To lead from a distance

Virtual Leadership

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Abstract

In a world that is getting more and more globalized and dependent of the progress within the sphere of technology, there is a need for organizations to keep up with this development. Virtual Teams are a developing area, where there is a strive and a consistent desire to evolve and reach a higher level of efficiency. There is also a development when it comes to communication and is a consequence of a world that is increasingly globalized, and creating global competition is facilitated by a wider use of information and communication technology. This leads to higher demands on the Virtual Leader in order to make sure that the team reaches its full potential, and being able to tackle the challenges that comes with leading an in a Virtual Environment. Since it is a subject that is still going through a phase of evolution, there is a knowledge gap in both a theoretical and practical view. The creation of Virtual Teams and the Virtual Leader encounters several aggravating challenges compared to traditionally collocated teams. There is a need for a clear definition of a Virtual Leader as well how to handle upcoming challenges.

This study suggests a suitable definition for a Virtual Leader, where the result was drawn from a literature review and qualitative data from ten different companies and twenty respondents. A connection is drawn to the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation model (FIRO) made by Will Schutz in 1958. The main objectives of a leader are still the same, it is rather the context that has changed, and therefore an expansion of the model is presented. This reinforces the purpose of this study which is to investigate how a Virtual Leader can overcome the aforementioned challenges and ensure that everyone in the team are heading in the same direction.

Keywords: e-leadership, virtual leadership, distant leadership, leading through ICT, global leadership, virtual teams, trust, communication, goal fulfillment, FIRO
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<tr>
<td>AIT</td>
<td>Advanced Information Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>AST</td>
<td>Adaptive Structuration Theory</td>
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<td>CMC</td>
<td>Computer Mediated Communication</td>
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<td>FIRO</td>
<td>Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communication Technology</td>
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<td>LMX</td>
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1. Introduction

The traditional corporate boundaries are beginning to blur out and transform both internally and externally, that is a consequence from a more globalized world that creates the pressure on competing globally. This is followed by a wider use of information and communication technology (ICT) that creates new opportunities to communicate. (Cascio, 2000)

The upcoming area of technology creates a setting where organizations needs to be more flexible, since there is a constant development. The creation of Virtual Teams sets pressure on the Virtual Leader to embrace this development. It needs to be taken into consideration that there is a possibility that the team consists of people with different cultural backgrounds, where the Virtual Leader needs to identify their preconditions, in order to being able to reach their maximum potential, both individually and as a team. With a diversified team comes naturally that people will be different, which means that different things might motivate them, and as a Virtual Leader it is essential to mapping this in order to achieve an effective team. (Conine, 2014; Nauman, Khana and Ehsana, 2010)

Based upon previous research within the field of Virtual Leadership it can be identified that there is no clear and well-known definition of a Virtual Leader. Since the subject is not well-defined from the beginning, it creates some diffusion when it comes to knowing how to work with it, if it is not clear exactly what it consists of. (Jawadi et al. 2013)

With a team that is situated in different physical places, the highest priority should be on creating a free flow of information and enhance the communication within the team. This is where a gap in existing studies can be found, in the sense that communication needs to be the core of the team, in order to being able to achieve trust, motivation, cohesion, relationship, effectiveness, flexibility, synergy and goal fulfilment. (Avolio et al., 2014)

To the best knowledge of the author, there is a knowledge gap within the literature when it comes to creating the bigger picture and connect all the essential parts. It has been stated clearly that communication is part of the core in a Virtual Team, but what has not been thoroughly explained is why it is important for the success of the team and how to achieve it. Further on, a gap can be identified regarding what exactly is meant by a successful virtual team; how is success measured? The structure that is needed in order to be a successful Virtual Team, falls on the Virtual Leader to create. (Dennis, Meola and Hall, 2013)

This study intends to fill the identified gap with the help of the FIRO model (Schutz, 1958). The model in itself is from 1958 and it is of need of an update in order to fit in a Virtual Environment that comes from the constant technological development in todays world.
1.2 Problem

The subject can be seen as relatively new and not thoroughly investigated from a theoretical as well as practical approach, and with a society that more and more confides in a technological progress, there is a great importance in studying the area more closely and create a greater understanding. The creation of Virtual Teams grows more common in combination with the use of ICT, however, Virtual Teams encounters some more enhanced challenges compared to traditionally collocated teams. The first challenge being the ability to work over different time zones, which can create a bit of a logistic challenge in order to coordinate over time and space as well as organizational boundaries. The fact that communication can take place through intermediary technology also impacts the possibility to use body language and creates challenges to create a personal relation. This creates the focus of this study in how a virtual leader can overcomes these challenges and secure that everyone in the team are heading in the same direction. (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002)

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of the study is to identify what is a Virtual Leader and describe the factors that impacts the leadership in a Virtual Environment based upon the Fundamental Interpersonal Relationships Model (Schutz, 1958).

1.4 Research questions

• *What is a Virtual Leader?*

• *Which are the challenges that comes with being a Virtual Leader?*

• *What is the core in creating a successful Virtual Team?*

1.5 Delimitations

This study will focus on leadership in a virtual context, and **not on the group**, this because of a gap in research within Virtual Leadership. **Nor will technological tools and facilities be discussed** in greater detail, but rather seen as tools to create a Virtual Environment, since the focus of this study **is not of technological nature.**
2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Virtual Leadership

The phenomena of leading from a distance in itself is not new and has been done for decades, however, the term Virtual Leader is a relatively new concept within the field of leadership. This indicates that the field of study has limitations when it comes to available theories within the subject. This section will focus on clarifying the definition of virtual leadership and similarities and differences with traditional leadership. The majority of existing literature within the subject focuses on advantages and disadvantages that comes with virtual teams, according to Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) finds it surprising that there is a very limited set of research when it comes to virtual team leadership.

“...a process that aims to guide behaviors toward fixed shared goals
but which is simultaneously mediated by information and communication technologies.”

(Jawadi et al. 2013, p.200)

There is no doubt that research throughout the years has demonstrated the importance of strong leadership when it comes to the influence on both a personal level and the outcome of the whole team, as well as the end-result. However, most of this research is based on the assumption that there is face-to-face interaction, which is not necessarily the case in a world that becomes more and more dependent on technology. Although, the basic behaviors of leaders stay the same, it is not possible to lead a virtual team in the exact same way as a team on a face-to-face basis (Kelley and Kelloway, 2012).

Leadership has a strong significant impact not just on outcomes, but can also have an influence from individuals to groups, organizations and society as a whole (Lord and Dinh, 2014). When it comes to leading from a distance, it is stated that the virtual leader needs all leadership skills and, just a little bit more of everything There has been identified some challenges when it concerns virtual leadership, this includes; working in different time zones, sense of isolation (since there is a lack of face-to-face interaction) as well as there is more pressure on the leader to create trust and lead everyone in the right direction and create a sense of connectedness (Dennis, Meola and Hall, 2013). Nauman, Khana and Ehsana (2010) talks about that virtual teams have the possibility to rapidly respond to upcoming business globalization challenges, and that their use is expanding.

The article from Chen et al. (2011) enhance the fact that with rapid advance in information systems it enables a greater integration of the technical, human and organizational systems. With this said, it is evident that the measurement of leadership effectiveness needs to be incorporated into various dimensions. The effectiveness of the leader can influence the effectiveness of the team through improving the communication, build self-confidence within the group, create motivation and knowledge-sharing. When it comes to leadership effectiveness, the articles that touches three theories; Trait theory – where a leader is born not made, technology can in this case make it more difficult for this to show since it might undermine strong and typical leadership traits such as social status and/or charisma, Contingency theory – where it is divided between task-centered (focus on accomplishments and achievements) and relationship-centered (focus on interpersonal relationship
with the co-workers) leaders, and, Behavioral complexity theory – the necessity for the leader to possess various roles in order to being able to succeed in a changing environment. The Behavioral complexity theory will be the one most applicable when it concerns a virtual team, this based on what has previously been mentioned that a virtual context means the need to being able to handle change, since a virtual team also could mean cultural differences and a wide range of people within the team, it is demanded of a virtual leader to being able to handle these changing situations as well as the different kinds of people that the team consists of. (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002)

As mentioned, when it comes to leading in a Virtual Environment, researches state that the task of being a leader becomes a bit more challenging. Some of the challenges that need to be concurred are the geographic dispersion which includes the possibility for team members to being placed in different time zones, this leads to the importance to take into consideration differences when it comes to culture and/or language barriers. In order to overcome these obstacles, not only planning and consideration is needed, but also to constantly strive for creating trust, cohesion and satisfaction within the group. The trust needs to come from both ways; the leader needs to receive the trust from the team members even though there is no face-to-face interaction, but at the same time, the leader needs to being able to trust that the team will do what is expected and that the set goals will be reached within the aimed timeframe. This trust will be the foundation for establishing relations within the team, which are necessary for creating an efficient team and leader. (Nyström and Asproth, 2013)

Like in every successful team, the members need to have some kind of motivation in order to achieve what is expected from them. According to Park, Spitzmuller and DeShon (2013) the team members’ individual motivation influences the overall team motivation, which can have effect on the attitude of the team members, their behavior and the outcome in the end.

