees who practice regular feedback procedures. Similar to what Hawes and Rich (1998) suggest, providing feedback verbally was evaluated as most effective by the interviewees. The leaders in this sample primarily focus on seeking individual contact with their team members on a frequent basis. The emphasis of literature to point out time and up-to-dateness as crucial factors in the feedback process (Yukl, 2013), is confirmed by the interviewees who are aware to ensure prompt and timely feedback on current happenings.

While concrete activities like prepping and utilizing feedback are relevant for solution-oriented behavior, they are also essential components of the leaders' strive for continuous improvement since they tackle the problem of having limited experience directly.

Not least because the discussions above show intersections and relations on several points, we attach particular importance to striving for continuous improvement. But this is also the practice that provides the most robust evidence for the first overarching finding, which shows how the positive-deviant leaders deal with their experience gap. Even though **striving for continuous improvement** cannot directly be related to a specific 'task-oriented' activity, it has a relevant influence on the stated general goal and performance focus (Forsyth, 2019).

Building upon the feedback culture, a general working climate of trust requires a two-way channel of communication. The same as trust and respect go both ways; also, feedback should not only be given but also actively received by the leader (Hawes & Rich, 1998). It is stated that leaders tend to be very secure about their behavior due to their accomplishments to get in their current positions. This self-confidence may lead to the peril to ignore criticism from less successful people or subordinates (Yukl, 2013). In addition, executives often become isolated in the sense that people “become more reluctant to risk offending them by providing criticism” (Yukl, 2013, p. 371). The participants, though, strongly agree that receiving feedback has been very valuable for them in the past. Also, theoretical results indicate that overall, leader behavior is likely to improve after getting feedback from employees (Atwater, Roush, & Fischthal, 1995). Even before becoming a leader, several interviewees reported that they were regularly seeking input from their superiors and later when being a leader themselves, from their subordinates. Building a common ground as a basis for gaining trust, clarifying mutual expectations to prevent discrepancies, and building an understanding of each other’s role were mentioned by the leaders as main reasons for why requesting feedback is so crucial in the early career phase. The data also provided some evidence that received feedback was taken seriously, and the leaders responded with measurements. This indicates that the sample is truly willing to get actively involved in the learning experience, which is one ability that points in the direction of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). As it was described in the theory section, an individual needs to meet four criteria in order to create genuine knowledge from experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). For two of the criteria, no concrete answer can be given since the data does not provide insights into the analytical and problem-solving skills of the sample. Building upon the discussions about the above-mentioned practices, the leaders are highly solution-oriented and take vital initiatives for their decisions. Therefore, it is assumed that those two criteria are met. With regards to striving for continuous improvement, it is also evident that the leaders are open to reflect on their experiences and are willing to be actively involved in the experience of learning, which indicates that the other criteria are met as well. Having this said, it can be assumed that the leaders facilitate a climate of experimental learning (Lee, 2007).

Beyond seeking and being open for feedback, we found that the leaders specifically stand out by challenging and questioning their environment and given circumstances. This thought has similarities to what Carlsen et al. (2012) call generative resistance. This expression can be understood as the considered and intelligently reasoned disagreement or debate with current ideas or suggestions. It can also be interpreted as a challenge of the most accessible solution, actively seeking, exploring, and using what is difficult (Carlsen et al., 2012). Beyond seeking feedback, challenging and questioning current approaches in team meetings and preparation sessions supported their affinity to generative resistance.
This attempt can be further associated with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977), which represents the individual perception of whether one can do one's own work. From that point, self-efficacy "as the people's belief about their capabilities" (Bandura, 1994, p. 1) also determines to some extend how people behave in certain situations. When the level of self-efficacy is high, people tend to welcome challenges and cope with situations instead of being threatened and expecting personal failure (Bandura, 1994). While the latter leads to poor performance, a high sense of self-efficacy can affect as an "energizing facilitator of performance" (Bandura, 1994, p. 3). This mentality became visible, for example, when the leaders turned the situation of being doubted and underestimated because of their age into a positive one. In the end, they saw this as an opportunity to impress and surprise the critics. The leader stories indicate that this way of thinking supports them in overcoming potential acceptance barriers and increases the leader's establishment within the team. Since people develop and solidify self-efficacy when having the feeling to make progress and mastering problems (Amabile & Kramer, 2011), this relation seems to go both ways in the case of the sample. We believe that the early-career leaders already have a certain level of self-efficacy that helps them to overcome challenges and make progress, which further consolidates and strengthens their self-efficacy.