2.2 Transformational leadership

According to Ruggieri (2009) the role of a leader in a Virtual Environment has created the possibility to redefine the concept of leadership, since traditional leadership often is based upon the possibility to offer encouragement, reward and motivation but mostly through physical presence and the development of personal relations with the group. With this as a foundation it is evident that there is a need for a certain revision within this aspect, but as a fundamental need to create the recognition of the leader’s status even in a virtual context.

Since face-to-face interaction includes the possibility to influence a situation from everything from body language, eye contact and clothing, it creates a challenge when it concerns a Virtual Environment with Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). In the study made of Ruggieri (2009) it has been shown that transformational leadership is suitable to apply in a virtual environment since it seemed to have a positive effect on the group effectiveness.

Transformational leaders can be based upon four factors; idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. With this the transformational leader increases the level of interest of the group, as well and inducing respect
and encourage the group to find new solutions in aiming for the goal. It also is said that transformational leaders stand for empowerment, cohesion and perceived group effectiveness, which are all aimed for in a virtual context. (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Jung & Sosik, 2002)

A transformational leader displays the importance of working together as a joined force, where by projecting confidence to the team members have positive goal-setting effects. It also builds on trust, which is highly needed in a virtual team, where the team members are trusted to fulfil their task in a satisfying way, which creates motivation. (Hambley, O’Neil & Kline, 2007; Cascio, 2000)

2.3 Management by Objectives

Management by objectives (MBO) means the usage of direct goals that needs to be clear and well transmitted throughout the organization, in order to make sure that everyone is heading in the same direction. It is regularly used in decentralized organizations where there is a shared responsibility compared to having all the responsibility at the top. The objective with MBO is to create effectiveness within the organization by giving the possibility to break down the goals into miner goals that in the end will help to reach the common goal. With this it will create a sense of inclusion and can also enhance motivation. Like always, these goals need to be realistic and reachable, and preferably measurable in order to verify if they are being reached or not. (Olve, Nilsson and Parment, 2010)

MBO can be connected to management control, where the operational and strategically aspects are being linked together, in order to make sure that the right goals are set and being reached. It is originally a way of implementing strategies, but has evolved into also incorporate the creation of strategies that is in line with the goals of the organization. (Simons, 1994)

2.4 Trust

To have trust in a team is essential for the success of the outcome, Sarker et al. (2011) emphasis the importance of trust being almost critical when the team consists of members from different areas around the world, with divert goals, values and ideologies. According to Nyström and Asproth (2013) trust falls into two behavioral categories; credibility and benevolence. The first category that touches upon the subject of credibility is built upon such things as expertise, capabilities and competence, whilst the second category gives a more emotional aspect, where benevolence concerns the behavior. Chhay and Kleiner (2013) states that trust is usually described as what creates synergy in a team, which is important in all types of teams, including virtual teams, that needs to solve how to create trust without traditional interactions.

It is shown in previous research that to achieve high-quality relationships in virtual teams, the virtual leader plays an important role in order to build trust and cooperative relations between the team members. Virtual team literature usually focuses on how to build trust between team members and overlooks other qualities that could have a great impact on the success of the outcome, such as; liking, respect, mutuality and cooperation. There is a three-step model over how virtual leaders approach the aim to build relationships in the workspace; assessing conditions (the factors that are available at the start of the project), targeting the level of relationship and creating strategies.
However, there are no practical examples where this model has been used, since there is a lack of studies that investigates the issue of how to establish relationship development through virtual leadership. There are, however, studies that enlightens the area of having three different categories of behavior when it concerns the exchange between team members and leader; transformational, relation-oriented and task-oriented behavior, where the first two are seen as having the most significant effect on establishing relationships. (Jawadi et al. 2013)

When it concerns leadership behavioral complexity, it is being implied that there is a need for leaders to develop cognitive as well as behavioral skills in order to being able to manage all types of situations; both complex and contradictory. This is based upon the belief that leaders who can balance and have a diversity when it comes to their behavior; are expected to have a higher degree of behavioral complexity and therefore are more able to meet the arising organizational demands. (Jawadi et al. 2013; Dennis, Meola and Hall, 2013)

The authors use leader-member exchange theory (LMX) to be able to analyze the relationship between leader and subordinates, as well as the impact on both individual and organizational outcomes. LMX is explained as an effective leadership process where the leader and follower are being able to develop a relationship and also access the benefits that this relationship might bring. From this interaction between the behavior of both the leader and the members, there is created a multidimensional concept that is based upon trust, respect and mutual obligations. (Jawadi et al. 2013)

2.5 Communication

Communication has always played an important role within the corporate world, it is a necessity to have good communication within an organization in order to achieve a common goal and strive towards the same destination. When it comes to communication, the concept in itself has not changed much over the years, and therefore older studies can still be seen as relevant in today’s world. The elements of communication are; source (the origin of the information), sender (the one that transmits the message), channel (what medium the sender use for the communication), receiver (the one that receives the message from the sender), destination (the place or person that is intended to receive the message) and the message in itself (that is being communicated), after this it is essential to include a step of feedback in order to making sure that the receiver has understood the message. It is not unusual that the receiver gets the blame for not accepting the message through communication, although, in many cases this falls on the sender that might did not manage to communicate a clear message with the right type of channel. (Berry, 2011)

To create a clear flow of communication, the seven C’s of effective communication can help to overcome some barriers; completeness (the message that is being transmitted is complete with all necessary information), conciseness (a concise message; keeping the message short and clear), consideration (to keep the receiver into consideration when creating the message), concreteness (being specific, vivid and definite in the message), clarity (the purpose of clarity to transit the message from sender to receiver), courtesy (taking into consideration the perspective and feelings of the other people involved) and correctness (to secure the correctness of the message; spelling, accuracy of statistics and the right type of suitable language). (Kelley and Kelloway, 2012)
It is important to create a shared vision, set clear goals and objectives, for this to be established, communication is very important. In a virtual context the visual part often disappears by using, for example, conference calls, e-mail, smartphones or software designed for meetings (Kerfoot, 2010). These falls into the area of virtual communication, that is described by Berry (2011) as the usage of computer-mediate technologies in order to communicate across time and space and what can be seen as organizational boundaries. In a virtual environment it is important to strive for good communication which will lead to a better cohesion within the team and improved working relationships, which in the end will have a positive effect on the ability to create trust (Kelley and Kelloway, 2012).

Working in a virtual environment creates some differences from regular face-to-face communication, with the characteristics of CMC the visual and auditory interaction might be limited.

The authors Fan et al. (2014) states that there are three types of what they call language that concerns leadership; Percutionary (Direction-given language) – the importance to clarify goals, Illocutionary (Empathic language) – to show consideration and emotional understanding and Locutionary (Meaning-making language) – the rules and culture that creates consensus. The authors argue that using one or the other language will affect the outcome, where the direction-given language generates more ideas under the demanding feedback approach and the empathic gave higher creativity performance. González-Navarro et al. (2010) studied the effect that communication and information technologies (TICs) have on group functioning and outcomes, where it is pushed upon the importance of communication, not only to spread task related information but also knowledge that can be of value for the group.

2.6 Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory (MRT) is to create an area of electronic communication. It consists of placing different media dependent on their level of richness within a spectrum that goes from “rich” to “lean”, where the richness of media is based upon the degree of normative, emotional and attitudinal cues that is presented. This classification is based on the capacity for feedback, the number of cues and channels and how personal the media is. The one that is classified as the richest of media is face-to-face communication, the different media then goes down from video communication to e-mails, which is seen as lean communication.

There has been some criticism towards this theory, stating that some aspects have been left out. Where it is pushed upon that the choice of media should not be chosen just based on which is the richest but rather it should be seen to the needs of the organization and the people within it. This creates the possibility to see which kind of media will be most suitable for different situations. This makes it possible to customize based upon the needs and conditions that exists in different organizations, where the choice of media should be based upon the familiarity of using different kinds of technology as well as existing norms and culture within the organization. (DeRosa et al., 2004)
2.7 Adaptive Structuration Theory

There can be seen an upcoming rise within this field with an increasingly global dispersion as well as a constant urge for development within the area of communication technology and a rapid technology growth within organizations with an aim of global reach. It has been shown that leadership and technology influence each other, through the Adaptive Structure Theory (AST). The AST shows the impact they have on each other, which has it foundation that human actions are being driven by structures, where organizational structures are being created by technology, and at the same time, these structures can be influenced of both technology and leadership. (Avolio et al. 2014)

AST has its foundation in that group structures, these structures are being created by things such as establishing rules, achieve cohesiveness and/or accomplish goals. It can also be influenced by social and cultural differences that comes from a variation when it comes to the team members. The AST puts light on the relationship between group inputs (rules and resources) and the outputs (decisions and feedback). According to AST the core part of this theory is communication, it is through communication that structure arises. It is also with communication that weaknesses in the structure can be visible and can also lead to a development of the team. ("Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST)", 2012)

Avolio et al. (2014) also states that there is an interaction between Advanced Information Technology (AIT) and leadership and how they affect each other, where virtual leaders are affected by time, distance and different cultural considerations. In today’s world it is getting more and more usual that ICT is being used and that the communication between leader and team member is not only taking place on face-to-face basis but also through information technology. With this, it can be said that the leader might need further skills in order to being able to create the wanted relationship with the followers, Conine (2014) states the importance of prepare the future leaders for the unexpected complexities that can occur from operating in a global environment. Since the members are relieving on CMC a challenge with this then becomes the ability to create a relationship within the group. This is based upon the lack of face-to-face interactions, the physical proximity, verbal cues and absence of facial expressions. There also comes the challenge of making sense of technology in order to being able to make the most possible use of it (Jawadi et al. 2013). It then comes into the area of media richness that includes the possibility for the media to transmit different characteristics such as personalization, rapid feedback and language variety (Klitmøller and Lauring, 2013).

2.8 The Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation

The FIRO model was created in 1958 of Will Schutz, it was created as a result of a mission given by the U.S. Navy. The aim for Will Schutz was to detect and look into the interpersonal relationship within groups that had the same education and conditions, but because of some reasons did not deliver the same result.
The FIRO model shows a constant development within the group, that is mainly focused in three main phases; Inclusion, Control & Openness. The first part being Inclusion, the importance of being a part of the team and being accepted by the rest of the team. The characteristics in this phase is the need for getting to know the others in the team as well as belonging. In the Inclusion part, there is a strive for creating significance for yourself within the group, just like it sounds; to be included. It is the wish to feel accepted and belonging, and at the same time to give attention and understanding to others. Followed by this is a, so called, middle phase; Comfort. This one is a continuation of Inclusion, where, according to Schutz, it is suitable to settle down in the group. In this phase it is the leader that takes the group to the next phase, this is done by giving tasks that creates a necessity for the group to discuss in order to get to the next phase; Control. This is where everyone needs to find the suitable position within the group as well as the level of responsibility for every member in the group, if this is not handled there is a risk of arise of conflicts, and therefore the role of the leader in this phase is very important. It connects the importance of finding your spot within the group, with respect and where the power lays. Followed, there is a second middle phase; Idyll. Where the group has put in a lot of effort in solving the conflicts, and can be described as a resting phase, before the group enters the next phase; Openness, where it is essential to concentrate in being a well-functioned group. This is also the phase where there is a need for affection, which can vary from person to person. According to the model, this is something that flows contingency between the different phases, and it is not said that a group only pass through each phase one time. (Schutz, 1958; Schutz,1984)
Schutz made an update in 1984 of the original model from 1958. This because the third phase did not transmit the most essential. From origin, the third phase was called Affection, where the individuals in the team desired affection and confirmation of good performance. Schutz saw a need for development in order to catch a larger picture, and the phase of Openness was detected. (Schutz, 1958; Schutz, 1984)

In the study of Will Schutz (1958), he also detected the relationship between the two variables Compatibility (C) and Productivity (P), where it was shown that the higher the C, the higher the P will be. In this case, C comes from how well persons would function together in a group, not if they would like each other at persons, since the main focus in the end is goal fulfillment.

Jenster and Steiler (2011) and Hirschy (2011) raises the thought that virtual leaders should adopt, what they call, a softer version of leadership, which involves compassion, caring, relationship building and mentoring. They claim that this could have a positive effect on improving three important team outcomes; commitment, trust and effectiveness. However, they also lift the thought that there need to be set clear goals, clear roles and responsibilities which are being classified more as the hard approach to leadership style. Based on this, Jenster and Steiler (2011) made the connection to FIRO, that divides into three areas; inclusion and openness (that covers the soft approach) and the third part being control (that is the hard approach). The FIRO model has its foundation in that all human beings have the same urge to feel significant, competent and likeable. The three areas; inclusion, openness and control provide an awareness of interpersonal preferences, with the aim to achieve more efficient relationships.

2.8.1 The Human Element

Schutz (1994) reconstructed his original theory, since he was not satisfied of how it was interpreted and used. The earlier found connection between Compatibility and Productivity had a positive effect on the final outcome of teams, but since there where still some parts missing in order to have an even greater impact, Schutz found it essential to update the instrument. To create a greater understanding the creation of Element B, Element F and Element S took place.

**Element B** is the behavior

- Inclusion
- Control
- Openness

**Element F** concerns feelings

- Significance
- Competence
- Likability

**Element S** is the self-concept, that is also divided into to parts

**Behavior**

- Aliveness
• Self-determination
• Self-awareness

Feelings

• Self-significance
• Self-competence
• Self-like

These instruments were integrated into the original theory and the Human Element was created, that show an integrated solution to the human issues in organizations. The use of the Human Element is the possibility to maximize the potential of individuals in order to work better in teams and further on have a positive effect on organizations. Where the Human Element should be seen as an integrated solution in order to work better together. (Schutz, 1994)
3. Methodology

This chapter describes the research design strategy, the respondents, the interview questions, the data collection as well as the ethical considerations.

3.1 Motive for the study

Existing theoretical and practical evidence is focusing on benefits and challenges for working in a Virtual Team, therefore this study is seen from the Virtual Leaders point-of-view.

This study aims to fit the FIRO Theory into a Virtual Environment by identifying the core parts in a successful Virtual Team led by a Virtual Leader. The connection between the FIRO Theory and a Virtual Team sees into the perceived levels of interpersonal behavior and the outcome of the team.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The data is gathered in a single point of time in order to examine patterns of association, with data of qualitative nature (Bryman, 2008). This means that the respondents have answered all the questions at a single point of time, where there was the opportunity to perceive further contact if there was a need for a deeper understanding or even more questions. The ambition has been to using the empirical findings through an interpretative approach to generate key definition and a basis for new theories and models. Since the existing studies within the area of Virtual Leadership are limited, the approach of this study is an inductive approach with expansion of existing theory. (Wiedersheim-Paul & Eriksson, 1991)

The area of Virtual Leadership is in a stage of development, and has been for the latest years. This study created the opportunity to look more closely into the currently happening changes that is followed by the development within the area, which has created new tendencies and point of views, which led to a closer description of Virtual Leadership as a product of the creation of Virtual Teams, in order to create greater understanding. The limitation of the study is the reflection from the empirical founds that limits the sensitivity in the study even though there is a strive for a nuanced picture of the field of study it can not be fully guaranteed that it has been achieved.