In order to conclude the first side of the conceptual model, the ongoing debate that was presented in the theory chapter about whether good leadership is teachable or can only be obtained through practice (Doh, 2003) will be picked up again. Neither teaching nor experiencing were found to be the sole foundation of their leadership, but rather a combination. While it is evident that the interviewed sample only has a limited amount of both experience and academic leadership knowledge obtained through teaching, the findings clearly indicate that these early-career and positive-deviant leaders do not try to cover this. Their call for feedback and the critical questioning of given circumstances indicate that they do not pretend to be the perfect leader already. Instead, we found that they embrace their challenge of lacking experience with initiative and solution-oriented behavior. Additionally, their sustainable approach to continuously strive for improvement as a particular way of self-teaching and learning in an experiential environment completes the 'task-oriented' side of the model. But this is only one component of the early-career success that we identified in our thesis.

5.2 Relations-oriented practices

Throughout this section, the right side of the proposed conceptual model will be elaborated, meaning the leaders' 'relations-oriented' practices with regards to connecting to their environment. By exercising 'relations-oriented' behavior, the leader focuses on the interpersonal relations within the group. To increase socioemotional satisfaction and teamwork in the group, the leader gives support and encouragement, boosts morale, treats every individual equally, helps members to release negative tensions, and shows concern and consideration for the group and its members (DeRue et al., 2011; Forsyth, 2019; Yukl, 2013). When focusing on how the leaders described their behavior towards their teams, external customers, and the individual employee, we draw certain similarities to the theoretical section of this thesis as well as the first part of the discussion.

Within **interacting as a team captain**, the metaphor of the captain who unifies the team by setting common goals and visions proves the relevance of 'inspirational motivation', which is one of the types of transformational leadership (Yukl, 2013). Not only the leaders themselves emphasized this, but also the outside perspective confirmed that a reason for why the participants are successful in what they do, is their comrade-in-arms mentality that leads to the extraordinary commitment of the team. Their enthusiasm and positivity to shape and improve the business, combined with a strong communication of the team spirit, are striking signals in this regard. Referring back to the research on the inner work life system, Amabile & Kramer (2011) provide insights into the roots of personal motivation and the desire to do the work. It is argued that motivation and drive towards the job are strongly related to someone's emotions/feelings and perceptions/thoughts (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Those conceptual relations are stated to have a strong influence on the performance in the end. Drawing back to the identified practice of taking the initiative as well as the analyzed mindset of the leaders with respect to theory on generative resistance and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Carlsen et al., 2012), we derive that the positivity growing from these mentalities explains the extraordinary motivation of the early-career leaders in this thesis.

In the further process, the aspect of role-modeling that is stated by Rich (1997) to have a specific meaning in the sales environment, was picked up. Several participants exactly pointed out the relational proximity and the establishment of trust to be useful in the situation when the sales employees work independently outside of the boundaries of their organization. Since a team's "[…] trust is hard to win and easy to lose" (Kane, 2012, p. 38), the leaders are very conscious in sustaining this relation. This is particularly visible in how failures of employees are handled. In response to the question of what the leaders would do if the sales numbers of their team would start to decrease, it was often mentioned that they prefer reacting thoughtfully instead of rash. They do not want to lead with pressure and fear since they believe in the power of positive feelings. That is why they argue that they would always approach such a matter in a comprehensive way without blaming anyone upfront for securing and sustaining a trusting relationship with the team. To be reliable, even when the going gets stormy, influences trust relationships positively (Kane, 2012). Trust is furthermore considered as a pathway to build HQR in the work environment (Dutton, 2012).

The findings support that the sample is leading their teams with a focus on collectivity, mutual participation, and equal involvement. This is in line with the LAP understanding of seeing leadership mirrored in collective activities and everyone's participation (Raelin, 2011). However, throughout the sample, some concerns about the implications of this behavior were mentioned. The leaders reported that on the one hand, their participative measures and the approach to include the whole team in decisions have positive effects such as increasing satisfaction and acceptance of the employees. On the other hand, this process is time-consuming, and the leaders also mentioned the risks to give away too much control and to lose their general standing as a leader. Employees would get used to being involved, and consequently, they would begin to expect this naturally. Taking participation research into consideration, a similar inconsistency, and lacking evidence for formulating any reliable conclusions can be found in the literature (Yukl, 2013). Vroom and Yetton (1973) contributed to this discussion with their approach to focus on situational differences to adapt the level of participation in decision procedures accordingly.