The approach with smaller samples where chosen in order to use the qualitative data to set the ground for facilitate the understanding of the surroundings and the context, as well as an opportunity for going deeper within the subject is also created. An inductive approach is also seen as best suited for newer topics, where a small number of prior research and literature can be found. (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Ketokivi and Choi, 2014)

It can be argued that the twenty interviews that has been done for this thesis can not represent all organizations that are working in Virtual Teams, since it is applicable for organizations worldwide. It can also be said that the empirical evidence is too specific for creating the possibility for general application and as a foundation for definitions and creation of a model (Merriam, 1994). As a
counterweight to this, it has been intentionally to find organizations in different areas in the world and within different fields of operation. It has also been chosen to interview both Virtual Leaders as well as team members of Virtual Teams, to get a wider picture of the area (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Where it creates contrasts between the respondents as well as the case studies, and different views can be used to explain both similarities as well as differences, and should be seen as a possibility to generate findings of a more general nature.

Eisenhardt (1989) states that since the analysis and conclusions are connected and based on the empirical evidence collected it sets a strong possibility of generating valid theory. As been emphasized, there is a gap in the literature. With regards to the increasing interest and usage of Virtual Teams, a deeper understanding of how to approach the task as a Virtual Leaders is emergent. This increase the feasibility of theory expansion, based on an inductive approach. (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007)

3.3 Research Purpose

The characteristics of the research questions of this study is for the author seen as exploratory, where the aim is to gain knowledge and insight regarding the issue of how a Virtual Leader works in a Virtual Environment in order to lead a successful Virtual Team. Thus, this study could be seen as assessing a specific topic in a new light. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015)

3.4 Research Strategy

The chosen approach has been to collect qualitative data in form of interviews that have been conducted by e-mail. The ambition has been to test if both the theoretical and practical views are linked.

3.5 Sample Characteristics

In this study, the objective was to gather a representative sample of Virtual Teams based upon both Virtual Leaders and team members. The reasoning behind choosing both leaders and team members was to see if they predicted similar or contrary results (Voss, Tsikriktsis and Frohlich, 2002). Several companies were approach for participation in the study, the selection was based upon the following criteria;

- Working in a team that on a day-to-day basis is using some kind of telecommunications to fulfil the collaboration
- Have a designated team leader
- Working towards a shared objective

It was not set as criteria that the teams should be working internationally, since the characteristics should not be influenced weather it operates international or within the national boarders, as long as the other criteria’s are fulfilled. It was also of importance to get the view of both team leader
and members, therefore the aim was to get a spread within the different teams in order to see if there were any differences between the different point of views. The spread within sectors and if the teams are working within national boundaries or international is shown in the table below. All the teams have their base in North America, which was not set as a criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
<th>SECTOR</th>
<th>GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Online solution - Software tool</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Online solution - Support software</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Online solution - Connecting apps</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Online solution - Software tool</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Online solution - Digital Strategy</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Online solution - Medical Education</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Online solution - Digital Strategy &amp; Consultant services</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Online Solution - Digital Strategy for Social Media</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Online solution - Digital Strategy</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>App - Organizing tool</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5.1 Table - Characteristics
Respondents
As mentioned, several organizations were approached to take part in the study, with the result of 20 interviews from 10 different organizations. There was also one Skype-meeting with one of the respondents from the interviews, the aim with this meeting was in its full to get an insight in the program they used as a basis for the Virtual Team, and get a practical view of how it was conducted in reality. See table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>4/29/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/6/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5/5/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/11/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>4/26/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5/3/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>4/30/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/2/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/2/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5/12/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/13/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/16/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5/11/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/13/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>6/19/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>4/29/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5/3/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/11/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5/10/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>5/12/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skype-meeting</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>6/21/2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5.2 Table - Overview of gathered data.
A type of “snowball-approach” was used when identifying respondents for the study, starting with contacting the Virtual Leaders that had been identified as relevant interview objects and then asked for recommendations of team members that could be interested in participating, in order to contribute with value for the study. This is also connected with the strive of obtaining a holistic approach to the study. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015)

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The quality of information in this study is of great importance, therefore it was taken into consideration of how to gather the needed information in the most efficient and effective way, in order to get an accurate image.

All the suitable candidates for the interviews that were identified by the mentioned criteria, were contacted over mail. The respondents were approach with an individually composed e-mail with further presentation of the subject and the study (see appendix). In the attached document, it was briefly presented the purpose and aim of the study, in order to create a greater insight. Followed by this initial contact, the interview questions were distributed and the answers gathered.

Since this study was conducted through in-depth mail interviews with experts from the chosen companies, and, therefore, it can be said that it was performed in the natural setting of the employees. With the research questions and the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews appeared as most suitable for the data collection. However, the initial form of interview questions can be seen as a standardized approach, but, there has been a constant flow of communication with the interviewed objects for this study which created the possibility to go deeper if anything needed to be to clarified and explained. Just standardized interviews would increase the risk of missing valuable information, and the use of an in-depth interview would increase the risk of missing data connected to the research questions, since you cannot steer the interview in the same way.

The process of data collection started in April 2016 and the last interview was conducted in July 2016.

3.7 Interview Guide

An interview guide was developed in order to conduct the interviews for this study (see appendix). This to create an initial understanding of what the study is about, as well as creating some form of original structure. The interview guide was not adopted depending on which position the respondent had, this to set the same conditions for the different respondents. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015)

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), it strengthens the dependability of the study to in advance send out an interview guide where the subject is being presented, the purpose of the study and what the interview will be about, this was done for all the respondents in order to give them a chance to get to know the subject before the interview.
The FIRO Model is based upon the three mentioned phases. This model was used as a basis for setting suitable interview questions (see appendix) in order to identify the most important aspects in the concept of Virtual Leadership. Further on, the interview questions were created by the aim of a) avoid being biased, b) simplified language and c) strive for universal applicability (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). The interview guide was divided into five areas; Virtual Environment, Interaction, Key Factors, Trust and Measurement of Success.

However, it is important to be aware potential difficulties of the chosen collection technique. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2013) it is of significance to create trust and confidence between the respondent and the researcher, if this is not achieved, there is a risk that the respondent may be reluctant to share any detailed insights of information, which will have a negative effect on the quality of the study. It is also important to consider the bias as researcher, in this case the respondents and the researcher had no connection before the study, and should therefore not be seen as a risk to influence the analysis and interpretation of the empirical material, but instead have an objective standing (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013).

3.8 Data Analysis Techniques

When the empirical findings had been collected, it needed to be analyzed as well as connected to the theoretical framework. According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2015) there are at least two types of data analysis, either it is qualitative data analysis, or quantitative data analysis. As mentioned, this study has collected non-numerical data, and is therefore classified as a qualitative analysis, and is focused on creating meaning of context (Dey, 1993). Further, this study seeks conceptualization, which is another reason behind the choice of data collection methods.

The collected data has been summarized in order to identify key points, which have been brought up during the interviews in order to identify relationships between different themes, which can be of relevance for the study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015). In continuation the collected data was categorized in order to continue with the analysis, which according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015) involves two steps; developing the categories and attach those categories to a cluster of collected data, which creates structure. This was done by entering the data into Excel, and structured based upon the different respondents and questions, in order to get an overview. The gathered data was first put into the table in its full, after this it was shortened into one, or in some cases, two sentences. This made it possible to categorize the responses and detect patterns or differences. The quotes that can be found in the Empirical Findings section, is based upon what was commonly agreed upon with the basis in the received answers, then they were chosen based upon formulation clarity, if there were any divergent answers, they are stated in the text of empirical findings. The structure of the theoretical framework flows throughout the study, as a base for the empirical evidence and as a foundation for the structure in the analysis, with mainly focus on the FIRO model.

3.9 Research Quality

When conducting a qualitative study, the question of validity and reliability should be raised in order to determine the objectivity of the study, and to reach a level of trustworthiness and credibility of this research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The results should be seen as representative since there is both leaders and members as respondents, as well as from different geographical background. However, it can always be discussed that the settings can change over time and therefore have effects on the data that could influence the results. In order to aim for a high level of reliability in
this study, the process of data collection is well-described that increases the ability to conduct a study with same conditions as followed by comparable results. Concerning the Validity of the study, it is of great belief that the conducted interviews have created the possibility to fulfil this study based upon the aim of the paper with satisfying credibility. Since the aim is to produce a result of general character and a broad theoretical angle, it should be seen of a strive for creating transferability of the study. (Bryman and Bell, 2007)

In order to ensure a certain level of quality in a qualitative study, it is needed to consider credibility and trustworthiness during the conduction of the study. This is especially essential for a qualitative study, where the method has been criticized for lacking scientific thoroughness compared to quantitative studies (Cope, 2014). It can also be seen as a weakness of using a qualitative study that the results are exposed for the possibility of being biased by the researcher, it regards the subjective interpretation (Koch and Harrington, 1998).

By making stringent and coherent decisions based on grounded information reduces the risk of conducting a study with low sincerity, and the risk of getting incorrect conclusions are reduced significantly (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015).

The goal of the study was to create a broad understanding within the field of Virtual Leadership and get a realistic insight in how a Virtual Team operates. Since the interviews were conducted over e-mail the respondents had the opportunity to create personal answers and opinions that to some extent opens up the possibility for the receiver to make an own interpretation of the answers.

There was another consequence of conducting the interviews over e-mail; how is it possible to know that it is the claimed person that actually answers the interview questions? This situation was handled by creating an additional contact after the interviews with the respondents. In seventeen of the cases it was the claimed person answering the interview, and in three of the cases it was a person answering on behalf of the claimed person but with full responsibility to be answering in the name of the claimed person. It can be argued that the person answering for someone else has the risk of being biased and influenced to answer in a certain way, but as they had the full responsibility to answer on behalf of the person in question, it can be assumed that the received answers are correct and trustworthy.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Regarding the sensitivity of the gathered data, it was clearly stated that the data will just be used for this study and is of nature the property of the researcher as well as the respondents. All respondents were given the possibility to be anonymous, were 2 of the respondents demanded this. Therefore, the decision to make all of the respondents anonymous were taken, since the identity of the respondents has no impact on the result of the study, this is not seen as a weakness of the study. The possibility to be anonymous was given in the belief that this would encourage clear answers.

Since the interview were conducted over mail, only the researcher had access to the information with username and password, the data will be kept one year in an electronic format, after the publication of the study, and will thereafter be deleted.
4. Empirical Findings

In this section the empirical findings from the collected data will be presented, this section will in its full extent be based upon the conducted interviews as well as the company papers, without any personal reflections from the researcher. The gathered data will be based upon the construction originated from the interview guide, with all the answers from the respondents gathered under the different sections from the interview guide, this to create clarity for the reader.

4.1 Virtual Environment

The respondents have different roles within the team, both formal leaders and team members. This section is in its full extent based upon their views. The Virtual Environment is created where the Virtual Team is being existent.

4.1.1 Virtual Team

A Virtual Team is seen as a team that shares a virtual workspace, that is, a team that doesn’t require physical proximity to accomplish their goals. In this section, there are no bigger differences between the answers from the Virtual Leaders and the team members, the view of a Virtual Team is to some extent consistent between the different roles.

It is however pushed upon the phrase Virtual Team, where one of the organizations are resistant to this and thereby suggests “Remote Teams” as a more suitable term. The argument for this is that the team actually exists but that it is just distributed. This doesn’t exclude the possibility for the team to work together in person neither to have face-to-face meetings. Further on, the term Virtual Team is dissociated in the sense that even if the team never meets, the collaboration is still meaningful and the team is still real.

In continuation, despite from this one company being reluctant to the term Virtual Team, it is described as a group of people that primarily works and interacts online striving towards a common goal, the people within the team could be placed within the same building but just as easily on the other side of the world.

4.1.2 Virtual Leader

Followed by this, a Virtual Leader is defined as the one leading the Virtual Team, in other words, the formal leader of the group. The respondents state the importance of the leader to have the ability to not just lead, but to inspire. From the Virtual Leader it is essential with a clear flow of information as well as documentation in order to make sure that everyone is going in the same direction, the leader must facilitate the collaboration and the process for the rest of team, which can be a challenge when it is not possible to being physically present.
4.2. Interaction

The teams can be situated throughout the world, in the majority of the respondents they are geographically dispersed with internationally distributed teams, in some of the cases the teams are situated in the same country.

None of the respondents are located in the same building as their team members, in some occasions they are in the same country but in the majority of the cases they are working internationally. This creates teams with different international backgrounds. This influences the regularity of meeting face-to-face, in one of the cases they have a range of meeting from a daily base to a weekly basis and in some cases every tenth week. In another of the cases they also strive to have the regularity of meeting every second week, but at the same time have some of the team members that they have never seen face-to-face. There is a tendency for meeting the management team on a more regular basis where the same need does not seem to be as strong for gathering the whole team as often. In some of the cases there can be months apart, or even on a yearly basis.

“...I can interpret messages better after I know their real-world personalities.”

Virtual Leader, International Team

There is still the importance for the leader of getting to know the rest of the team on a personal level, which is stated to set a foundation for an effective collaboration.

4.3 Communication tools

In a Virtual Environment there are different tools to use for communication, based on the respondents the most commonly used tool is Slack (an online chat application for both group and private messages, as well as the possibility to gather documents). Slack creates a sense of presence and creates the opportunity for spontaneous communication for the different teams, it is quick, and at the same time it is also used to archive and keep track of the previous conversations. A minority of the respondents says that they are using some kind of video conference calls (in this case, Skype or Zoom), and on rare occasions phone calls are used for one-one-one conversations.

4.4 Key Factors

Working in a Virtual Team takes some practice, where communication has a very important part, with clear communication comes the need for that everyone gets the right information at the right time, in order to achieve at their best. If this is done, it creates the foundation for keeping everyone on the same page in order to reach the common goal, which is essential in a Virtual Team.
The respondents were asked what was the most crucial part when working in a virtual team, it was stated that, as mentioned, communication is the key for success. This connected to striving for creating a presence even though the leader is not situated in the same place as the team, this is done through creating a sense of availability; being available on the chat, trying to answer as fast as possible, being responsive and aim for having a close contact with the team. It is of great importance of keeping everyone on the same page

“Communication, communication, communication.”

Virtual Leader, International Team

It is further pushed upon the great importance of clear communication; it is stated that if this is fulfilled it will simplify keeping everyone striving towards the same goal. It is also a necessity to be organized and make sure to have a suitable process for making it as easy as possible for the team as a whole. With a strive for organizing everything comes the need for making sure that everyone knows what is expected from them and when it is supposed to be delivered, this puts some pressure on the leader to create clear roles and responsibilities. With this, there comes a strong need for everyone involved in the team to take on personal responsibility, in turn, it follows naturally to trust that everyone fulfills their tasks in time.

4.4.1 Critical Factors

In a Virtual Environment the team members tend to be happier and more productive, since it creates the possibility for more deciding over your own time in opposite to regular office-hours, more personal flexibility is created. It can also be seen to have a positive effect on the environment since it means less travels and therefore can be seen within the area of green-thinking.

“I think this is the future of work in a world where we have to focus more on personal life balance and achieve a sustainable society.”

Team Member, International Team

With Virtual Teams it also creates a bigger talent pool when it comes to finding employees, since there is no limit to where to search for suitable members of the team. With team members with different international backgrounds creates a diversity that could provide diverse perspectives and create better output. However, when the talent pool increases it also raises the importance of making sure that the right persons are found. Not everyone is adequate for Virtual Teams, and therefore it is of great importance to secure that the most suitable person for the team is found.

A great challenge with Virtual Teams is, as mentioned, the communication. It is needed to know when there is a need for communication and when it is not necessary or suitable, to find the level of adequate communication. The communication can also be seen as slower compared to face-to-face conversations where it is easier to get an answer at the same time as the question is being
asked. Another challenge is the possibility to be placed in different time-zones, if this is happening it will be a struggle if it is needed to be online at the same time, which demands planning and structuring, which could lead to that the people work asynchronously. In one of the cases where the team is situated within national borders, it is necessary for the team to be online at the same time for a part of the day, to tackle the issue of being asynchronous. This is based upon the assumption that everyone have access to a good internet connection.

Yet another challenge with working in Virtual Teams is the risk of feeling isolated, since there is a smaller possibility to have informal time and the personal connection can get lost in the Virtual Environment.

4.5 Trust

In a Virtual Team it is essential to create trust within the group, it is especially critical for the leader. It is stated by all the respondents except for one that trust is one of the most important factors in a Virtual Team. It is the foundation for team collaboration, and a necessary detail for a Virtual Team to function properly.