Overall, we found that the benefits of the collective approach outweigh the negative considerations. For instance, the aspects of engaging subordinate's participation, involvement, and responsibility are also known to impact success in the sense to increase an employees' creativity and motivation. When people have a voice and responsibility in their own work, they are more likely to gain self-efficacy as their work makes progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). As it was discussed within the practice of striving for continuous improvement, the leaders' own self-efficacy is a factor that contributes positively to their success. Considering again the research of the progress principle where Amabile & Kramer (2011) connect sharing responsibility and involvement with the establishment of self-efficacy, it can be said that the leaders create conditions for their employees to develop and strengthen their own self-efficacy.

It is claimed that the demand for a leadership position has changed over the last decades (Bennet, Bennet, & Lewis, 2015), a topic that was also brought up by the Head of Human Resource Management during the second interview round. In earlier times, leaders were most often selected based on their competence, knowledge, and experience. Today, professional knowledge is still required, but the leader does not need to be a specialist. Interpersonal skills, as well as the care for the own network, were assessed as crucial factors that had a beneficial influence on the selection process for the investigated sample of early-career and positive-deviant leaders, which is in line with relevant research in this area (Bennet et al., 2015). In their previous positions, they were perceived as outstanding, not only in building, but also in making use of their network, which enabled them to fill knowledge gaps, to get advice in an early stage, and after that, to perform on a higher level. Also, in their position as a leader, a profound network makes it possible to support employees more efficiently by being able to connect their requests to the right contact person or department within the company. Matching resources to a person's needs and the task at hand is considered as task enabling behavior, which further often results in building HQR (Dutton, 2012). Since task enabling with respect to sustaining HQR at the workplace "works best when a continuous learning process is in place" (Dutton, 2012, p. 15), the previous discussions on striving for continuous improvement provide the foundation for the success of the leader's network activities. Furthermore, literature found that in an organization, good network relations of a leader are associated with having a more significant influence over subordinates (Bono & Anderson, 2005). Additionally, a transformational leadership style is affecting the building of networks positively (Bono & Anderson, 2005). The discussed practices are also again highlighted by Yukl (2013, p. 66), who refers to similar actions that "[e]ncourage mutual trust and cooperation among members of the work unit" and categorizes them under "Relations-oriented Behaviors".

Beyond the team's perception of the leader as a team captain and network facilitator, we found individually **supporting as a sparring partner** to be a crucial practice with strong relational orientation.

Due to differences in employees' needs and expectations for guidance, the leaders stated the special importance of individual support and assistance on a personal and professional level. Empathy, curiosity, respect, and understanding of different personalities, cultures, and characters are considered to have a crucial value.

This executed individuality and proactive engagement offer visible links to respectfully engaging others as a common strategy to build HQR (Dutton, 2012). Kahn (1990, p. 700) uses the term 'personal engagement', which he describes as "[...] the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performance". The connection is further increased by showing empathy, trying to put oneself in the place of another person, and trying to fully understand and feel the needs and problems, which tightens the bond between them (Kahn, 1992). What Petriglieri (2020) defines as interpersonal holding becomes visible in the present case through the leaders' engagement and concern about private matters of the individual. By responding to personal circumstances and seriously taking time for individual needs, a leader can give people a feeling of being held (Petriglieri, 2020).

The fact that the leaders sacrifice their own time and prioritize the contribution towards their subordinates is also a characteristic of 'idealized influence', which seeks to treat each team member as a unique contributor and provides mentoring, feedback, coaching, and growth opportunities on an individual level (Kendrick, 2011). Further, this behavior is considered to increase the subordinate identification with the leader and is also shaped by setting examples "[…] of courage and dedication and making self-sacrifices to benefit the followers" (Yukl, 2013, p. 313). Being close to the business and the clients is also frequently practiced by the leaders through joining team members at important customer meetings. This not only provides individual support and security to the Account Managers during the meeting, but it is also a sign of importance and relevance to the customer and can improve the success rate of the deal (Scott, 2007). Moreover, the leaders can also use these meetings to closely observe their subordinates, providing relevant feedback, and detecting possible sources for improvement (Scott, 2007).