“You cannot run a virtual team without trusting every employee.”

Team Member, International Team

If the trust is present in a team there is no need for the leader to micromanage, it can be assumed that everyone knows their role and will do what they are supposed to do. There will however always be the natural instinct of getting a better connection with some people than others, even in a Virtual Environment, since in today’s world it is not unusual to get to know people online. The one respondent that did not put trust as one of the most important factors pushes upon the strive for creating mutual respect and keeping a personal integrity within the team, as well as good communication.

“...building a structure around a way to earn and deliver trust is most important.”

Team Leader, National Team

Trust is in this case seen as a bi-product of building the suitable structure for the team. If the other parts are achieved, then trust will follow as a continuation.

Further on, there is a consistent view of how to achieve trust within the team. As mentioned, it is needed to do what is supposed to be done within the timeframe, this is connected to that the leader needs to be the one that demonstrates that the team members are being trusted, by giving the
personal responsibility. If the trust is not achieved, it comes back to the leader that needs to ask the questions; *are the goals clear? Do the members have what they need? Do I have the right set of team? Have I given them the inspiration that is needed?*

Trust should be a strive from day one, to be put as a natural part of the culture that is present within the team. This by communicate, being honest, reliable and accessible. If a culture with trust is build, the members will feel comfortable within the group which gives a strong sense of belonging and a foundation for helping each other if needed in the strive for the common goal.

4.6 Measurement of success

To measure success can always be discussed, in this study all the respondents have pushed upon the measurement of success in goal fulfilment. What kind of goals can however vary depending on the organization and the objectives of the team.

> “*What goals do you have? Are you hitting those goals? If so, you're successful.*”

Team Leader, International Team

With clear processes, good communication, strong awareness of goals and empowerment, the basic conditions for reaching the goals are set.

The success of the Virtual Leader depends on the obtained ability to inspire, lead and manage the group, in other words; set a vision, empower the team members and ensure the reach for achieving the objectives. To set a clear vision is to ensure that everyone are going in the same direction for the good of the project, to empower the team members includes the need for personal responsibility, trust and freedom. And the importance of setting clear objectives can not be stretched enough, since the leader is primarily the one taking the responsibility if the goals are not achieved.

To measure success in a Virtual Team it is no different than for any other team; by goal fulfillment. That is why it is of great importance that the goals and objectives are stated clearly in the beginning for setting the right conditions for the success of the team.

> “*Work is not a place, it’s what you accomplish together.*”

Team Leader, International Team

A team that is passionate about a common set of goals and have the willingness to engage themselves in it will reach success, combined with strong leadership and a strong culture. This will
create the sense of being part of something and motivation will appear, this in combination with aligned values and goals will set a strong foundation for creating a successful Virtual Team. It is also essential to making sure that everyone have what is needed; both when it comes to knowledge and needed tools and technology. However, the respondents do not see a slow development in the area of technology that sets limitations for the development of Virtual Teams, rather the difficulties lies in the behavior and mindset of people towards working in a Virtual Environment, where the only thing that can be done for handling this is changing attitudes and develop the team culture, and that is where the greatest challenge is.

"Changing attitudes and team cultures is much harder than buying the latest software solutions."

Team Leader, International Team
5. Analysis

This section will mainly focus on the FIRO model, connected to the empirical findings, with the other parts from the theoretical framework to create a deeper understanding within the subject. Since it has been demonstrated in this study that there are some limitations within the field of practice of Virtual Leadership when it comes to existing literature, it is of importance to see how it is done in practice.

5.1 Virtual Environment

To work in groups is not something new, and is seen as a group of people working towards a common goal, this does not change when working in a Virtual Team, what differs here is that there is no demand for the group to ever meet face-to-face, although, this too could occur. The definition of a Virtual Leader is based upon the definition of Jawadi et al. (see theoretical framework), that explains that Virtual Leadership is a process that guides the behavior of the group towards shared goals through ICT, a Virtual Leader should therefore be seen as the person that stirs this process. What is clear is that when working in groups there is always a need for a strong leader, this is the one that makes sure that the group is heading in the right direction as well as striving towards the common goal. There lays a grand responsibility on the Virtual Leader, not just to make sure that the goals are reached, but making sure that everyone in the group have the right set of skills and/or tools to being able to fulfill their task in a satisfying way.

To see the effectiveness of the Virtual Team, it is needed to see to the effectiveness of the Virtual Leader. It is on the leader to create the ground settings for the team as well as making sure that the team members are feeling motivated and inspired, especially in a Virtual Team where there is a large personal responsibility. In order to create motivation and build self-confidence there must be clear communication. In a Virtual Team this communication can take many forms, as long as needed information is being transmitted, the chosen tool of communication will not effect the outcome, and the tool should be chosen upon what is most suitable from case to case. The Virtual Leader needs to be able to spot these differences, not only when it comes to different situations but also to recognize the diversity of the members that the team consists of.

There is always different angles that a leader should take into consideration when it comes to optimize the capability of a group, but in a Virtual Environment, some things are even more visible. Since the groups are situated all over the world, there is a great possibility that the team consists of people with different cultural backgrounds, that could have a great impact on the group, especially when this is not being considered.

5.2 Transformational Leadership

As seen in existing theory within the field of Virtual Leadership, it is of great importance to being able to create encouragement and motivation within the team. This falls on the Virtual Leader to establish, and can be seen as one of the challenges that comes with working in a Virtual Environment. The theory can be applied in the practical view in order to create an effective team.
However, it should not be seen as one of the core parts in an effective team, rather it should be looked upon as a way of creating trust within the team.

If the Virtual Leader is being able to create motivation as well as empowerment, the following by this will be an effective team in the sense of individualized work with a strong connection to the common goal. So, transformational leadership within a Virtual Team can be highly effective and suitable since there is a great need for personalized consideration, in order to achieve effectiveness both on a personal level as well as for the team as a whole.

5.3 Trust

Both theoretical and practical findings push upon the importance of establishing trust within the Virtual Team. Although, trust is always wanted in a team, not just a virtual one. But the literature does not go deeper into how this trust is created. One of the respondents focus on that the structure created within the group will lead to trust, while the other respondents says that it should be focus on this from day one, either way, trust is essential to achieve. Trust is a strive that needs to be prioritized when working in a Virtual Team. If the Virtual Leader can create trust within the team, the Virtual Leader will not find the need to micromanage everything, instead some of the responsibility can be delegated out on the team members.

If the trust will be a natural part of the culture within the Virtual team, a bond between the team members and the Virtual Leader needs to be established, since it is hard to trust people you do not have any connection to at all. This is a great challenge when it comes to Virtual Teams, since they do not have the possibility to bond in a natural way when you meet people in real life, instead this trust needs to based upon something else than just personal connections. In the LMX theory it is shown the importance of creating an effective leadership process with a base upon creation of relationships and the benefits these will give. In a Virtual Environment, the biggest benefit shows to be trust.

Trust can be achieved through credibility (expertise, capabilities, competence) and benevolence (emotional, behavior). But how do you achieve this in a virtual context? Again, it could be said that this is connected to creating trust. There is created a pressure on the Virtual Leader to prove himself, both when it comes to being trusted but as well when it comes to showing the expertise and competence. This is not something that will come from day one, instead it needs to be something that grows up from the strong foundation of the group that is strived for being created from the first moment. The emotional aspect is also something that will grow with the evolution of the team, if the leader is achieving to create a sense of accessibility it will have a positive effect on how the team perceives the leader. Also through communication and to show that the leader is someone to rely on.

5.4 Communication

A part of the visual interaction is lost when working in Virtual Teams, and even though different types of medias are classified based upon their level of richness, based upon the empirical findings,
it is not seen as something essential. Focus lies on using quick and efficient ways of communication, instead of creating a personal relation to the person on the other end, that is easier done if they are visible. This is done mainly by using chat applications, both individually and in group, this also strengthens the sense of availability. It is also shown that programs for organizing and sharing files and documents are of great importance, this creates a high level of transparency and synergy and facilitates to work as a group even if not situated in the same place. This means that there is a need for organizing when it comes to create access to information. The chosen channels of media are seen as less rich, but it is not said that they are less useful when working in a Virtual Team, since it can not be seen as the most important to create personal relationships. As long as the chosen channel of media fulfils the criteria; accessible and quick when handling the information in question, which follows on the criticism towards the media richness theory, where the channel should not be based upon which is the richest, but rather on which is the most suitable and effective in every situation.