The fact that human connections and building positive relationships are the cornerstones of 'relations-oriented' practices has now been discussed thoroughly throughout this section and is also in line with the criteria of 'relations-oriented' behavior by Yukl (2013, p. 66). However, one perspective that, according to Seppälä (2014), is lying at the root of human connections, has not been debated yet. She argues that vulnerability and **being authentic** are essential for sustainable relationships but that these critical elements are often missing at the workplace (Seppälä, 2014). While vulnerability in this context does not imply weakness but much rather means the courage to be yourself, leaders rarely practice it because they are taught to keep distance and to project an image of confidence, competence, and authority (Seppälä, 2014).
In contrast to this, the findings section presented several stories where the leaders executed vulnerability through disarming behavior and showing their own imperfections in the right moments. This reminds of the first part of the discussion, where the honest acknowledgment of their experience lack was the starting point for successfully engaging within experiential learning and striving for continuous improvement. The leaders also need to transfer this attitude to the whole team, since only they can create and reinforce a culture that makes people feel both responsible and comfortable for improving and learning from failures (Edmondson, 2011). A

work climate that is authentic and where vulnerability is exercised is found to have positive impacts on the trustworthiness of the leader, which then also results in higher employee performance (Seppälä, 2014).

Besides the described vulnerability, the leaders themselves also provided indications for humble attitudes throughout several stories they shared during the interviews. For instance, when saying that they do not want to lecture employees, who have twenty years of experience, on how to do their job. To step back from the spotlight and to let others shine was an underlining metaphor for humbleness. Often, being able to make and publicly express confessions was directly associated with increasing authenticity. According to Yukl (2013), authentic leaders are motivated by a strive for self-verification, which makes them less defensive and more willing to learn from feedback. In contrast to pseudo-transformational leaders, authentic transformational leaders truly act towards legitimate means and fair treatment (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). They are engaged in the moral uplifting of their team and "the sharing of mutually rewarding visions of success" (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 211).

In this context, we also found that the interviewed leaders have a strong tendency towards socializing with their team, including opening-up and sharing private matters. They are not scared of showing who they are or building personal connections with their team members. Yukl (2013) emphasizes building relationships through socializing to be an important 'relation-oriented' practice of leaders. As framed by Dutton (2012) in the fourth pathway 'Play' to build HQR, moments of interaction such as team-building activities, lead to stronger connections, and evoke a positive atmosphere at work. Several other studies (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Gupta & Krishnan, 2004) confirm that socialization between leaders and followers imply higher employee motivation and trust in the leader.

Having the previous discussions in mind, the question arises, if the leaders' intention behind the 'relations-oriented' practices is influenced by an exchange mentality that likely occurs in the sales environment. Therefore, we follow this path by deepening a perspective on the motivational climate. On the one hand, CHG-MERIDIAN is a sales company that applies a common reward-performance system where each Account Manager works for his/her customers and the thereby generated commission. Several interviewees pointed out that their success is largely depending on the success of their team members and that they are giving maximum support to evoke this success. Having this said, the leaders indeed have some exchange in mind, where they give the best possible patronage, but the employees in return perform on the highest level, which then also results in success for the leader. This thought allows a connection to transactional leadership and, furthermore, a performance climate of motivation, which is usually characterized by internal comparison and the strive to always fulfill the goals and increase performance (Farbrot, 2012). Although we consider this element to be important, as the organization can ultimately only survive if a certain focus is placed on performance, it is not the decisive reason why the sample is successful in this respect.

On the contrary, we found more indications that leaders' tendency towards transformational leadership and a mastery climate are significant parts of their early-career success. In a mastery climate, success is defined by commitment, self-development, learning, mastering tasks, and cooperation (Farbrot, 2012). Throughout the findings, it becomes clear that the leaders are doing everything possible in order to give their employees the opportunity for maximum professional and personal development, which is also crucial for a mastery climate (Farbrot, 2012). The examined literature provides further evidence that this contributes positively to job commitment, employee motivation, and self-efficacy, which in the long run, also has benefits towards goal and performance orientation (Farbrot, 2012). Our findings confirm this positive effect in the sense that **collaborating and building trust** as representations of a mastery climate are found to unify the practices on the 'relational-oriented' side. Even though the company setting is performance-oriented, the leaders' sense of mutuality without the expectation of giving and taking stands out to be crucial when investigating what they do that makes them successful.

6. *Implications*

6.1 Implications for academic research

Most of the practices we debated in the discussion section can be backed up with traditional as well as recent literature. This shows that the topic of our thesis is highly academically discussed and that our results meet other approaches within the research field of leadership and sales. Our study validates the categorization of leadership behavior in ‘task-’ and ‘relations-oriented’ behavior, which is a persistent distinction in the literature. Taking the perspective of early-career leaders in a sales and service environment, our study points out specific practices which are of major importance for this target group within these two categories. From that point, we believe that our theoretical contribution in terms of added value for the existing state of research is manifested in the two main results that we highlighted in the discussion.

The same as ‘task-’ and ‘relations-orientation’ were found to go hand in hand, so do learning and experiencing. Although the debate on teaching versus experiencing leadership is widely explored, we believe that our study provides additional value by presenting practical insights from a relevant party. Leaders in an early career stage are a group that is directly affected by discussions on the role of experience. It is a common saying that leaders without experience tend to fail easier (Smith, Carson, & Alexander, 1984). But what if failing is welcomed and turned around as a source of learning? Even though we validate experience as an essential factor, the present sample of leaders in this thesis proofs that lacking experience is not an insuperable barrier and that a leader does not have to be flawless in order to be successful. We reveal that self-efficacy and mentalities such as generative resistance are especially important in an early-career stage of leadership, where failures might be more likely to appear. Since experiential learning can happen without being taught and refers solely to the meaning-making process of someone’s direct experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2008), we found this concept to be widely useful for early-career success. The honesty to acknowledge lack of experience, matched with the leaders strive for continuous improvement, was also found to have relevant effects on the ‘relations-oriented’ side by, for instance, increasing a leader's authenticity. Our study not only contributes by drawing theoretical connections between the mentioned concepts, we also present very practical insights from a sales company and examples for actions within this matter such as prepping or a two-sided feedback approach from the sample at hand.

In general, many leadership studies tend to focus on characteristics, categories, roles, and individual traits of the leaders. Also, the literature on sales and services commonly refers to established concepts such as transformational and transactional styles when investigating leadership success. We decided, however, to contribute to the emerged LAP approach, which supports a processual and practical view on leadership. Following the recent development of this approach, there is, to our knowledge, relatively little research that strongly applies the LAP understanding in the setting of a particular case study with special emphasis on early-career leaders in the sales and service environment. Through applying this approach, we believe that our discussions evoke angles and connections that break down early-career success also to some practices that on the first view might contradict with a competitive sales and service setting. By collaborating and building trust through involvement, engaging in self-development, and collective learning, the leaders provide the team with an environment of a mastery climate in which employees can develop their full potential. For example, the leaders' self-efficacy contributed significantly to their own success, and now they are also strengthening the development of this mentality among their team. While common sales research often tends to refer to the customer as the target group within the topic of trust, the trust between a sales leader and his salespeople has rarely received enough attention (MacKenzie et al., 2001).

Our study validates not only trust as crucial for recently promoted leaders to position themselves; we specifically disclose some connection points to how this trust can be established. For instance, several of our findings imply and mirror strategies to build HQR (Dutton, 2012), which go in the same direction as the literature we reviewed in the theory section on the importance of relationships in the leadership context (Brueller & Carmeli, 2011; Rich, 1997). Responding to the call of examining interrelationships among salesperson levels in practice (Ingram et al., 2005), our investigation contributes by including multiple points of view since the identified practices were not only validated by the sample but also by an external and team perspective.

6.1 Practical implications

Besides theoretical implications, this thesis also intends to contribute with naming some practical implications, concluded from the practices of the sample and which are directed towards future leaders as well as companies interested in supporting young talents.

The clear consensus between all participants that taking the initiative to communicate and actively fight for their career goal has informative value for people who aspire to a leadership position. Realizing opportunities, being willing to take risks, and daring to stand out are recommended practices to become a leader also at an early stage of the career. Likewise important is, however, that companies provide and give these opportunities to unexperienced but talented employees. How to make talents visible on an internal level is assessed by this thesis to be a very relevant issue to address for every company.