5.5 AST

As mentioned, a group structure will be created based on such things as stated rules and goals, but the cultural differences can also impact this structure. These structures are constantly developing, since they are connected to the structures of the organization. Followed by this, the structures of the organization are constantly changing since they are driven by technology, and as known, there are constant strive for advances in information systems. This creates a linkage of technical, human and organizational structures, where they are all affected by each other and in that way drives a constant development within those areas. The Virtual Leader will drive the need for new and, in some sense, “better” solutions within technology in order to make the team more efficient, the new structures of technology will impact how the organization is being run, and then again, effect the need for technology that the Virtual Leader posses.

5.6 FIRO

As proved in both theoretical framework and empirical findings, trust plays an important role when it comes to achieving successful Virtual Teams. But how to create this trust is not as clear. This study will therefore show the importance of creating an interpersonal relationship within the group in order to establish trust.

According to the FIRO model the first phase a group reaches is the inclusion phase, to be a part of the team. This phase will be effected of the fact that the group is working in a Virtual Environment, and therefore, they do not necessarily meet which could create difficulties in transmitting a sense of inclusion. First, the Virtual Leader needs to make sure that it is the right people that ends up on the right spot, otherwise it will not work out and could even have great negative effects on the finale outcome.

5.6.1 Inclusion

The inclusion phase is being restricted by the possibility for interaction between the team as a whole and also the interaction from the leader to the team, in the sense that there could be big
differences when it comes to cultural differences. This creates a challenge for the Virtual Leader, since this person needs to be the one creating opportunity for the Virtual Team to interact. As stated earlier, there could be some challenges for a Virtual Leader, as a consequence from the likeliness for not having any face-to-face interaction. In the empirical findings in this study, all the respondents work in groups that are not located in the same building, in some cases, not even the same country. This sets some limits to the possibility of creating interaction, which according du Schultz is an essential part for creating a successful group. There is an interest for the leader to create interaction within the group, but this interaction can not be seen as regular interaction when people meet. In order to make this, there must be created some kind of bonds within the groups, since this will set the foundation for building trust. If bonds within the group are achieved without any forced face-to-face interaction, it will help both the leader and the members to get to know each other on a deeper level, and thereby also learn how they function in general and in certain situations, this will strengthen the group and its capacity.

Although, it could be seen as not as important for the whole Virtual Team to interact, as long as everyone feels included, it is of more importance that the Virtual Leader is interacting with the team. This conclusion is based upon the fact that the Virtual Teams see it as more important to have regular meetings for the management team instead of prioritizing gathering the whole group as often. In a Virtual Team, you are working more individually with personal responsibility, that can be seen as the reason for why interaction is not as necessary. If everyone knows what to do and when to do it, it will be an effective collaboration, the responsibility lies on the Virtual Leader then to make sure that everyone in the team knows this. This leads us back to the importance of trust in a Virtual Team; How can I trust someone I have no interaction with?

Since the finale product will be a group effort there is a need for everyone feeling inclusion. If a satisfying level of Inclusion is reached, which in a Virtual Team is not needed to be high as long as everyone is feeling as a part of the group. The next middle phase will be reached; Comfort. Where everyone in the team will feel comfortable in the group.

5.6.2 Control

To continue to the next phase, Control, the Virtual Leader needs to be the one making sure this happens. This phase is very important in a Virtual Team, and thereby, it is of great importance that the Virtual Leader knows how to handle it. The Virtual Leader has here a possibility to climb on the foundation that was built in the first phase, to create inclusion and significance for the team. In order for everyone to find the right position within the team, clear roles of responsibility need to be set. What is my task? What is expected of me? When is it expected? How does it fit in with the main goal for the team?

In a Virtual Team, Control seems to be very important, not just in the sense to know where the power lays, but also that the Virtual Leader feels like the overall control of the team lays there. This is therefore connected to the importance of goal fulfillment. If clear goals are set, it will be easier for all the team members to see their part in the bigger picture, as well as setting the personal responsibility. If this is not done in a satisfying way, it could occur that the team is going in different directions. Setting clear goals, this could be both individually or common goals, will minimize the risk of arise of misunderstandings and in some cases even conflicts.
If the teams are located in different countries, there is a possibility that they will be in different time zones, this could have a negative effect on the outcome. To take control over this situation it is needed to plan and organize, so that everyone knows what to do and when to do it, in order to reach the fullest potential of the group.

The Virtual Leader has a great responsibility in all of the phases, since, in the end, it is the Virtual Leader that possess the overall responsibility for the success of the team. But how is a successful Virtual Team defined? DEFINITION – A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL TEAM

5.6.3 Openness

The third phase, Openness, comes when everyone has found their spot within the team, potential conflicts have been solved, the responsibility has been cleared, and the main focus is on function together as a group. Thus will only be possible if the Virtual Leader has been able to transmit the common goals and every team members sees their part in it.

That Compatibility has a positive connection to Productivity has been proven to be true in ordinary teams, and it could be argued that C has an even stronger positive effect on P in a Virtual Team. The reasoning behind this assumption is that the more compatible a Virtual Team is, the stronger the bond within the group will be and the strive towards common goals. This bond, is, as mentioned, not necessarily a personal connection between the individuals, but a strong belonging within the group. If this bond is created it will facilitate for the arise of trust as well as creating commitment. The trust needs to come from both ways; the leader needs to receive the trust from the team members, and at the same time, the leader needs to being able to trust that the team will do what is expected and that the set goals will be reached within the aimed timeframe. This trust will be the foundation for establishing bonds within the team, which are necessary for creating an efficient team and leader. The aim is to create well functioning and efficient teams, if Virtual Teams function they should fulfill this.

Since the work in a Virtual Team can be seen as very individually, it is needed to make sure that all the members are getting the motivation needed. This motivation can for some be the satisfaction of fulfilling their task in a satisfying way, it can also be a monetary reward or as simple as hearing “Good job”. All individuals continue to be individuals, even though they are part of a group, and this can not be diminished. The Virtual Leader should try to create a presence even though the team is located in different locations. As seen this is done by creating a sense of availability and having a close contact with the team. This will help the Virtual Leader to create the needed relationship in order to create trust. If the availability is applied, it will also facilitate for creating an image of a strong and dependent leader.

The different phases within the FIRO model can be seen as rowing boat, first when you enter the boat you need to be included to pass, are you allowed to join the other people on the boat? Followed, when no rules and directions are given everyone is going in different directions and the boat does
not really go anywhere. Therefore, the linkage between compatibility and productivity is very strong – if the group is compatible they will work good together and deliver satisfying results.

5.6.4 The Human Elements

With the revised instrument from Schutz, a wider view was created based on the FIRO model, which leads to greater insights and better understanding of the interpersonal relationships. If every individual can optimize their potential, it will have a positive effect on the outcome of the Virtual Team.

5.7 Management by Objectives

So how is the success of a virtual team measured? What is usually the case when it comes to measure success is to look at what actually has been done, and there is nothing that indicates that this would be different in a Virtual Team. What were the goals? What have we done? Did we reach the goals? Why/why not? There is a large personal responsibility in Virtual Teams, but in the end, the final responsibility is with the Virtual Leader. Based upon the answers on previous questions, it is up to the leader to decide if the performance of the team has been satisfying.

In the case of reaching the goals and even overcome them by far, can indicate that the goals from the beginning were not realistic in the sense that there was potential to reach even further. What was the reason behind this? Do we need to modify the goals? On the other hand, a situation could occur where the goals are not reached, which also needs some extra attention from the Virtual Leader. Why have we not reached our goals? Are they not realistic? Do we have the right tools to achieve them? Do we have the needed knowledge? Is there a need to modify the constitution of the team? This can be seen as a malfunction between the organizations operational and strategic aspects. In the end, the success of the team depends on the decisions the Virtual Leader takes.

5.8 Definition Virtual Leader

It is evident that Virtual Teams and Virtual Leadership is not just a trend, and it will most likely evolve a lot in the upcoming years, since technology continues to constantly develop and take up bigger parts of our lives.