As we stated in the first major finding, a leader's strive for ongoing improvement is one cornerstone of their success. An early-career leader needs to be aware that he/she cannot rest on the success of being promoted to a managing position if he wants to be accepted and successful in his/her new task. Therefore we believe that each potential leader should make him- or herself familiar with leadership and critically reflect on whether a leading position is a good fit with their own personality. In this context, the leader should think about whether it is his drive to continually challenge the status quo, trying to improve the company and also facilitating growth and development of his/her employees. In this process, companies could support by offering consultation or, again, facilitating the building of connections to experienced leaders to share their stories, challenges, and successful practices.

As stated by the leaders participating in this research, their current every-day life as a leader differs a lot from what they expected it to be. They were surprised by the amount of time and effort they spend supporting and collaborating with their team members. We also highlighted collaborating and building trust as very important for early-career leaders. We believe that they, even if at some point in their careers they may have fought alone and acted selfishly to get to where they are now, cannot do so if they want to succeed in their new position. They need to realize that they can only be successful if their team is too, and in order to achieve this, they need to work closely with them, support them, and gain their trust. Therefore, we urge young and newly promoted leaders to establish routines and settings where collaborating and support between them and each team member but also between the team as a whole is facilitated. Furthermore, they should establish a climate where the employees feel secure to opening up, sharing their personalities, which then eventually results in gaining trust. Thereby, the leader should act as an example. Saying this, it might be helpful for the leader to review literature on HQR or LMX. While this might not be the typical reading of a Sales Executive, it could be highly beneficial in order to become familiar with the theoretical foundations of establishing relations and trust

In order to support their leaders in this regard, sales companies could put an even stronger emphasis on relationships by offering platforms that foster exchange among leaders such as development programs or mentoring. Offering dedicated coaching towards building trust or collaborating in teams as a leader could be another beneficial support by the companies.

Overall, we believe that organizations should give the young talents, who they recently promoted the needed freedom and trust to establish their own leadership style and not rashly intervene if they make mistakes or run into conflicts. Only then can they learn from their experiences and establish their own successful practices.

7. Conclusion

From the large mosaic of ways to look at leadership, our study picked out one part and focused on the examination of Sales Executives who are considered positively deviant even though they are in an early-career stage. The findings gathered from multiple perspectives indicate the special relevance of six practices: ‘Taking the initiative’, ‘Acting solution-oriented', ’Striving for continuous improvement’, ‘Interacting as a team captain’, ‘Supporting as a sparring partner’ and ‘Being authentic’. While we found that all these practices contribute to early-career success, our conceptual model provides a structural overview of established interrelations and differentiates between ‘task-’ and ‘relational-orientation’. As the discussion shows, we manifest early-career success in two major components.

Firstly, recently promoted and early-career leaders are indeed challenged by a lack of experience. But our sample proves that lacking experience is not an insurmountable obstacle and that a leader does not have to be flawless to be successful. Majorly their experiential approach, self-efficacy, and self-reflecting mentality towards generative resistance that are presented within their striking strive for continuous improvement gave them the advantage of positioning themselves as leaders even without much experience.

Secondly, collaborating as well as building trust through, for instance, HQR, the establishment of a mastery climate, and their special authenticity complements the first component. This sample proves the benefits of behaving in a way that is prioritizing mutuality over giving-and-taking. Ending with the words of one interviewee, "(…) *in contrast to the coach standing on the sideline telling the team what to do and blaming them if they fail, […] a successful leader is comparable to a team captain in soccer who is on the field with his team." (M1)*

8. Limitations and outlook

As this thesis investigated the practices of early-career leaders at CHG-MERIDIAN, there are, of course, several limitations to the conducted research. The first limitation that is to be mentioned is in context with the set-up of the research. It was conducted at only one specific company and defined as a case study, investigating a particular topic. This very specific and limited field of view might pose certain limitations to the generalizability of the findings and the discussed patterns and practices of the early-career leaders. Besides the fact that only one organization was in the focus of the research, the area of operations of CHG-MERIDIAN, namely the sales and service sector with a focus on IT, industrial and healthcare equipment, might have led to different results then conducting similar research within companies operating in different sectors. Overall the validity of the research could be improved by replicating the study in multiple other companies and also within companies outside the sales sector.

The next set of limitations can be summarized under 'diversification of the sample'. The first part of the research was conducted with eight sales leaders who are at an early stage of their careers. This interviewed sample shows several similarities. Firstly, all interviewees are of a similar age (between their late twenties and mid-thirties). This fact is not surprising since the sample was actively selected for leaders at an early career stage and therefore is the explanation for the relatively narrow age distribution.

More interesting is the fact that all interviewees were male. We realized this limitation already at an early stage of the research while getting in contact with the prospective interview partners. It was, however, not possible to include female participants, since there are simply no early-career leaders or even any female Sales Executives at the company. It would have definitely been a valuable addition to the thesis to have a more diversified sample in terms of gender. Since theory on 'relational' and 'task-oriented' behavior is aware of sex differences in leadership (Forsyth, 2019), it could be subject of future research to investigate the established practices for similarities and differences between male and female (sales) leaders who are at the beginning of their careers.

The last identified similarity of the sample is of cultural basis. While several of the interviewees currently lead and work in subsidiaries abroad, all of them are German. Some of the leaders working abroad reported that they are adapting their practices alongside the culture, stating that this is necessary in order to lead successfully. It would have been another valuable addition to the research to investigate cultural differences in leadership practices.

An additional limitation lies in the breadth of perspectives regarding the identified patterns and practices. While the first round of the research included the self-perspectives of the sales leaders, the second round also included external views from subordinates and two other relevant company members. These external perspectives were used to verify and complement the findings from the first step. However, even these are subject to a certain limit and might be somewhat biased towards a particular company mindset or practices that are very common within this company setting but not applicable within other situations. Therefore, these external views could have even been enlarged by including perspectives from other parties, such as customers or suppliers, in order to get insights about the behavior of the leaders from persons who are not that familiar with the subject.

Lastly, the identified practices were allocated, and some of their interrelations were presented within the proposition of a conceptual model; however, this thesis did not provide a framework to further prioritize and weigh the practices against each other in more detail. It could be a call for future research to use these results as a starting point to deepen the study of correlations, prioritization, and causal relations.

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10. Appendix

10.1 Appendix 1: Interview guideline for the leaders' perspective

a) Initiation

1. Could you give us a short overview of your background?

   What were the most important educational and professional stages before you started working for CHG Meridian?
   Could you guide us through your way in the company: Which positions did you have and for how long have you been in the current position as a leader?

b) Storytelling

2. Could you tell us about the most formative experiences as a leader?

   When becoming a leader, what were your biggest challenges?
   Can you also remember concrete episodes where you had to show leadership?
   Going back to your first experiences as a leader - Would you do something differently?
   What was your motivation for becoming a leader?
   Could you walk us through practices of a typical day?

c) Directed and comparative questions

3. What do you think it takes to be successful to do your job today? What are specific habits you have?
4. What do you think will be the most important practices for a leader in the future compared to today?
5. What do you think are the critical differences between top-performing sales managers and average or below-average sales managers?
   What do you think you do differently compared to other sales managers?
   What kind of support does your team need, and what do you provide?

d) Closing and sharing

6. What recommendations would you give to future young managers?

If you were us doing a study on positively deviant young leaders, what questions would you ask, and what would you be interested in to know?

10.2 Appendix 2: Interview guideline for the external perspective

1. What do you think are the critical differences between top-performing sales managers and average or below-average sales managers?

2. At CHG-MERIDIAN, some leaders are young and have little experience. What drives you from a company perspective to promote these leaders?

3. Nevertheless, their age and little experience, these leaders are successful - What do you think they do differently than their colleagues?

4. Can you remember concrete episodes or stories related to outstanding leadership from our participants? The context is open for anything that comes in your mind.

5. If you were us doing a study on early-career and positive-deviant leaders, what questions would you ask, and what would you be interested in to know?

10.3 Appendix 3: The invitational text of the RBS

Draft: "In uncertain times like today, it can help to remember the positive things about each other. That is why I am reaching out to you today to ask for your feedback in a very special way. The context for this request is my current participation in an assignment of a Master thesis about leadership. For this reason, I would like to collect stories and memories from you when I was the most valuable for you as a leader. Please remember to think about concrete examples or situations, not general characteristics – then I learn the most. The stories don't need to be long. A few sentences will do."

10.4 Appendix 4: Coding table

See attachment on DigiEx or click the icon to view coding table (does not work in web view):

Coding Table