Suggested definition of a Virtual Leader:

“The official leader of a team that strives for creating structure and guide behaviors towards fixed goals by using information and communication technologies.”

Jönsson, 2016
The meaning of this definition is that there is a necessity of creating clarity and structure, which falls on the Virtual Leader to establish. With this as a strong foundation, it can be sensed that the team members expect personal responsibility, but it is of great importance that this responsibility is not given until the goals and task has clearly been stated. This sets a demand on the Virtual Leader to transmit information and keep a free flow of communication. If this is done, the Virtual Leader will establish a trustworthy image of an available and strong leader figure.

5.9 Expansion FIRO

The FIRO model is highly adoptable to fit in a virtual context, but since the original model came for over 50 years ago, there is a need to adopt it to fit in a more modern world where Virtual Teams are present. This study has led to an expansion of the theory, which can be seen in the image below, the Human Element has also been incorporated into the different steps in order to give a more holistic view.
The original model made by Schutz in 1958 is based upon the view of the team as a whole, where this extension of the model is based upon the view from the perspective of the Virtual Leader, in order to create an efficient team. Since the model is from over 50 years ago, it needs to be updated in order to fit in the technical world that is present today. Therefore, there can be detected an even earlier start for the Virtual Leader. The original parts (Inclusion, Control, Openness) are still present, but there can be seen some parts missing when working in a Virtual Environment. From the beginning there should already be set a clear goal, this in order to show who is needed and where. This will help when reaching the Inclusion phase, where it will be easier to create a sense of inclusion and integration; for everyone to see their part in the bigger picture. If the Virtual Leadership has been able to pick the right persons, it will also be easier to show individualized consideration, which is highly needed in a Virtual Team.

The next task for the Virtual Leader is to transmit the goals and responsibilities, the control phase, in order to make clear roles. This is done by clear communication, where the channel of communication is not based upon its richness, rather than on what is suitable for creating an efficient way of working for the Virtual Team. If the right channels are used, it will create synergy as well as transparency, where everyone knows what to do and when to do it, at the same time all necessary information needs to be shared in order to avoid misunderstandings and/or conflicts. This leading to the openness phase. Where it is first here that the Virtual Leader has deserved the trust from the team, and the work can proceed on its path. After this last phase, the Virtual Leader still needs to evaluate the finale product of the work of the VT, where success is measured as goal fulfillment.

The third phase will only be reached if the two previous phases where fulfilled in a satisfying way. This means that the challenges for the Virtual Leader are to get the right person on the right place to get the best possible conditions for a well-functioning team. Also to making sure that the goals are clear, realistic and well transmitted throughout the team. It is of great importance to find a suitable media channel, which should be seen to the needs of the team, where it is essential making sure that everyone in the team have the knowledge for using it to its fullest potential. If this is achieved, there is a strong foundation for creating a free flow of information and an opportunity for creating trust within the team.

In order for a leader to be successful in a Virtual Context, the leader needs to have all the basic skills that is described for a leader, and some extra. For the possibility to have a thriving Virtual Environment there is a need for basic infrastructure, in the sense that it can not be taken for granted the need for a certain level of technology and the possibility to use it for communication. There should also be sufficient of education within the field of Virtual Leadership and Virtual Teams, since there seems to be a gap of understanding of what it is and how it can be used. This education should also be connected to the technology; to learn how to use it as a tool towards a more globalized world. If this is done, the ambition is to make the Virtual Environment as a natural part of the company culture, which should create a positive attitude towards Virtual Teams, and create more efficient teams.
6. Conclusion

The result of this study shows a possible extension of the FIRO model that is adaptable to fit in a Virtual Environment. The theoretical framework acts as a strong foundation in order to create an understanding of the FIRO model and is connected to the empirical findings in a satisfying and supporting way.

There is a need for further research within the area in order to create greater clarity within the subject. Based upon this study the following definition of a Virtual Leader is suggested;

“The official leader of a team that strives for creating structure and guide behaviors towards fixed goals by using information and communication technologies.”

Jönsson, 2016

With working in a Virtual Environment comes some challenges for a Virtual Leader where the first one being the need of identifying what and who is needed; the right person and the right spot. Followed by this is the urge to making sure that the members of the team are compatible in the strive for efficiency, where it is of great importance to transmit clear and realistic goals. This should be done by finding suitable media channel, that is most suitable for that organization in that moment in order to create efficiency within the team, as well as making sure that everyone has the right knowledge for using it. This sets the ground for a free flow of information, where communication is highly important in a Virtual Team in the strive for establish trust.

The suggested expansion of the model will help the Virtual Leader in the strive for creating a successful Virtual Team, where the different steps will guide the behaviors of the Virtual Team in the wished direction.

In the end, it all comes down to finding the right person on the right spot and clearly transmit the expectations of that person and the final goal, and make sure that the person has the right conditions to get there.
7. Suggestion for future research

It is a subject that will go through great development, and therefore there is a large need for more research within the area. There is still some room to evolve the definition of Virtual Leadership in order to create a more general understanding for the subject. Since it is a relatively new subject that is going through a stage of development, more information is needed, both practical and theoretical, since there might actually be people using Virtual Leadership without being conscious about it.

Further on, there can be seen a misconception in the whole concept of Virtual Team, is Remote Team a more suitable expression? And, is there any differences what is seen as a Virtual Team compared to a Remote Team?

Lastly, it is shown that interpersonal relations is of great importance for the Virtual Leader in order to be part of a successful Virtual Team. It therefore could be of interest to look further into this matter with a more behavior psychological point-of-view.
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Appendix

In this section additional tables and questioners are being presented. Starting with a Literature Review on the upcoming two pages, that is made with the foundation in the Theoretical Framework.
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**Definition**

Flexible, effective, team, diversified, cohesion, communication, company culture.
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Presentation of study for respondents

Aim and Outline

In a world that is getting more and more globalized and dependent of the progress within the sphere of technology, there is a need for organizations to keep up with this development. There is also a development when it comes to communication as well as the traditional corporate boundaries are beginning to blur out and transform both internally and externally. This is a consequence of a world that is increasingly globalized, and creating global competition is facilitated by a wider use of information and communication technology (ICT). The advances in ICT thus serve as an enabler for creating new opportunities in communication.

The subject can be seen as new and not thoroughly investigated from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view, and with a society increasingly confides in a technological progress, there is a greater importance for studying the are more closely and create a better understanding. The creation of Virtual Teams encounters several aggravating challenges compared to traditionally collocated teams. The first challenge being the ability to work over time and space, not to mention organizational boundaries. The fact that communication can take pace through intermediary technology also impacts the possibility to use body language and creates challenges to create a personal relation. This reinforces the purpose of this study which is to investigate how a virtual leader can overcome the aforementioned challenges and ensure that everyone in the team are heading in the same direction.

Research Questions

• What is a Virtual Leader?
• Which are the challenges that comes with being a Virtual Leader?
• What is the core in creating a successful Virtual Team?

Benefits for participating Stakeholders

• Stakeholders participating in the study will get a comprehensive in-depth analysis of the impact the virtual teams have on the performance of the organization.
• How can the firm improve the capabilities to better suit the emerging trend of Virtual Teams?
• What are the enablers or inhibitors that facilitate or inhibit the operation of a Virtual Team?
• What is the role of the Virtual Leader?
Interview Guide

Interview questions

Name:
Title:
Organization:
Date:

1. **Questions**
   How would you describe a virtual team?

2. How would you define a Virtual Leader?

3. Which role do you have in a virtual team?

4. Are the members of the team international or are they geographically dispersed within national boarders?

5. How often do you see your team members face-to-face?

6. How do you, most commonly, communicate with your team members? (What kind of media) Why this?

7. How would you describe your experiences of working in a virtual team?

8. What would you say is most important when working in a virtual team?

9. How would you describe a successful virtual team?

10. How would you describe a successful virtual leader?

11. Can you identify some specific challenges and/or critical factors when working in a virtual environment? What are the pros and cons?

12. How are these challenges handled by the virtual leader?

13. What is your perception of trust in your organization?

14. Is it important with trust in a virtual team? Why/Why not?

15. How can a virtual team build trust?

16. How do you measure success in a virtual team?
17. What would you say is the most important part in creating a strong and successful virtual team? And how is this achieved?

Additional comments: