

The role of communication in team leadership Case: LittleLives

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Description <p>The objective of the thesis was to map out the current state of leadership communication at the client company LittleLives Inc., and to identify the key learning points. Thus, the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the situation and to discover the current status of internal communications and team leadership from the employees' point of view.</p> <p>The data was gathered using a qualitative research method by conducting semi-structured interviews. The gathered data was analyzed using the thematic analysis. Based on the results, transparency and clear communication of goals were seen as essential parts of leadership communication. Additionally, the importance of development discussions was highlighted. Communality was also perceived as vital for efficient team operation. Both the employees and the team leader struggled with how to best utilize the online communication tools at hand.</p> <p>The research provided the client with knowledge of the current state of communications from the team's point of view and also revealed some areas for development. Based on the results, there is a need to develop virtual communication and to enhance remote leadership. However, technology should be seen mainly as a tool for communication, and the focus should be placed on the leader's ability to communicate in a transparent, constructive and clear manner.</p>		
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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli kartoittaa johtamisviestinnän nykytilaa toimeksiantajayrityksessä, LittleLives Inc:ssä, ja tunnistaa sen keskeiset kehityskohteet. Pyrkimyksenä oli ymmärtää tilannetta kokonaisvaltaisesti ja selvittää, miten sisäinen viestintä ja tiimijohtaminen koetaan työntekijöiden näkökulmasta.</p> <p>Aineistonkeruu toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena puolistrukturoitua teemahaastattelua hyväksi käyttäen. Kerätty aineisto analysoitiin teemoittelun avulla. Tutkimustulosten perusteella viestinnän läpinäkyvyys ja tavoitteiden selkeys koettiin tärkeäksi osaksi johtamisviestintää. Myös kehityskeskusteluiden tärkeyttä korostettiin. Lisäksi yhteisöllisyyttä pidettiin elintärkeänä tehokkaan tiimitoiminnan kannalta. Sekä työntekijät että tiimin johtaja kokivat virtuaalisen viestinnän välineiden tarkoituksenmukaisen käytön haasteelliseksi.</p> <p>Tutkimus antoi toimeksiantajalle tietoa johtamisviestinnän nykytilasta tiimin näkökulmasta ja toi ilmi kehityskohteita. Tulosten pohjalta voidaan nähdä tarpeelliseksi kehittää tiimien välistä virtuaaliviestintää sekä panostaa tehokkaampaan etäjohtamiseen. Teknologia tulisi kuitenkin nähdä pääosin viestinnän välineenä, ja painopisteen tulisi olla johtajan kyvyssä viestiä läpinäkyvästi, rakentavasti ja selkeästi.</p>		
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1 Introduction

The world has been getting smaller for years, and the development of social technologies along with other changes has revolutionized the way we work. A team as a concept has broadened whilst technology has enabled us to communicate from a distance in a timely manner. Dispersed teams and virtual environments are inevitably here to stay. Thus finding ways to improve their efficiency in terms of communication is crucial for the organization's future. Hence, the leader's role in obtaining and sustaining functional leadership communication is central. It is a common expression that leadership is communication and communication is leadership. One cannot simply exist without the other. Thus it is important to look into leadership communication as it can be seen as the main means of improving both team operation and the company as a whole.

The different roles along with different backgrounds within an organization can create various communicative challenges, which in turn create a need for the development of communication competence. It is not unheard of that different cultural backgrounds in particular may correlate with different ways of operation. Considering that the nature of work and work communities are constantly evolving, it also creates a challenge for leadership communication to also adapt to these changes. The new generation technology, not even an option previously, gives a clear advantage for today's companies, and becomes an undeniable competitive edge if well utilized. Thus, communication has also advanced to a level where we are able to interact from a distance. Though the use of social technolo-

gies is becoming more common in organizations, many leaders struggle with how to best utilize them in their everyday work.

This thesis studies the various communication challenges and ways to improve the internal communications as well as the leadership communication within an organization. The subject for the thesis came from the client company LittleLives' founder and is based on their current organizational needs to find the means for effective communication when leading a team, partly from a distance. The client company consists of two teams that operate in Singapore and Malaysia including a recently opened office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Due to the recent organizational change, the focus of this thesis is to explore the current state of leadership communication from both teams' point of view and the communication between the two teams in order to develop the communication in the company as a whole. As the leader mainly operates from the Singapore office, a large part of the communication between the two offices solely rely on online communication such as email. When leading from a distance, challenges in terms of communication tend to be magnified. Essentially, remoteness decreases the amount of informal interaction, which is often considered essential for building trust relationships.

By studying the various perspectives of the subject it becomes clear that leadership communication serves as an enabler for an effective and engaging team environment. After all communication forms the basis of all team operation. The challenge, however, often lies in the assumption that communication has been achieved. To cite Clappitt (2010, 4) *"just as knowing about clouds, snow and fog doesn't make you a meteorologist, knowing the components of communication does not equate with understanding the communication process."*

2 Research framework

2.1 LittleLives Inc.

Startups can be seen as vital for the economic development as they create new jobs and thus improve the economic growth. Nevertheless, startups are more fragile and their policy needs are more unique when compared to larger businesses. Hence, developing a communicative and creative leadership is central for startups. (Humala 2015, 427.) As leadership communication is a unique form of communication, its different factors can be looked from the management or leadership point of view. Both of these aspects are linked to each other but emphasize different viewpoints of communication. (Åberg 2006, 94.) In this thesis, the focus will thus be on the leadership point of view.

The case startup is a Singapore based incorporation LittleLives that operates a fast growing technology company with a vision to enable technology to modernize education and thus provide a paperless office for their clientele. LittleLives operates in Singapore and Malaysia, and caters for five different Southeast Asian countries. With a clientele of over 500 preschools in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Brunei using their services daily, LittleLives holds a wealth of IT know-how and experience as well as innovativeness in designing IT solutions that serve the operational needs of preschools.

Through cooperation with local associations and the global network, it offers advanced software solutions including user-friendly and interactive applications for preschools' administration based on customer needs. LittleLives provides solutions for preschools' admin processes such as attendance-taking, health checks and e-portfolio the paperless way. Its strategy includes providing added value by minimizing the workload of administrators and teachers in kindergartens, and providing topical information for parents. In Singapore, LittleLives has been

ranked as the number one provider of “Software as a Service” (SaaS) by Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES).

The organization consists of two teams which operate in Singapore and Malaysia. LittleLives employs an estimate of 15 staff members, excluding the team leader, investors and interns. The teams are then further divided into different departments based on their job description. Additionally, each department has their own internal team leader. Thus in addition to the team leader, the research sample includes team members from each department, such as salesmen, software engineers, graphic designers, market analysts and interns, whom are responsible for administrative assistance and email communications. The reason for choosing this particular sample is the aim to incorporate various viewpoints into the research and to gain a comprehensive narration of the situation.

2.2 Methodology

Research problem and questions

The development of leadership communication is not often discussed and thus it is essential to build a theoretical framework around the concept of communication in leadership. (Johansson, Miller & Hamrin 2014, 147) This thesis aims to discover the current state and perceptions of team leadership in the client company and the meaning of communication for team operation. In a multicultural workplace, communication is a highly relevant part of the whole operation and it is effected by many different aspects. In a situation where team members are located in different geographical locations and working from a distance, the importance of effective communication and leadership is even more emphasized.

Hence, this study aims to map out the leader's and team members' perceptions, expectations and experiences of the company's current leadership communication as well as the internal communications within the team. Thus, the central research problem is

“What is the significance of communications for team leadership?”

By looking at the issue more closely, the research problem can be further divided into following sub questions:

“What is the current state of communications in LittleLives Inc.?”

“What factors are seen as important for developing effective team communication?”

“What communicative behaviors are identified as essential to a leader?”

It is also relevant to take into account some of the cultural aspects of communication when studying a multicultural team. By researching different ways to communicate efficiently, the team will gain access to the right tools and may thus grow to be successful also on a global scale.

Research method

The data for this study was collected from the LittleLives Inc. staff, including the founder and six team members in different teams located in Singapore and Malaysia by using a qualitative research method. As a method, qualitative research focuses on understanding and exploring the meaning that captures a certain aspect of the subject at hand. (Braun & Clarke 2013, 20) The objective of this thesis is not to produce generalizable information but to understand, describe and come up with a meaningful interpretation of the gathered data. (Kananen 2008, 24) A

qualitative research method was thus chosen to gain a better understanding of the importance of leadership communication to team communication as a whole. As this study focuses on communication as a phenomenon, the qualitative interview as a method also suits best for understanding the client company's staff's perceptions, experiences and insights from their points of view. (Lindlof & Taylor 2011, 5) Thus, based on these viewpoints, one is able to theorize the data into a hypothesis or an assumption on how the phenomenon functions. (Kananen 2015, 71)

The chosen team members will take part in a semi-structured interview that aims to map their insights and thoughts on the company's current state of both internal communications and leadership communication. All the participants are interviewed individually. To guarantee the richness of the gathered data, the sample consists of members that represent different roles in each team. This type of purposive, theoretical sampling aims to generate insight and in-depth understanding as well as to ensure a diversity of perspectives. (Braun & Clarke, 56) Without foreknowledge of the studied sample, the aim is to use saturation as a method to confirm the sufficiency of the gathered data. (Kananen 2008, 36) The saturation will thus be obtained when the interviews no longer provide new data, even if the sample size is relatively small. (Lindlof & Taylor 2011, 113, 117)

Due to the interviewees' geographical location, the interviews are conducted online by using the VoIP service Skype and a mobile recorder. The collected audio recordings are further transcribed orthographically, which implies that the focus is on spoken words and everything that is said will be transcribed. (Braun & Clarke, 162) This research however excludes any utterance as it is not seen as relevant information considering the study. Hence, only standard language is taken into consideration in the transcription process. (Kananen 2008, 80) The data is then systematically coded by using a complete coding method in accordance with the relevance of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 206-211) The codes are also marked on

the comment section on a Word file as bookmarks, which simplifies the interpretation process. (Kananen 2008, 89)

The data is analyzed by using a theoretical thematic analysis method. The aim is to identify certain themes and patterns of meaning to study the subjects discussed in the theory part. Thus, the objective is to find a solution to the research problem. (Braun & Clarke, 175) The concepts used in the analysis are thus drawn from the existing theory and classified into different themes. (Kananen 2008, 91) It is important that the data collection and analysis are concurrent, and thus from the researcher's point of view it needs to be crystal clear which particular pieces of information ought to be looked for in the data. (Kananen 2008, 38) All the participants are treated anonymously to ensure the confidentiality of the research, which also has an effect on the validity of the research. (Kananen 2008, 135)

Reliability and validity

Using a recorder as a tool for data collection enables access to the material, which makes it easier to check if the data is interpreted correctly or if it needs to be more in-depth. Being able to reexamine the data thus increases the reliability of the research. (Kananen 2008, 79, 125) As mentioned earlier, the gained data will be transcribed and afterwards analyzed with the assistance of existing theory of leadership communication. With accurate documentation also the transferability of the research increases. After the analysis has been made, the interviewees will go through the made conclusions to verify that the conclusions reflect their answers. This will thus effect on the validity of the research. (Kananen 2008, 126)

The validity is also considered in the research method. By using a qualitative research one is able to dig deeper into the views of team members and their thoughts on the subject. As this thesis studies communication and leadership as a singular phenomenon, an interview is the best way to reach the desired results.

(Kananen 2008, 126-127) Thus, purposive sampling aims to obtain a sense of generalization which can be linked to increase in reliability. (Silverman 2005, 304)

2.3 Objectives

This thesis explores the significance of leadership communication to team operation. Hence, the objective of this thesis is to find the means for building a successful team by gaining a deeper understanding of the current state of internal communications and by studying the effects of leadership communication in order for the team to develop as a whole. This thesis aims to integrate the research findings from the empirical study with the theoretical framework, which together will help to provide a foundation for the future development of communicative leadership in the client organization.

The theory of this thesis focuses on the different aspects of leadership, communication, motivation and multicultural teams. The subject is topical as multicultural teams are becoming more common especially in the global work field, where it is essential to work with people located in different geographical areas. Also in the client company, there is a need to develop online collaboration and communications between teams. Thus, special focus is given to the use of social technologies for online communication. As leadership communication as a concept is relatively broad, the subject was narrowed down to internal communications and online environments due to the case company's recent organizational change and the researcher's interest in the aspects of effective team communication.

The literature framework and the research results combined provide valuable information of the current state of communications for the team leader and thus enhance the organization's current communication policies. This research will also help the whole company to rethink their organizational structure and their ways

of communication, which in turn will enable the company to grow global in the future.

The following chapters 3 and 4 will cover the theoretical framework consisting of theories related to team leadership and internal communications with leadership communication in focus. Chapter 5 will then cover the results of the data collected through the interviews. The findings of the research will also be mirrored against the theories discovered in the literature review.

3 Leadership

3.1 What makes a good team leader?

Leadership is a process in which the leader shapes the future by guiding interaction and defining each member's purpose in the organization. (Humala 2015, 429) Without proper leadership skills, companies are unable to make use of the organization's whole potential. Nevertheless, management and leadership are not the same but they are in fact two sides of the same coin. In order for the company to succeed it is necessary that both of the sides are present. As Stephen Covey (1992) explains it in his book *Principle-Centered Leadership; Leadership deals with people – management deals with things*. (Passila 2009, 370-371) The role of a team leader thus withholds the ability to encourage group interaction, provide the team a source of enthusiasm as well as to overlook that the team's responsibilities are recognized and rewarded. (Trent 2004, 95)

As teams are an important part of the organization's design, developing understanding of how to enhance their success should be prioritized as an objective.

Many researchers have shown that team leaders have a direct effect on the team's success or failure, which highlights the importance of team leadership. (Trent 2004, 94) Thus, leadership can also be described as "the power to lead a team in a better direction". In another words, to lead a team to success and growth. The success of a team can be measured in increased sales, profits or production output, whereas growth can be seen as development of skills. Even though team members may have valuable skills, the ability to reach the set goals depends on the quality of leadership. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 41)

A good leader leads by example and sets the ideology that guides the whole team. It is also highly important that the staff feels that they are appreciated and listened to during the process. (Passila 2009, 371-372) Essentially, there are three elements that are required from a good team leader. First and foremost, the team leader needs to be able to set the direction for the team. Without clear direction including goals, values and objectives, the team will not be able to reach the desired results. The leader should also be able to implement and act accordingly when necessary. Additionally, it is essential for the leader to learn from its mistakes as well as successes. By identifying the key learning points, a great leader can improve the whole company's performance and make the team work better. The cycle of these three elements comprises the leadership model "VALue Model": V for vision and value, A for action, L for learning and ue for unlimited evolution. The focus should always be on sustainable development and the value model should be implemented as a team. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 41, 43) To be able to compete and survive in the global work field one must also recognize the elements of global leadership as well as how it works in practice. (Lewis 2006, 101)

3.2 Global team leadership

As many of the businesses around the world are becoming more globalized than ever, change has become inevitable. Especially Asian businesses are stepping out of the local markets to explore what is outside. Thus, the capacity for imagination is a powerful tool for building a successful future and developing new ways to grow. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 121-122)

The three waves of change; globalization, internetization and diversification have sculpted a very different world from what it was once upon a time. Thus, different forms of leadership, such as global leadership, are required to lead a team that consists of people with different cultural backgrounds. However, globalization has its advantages and disadvantages. Hence, it is essential to understand the team's strengths and weaknesses so that one is able to create a communication strategy to harness those strengths and minimize the weaknesses. Essentially, global leadership entails both global and local level of leadership and teams are formed based on skills and abilities regardless of their background. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 111, 115-116)

As many as there are nationalities there are also leadership styles. The most significant variations usually take place between continents. Yet, there are considerable differences within each continent as well. The concept of leadership has developed through history and is in connection with the specific society's organizational structure. The experiences we have, the geographical location, our appearance and the language we speak, among many other things combined create our beliefs and values that guide our needs and aspirations. Thus, also leadership styles and the ways we communicate are affected by these different factors, as seen on Figure 1 below. (Lewis 2006, 105-106; 108-109)

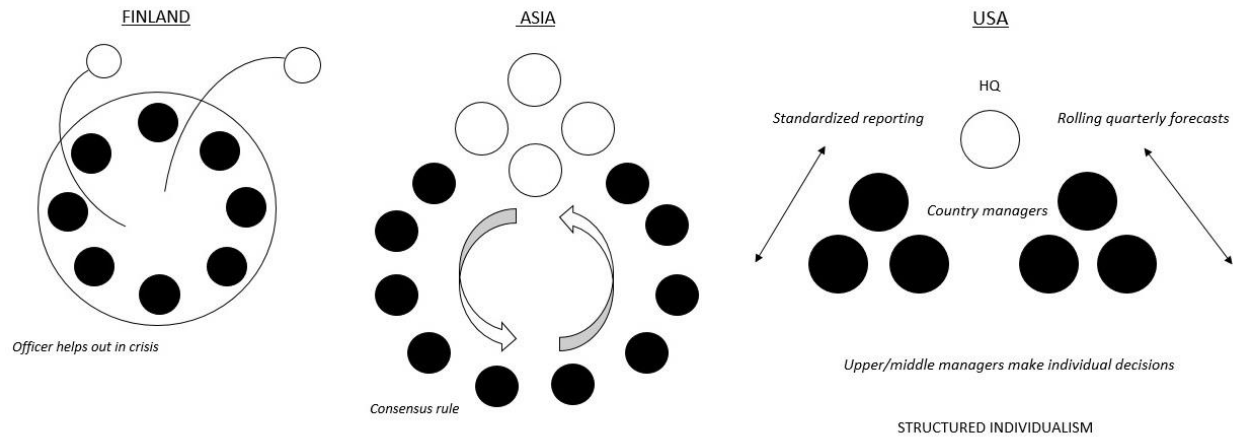


Figure 1. Leadership styles

Organizations are created by leaders and the leadership functions can be divided into two modes, the networking mode and the task-orientation mode. The networking mode for instance is concerned with the status of the leader, such as what is the chain of command, the leadership style, how motivated the employees are as well as what is the used language of leadership in order to achieve that status. The task-orientation mode on the other hand deals with tackling issues, formulating strategies, creating work ethic and deciding on the efficiency. The efficiency of a team has usually a lot to do with how tasks are distributed and communicated onwards, and how time is being used. (Lewis 2006, 110)

Essentially, communication of information is about sharing and interpretation. It is also largely determined by culture, and it creates cultural communality. (Åberg 2006, 85) No leader can lead alone. Thus teamwork should be heavily relied on to increase effectiveness, improve productivity and to utilize the whole organization's skills to reach desired goals. Working as a team also enables ideas to snowball and makes problem solving more effortless. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 5)

3.3 Cross-cultural leadership

Due to the diverse beliefs and values between different societies, it is inevitable that both the leadership of an organization as well as the leadership style are bound by culture. Authority can be based on education, wealth, achievement or even birthright, also referred to as ascription. Organizations are usually formed in a vertical, horizontal or in a matrix fashion that may also be affected by religious, philosophical or even governmental aspects. All in all, the fact is that no culture views the principles of authority, hierarchy or the aspired organizational structure the same as the other. (Lewis 2006, 110-111)

Corporate culture, on the other hand, bluntly describes the way things are done inside the company. It can be reinforced by using symbols, stories and routines. Additionally, culture provides a certain set of values that reflect the processes, choices made, as well as the behavior. In every successful company, there is a core ideology that functions like a cultural glue holding everything together. However, with ideology there come routines that may disturb innovative thinking and obstruct the development process. It may also lead to the resistance of new ideas thus lessening the competitive edge of the organization. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 211, 202) With growth, organizations also face the need to differentiate themselves into units based on e.g. product, market, geography, function or hierarchy. During this process it is essential that the leader is able to recognize the cultural consequences of the differentiation. To be able to build an effective organization, the various subcultures need to establish a common language as well as strive for common goals. (Schein 2010, 271)

Especially among Asian leaders, there are strong cultural values such as an excellent work ethic, mathematical and analytical skills as well as a profound sense of humility. Nonetheless, there are also a few cultural gaps that are displayed in the

form of acceptance of authority and hierarchy. Thus taking risks or engaging in constructive dialogue may be opposed within the work community. At worst, this may lead to an inadequate global mindset and understanding of diversity in international markets. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 207-208)

Multiculturalism as a topic is usually seen as challenging. In order to grow global, companies are required to understand and embrace different norms, make their business appealing to foreign markets as well as enable a multicultural team to work well together. The multicultural employees' backgrounds and beliefs are a part of their national culture which differs from the corporate culture point of view. The organizational culture may, however, be the reason why people join the company in the first place. Corporate culture can be divided into three levels. The first is the surface level that includes everything that is visible such as the brand, symbols and structures. Then comes the mid-level that is guided by values and beliefs. Lastly, there is the deep level that encompasses the basic assumptions on how the organization works. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 210-211)

National culture has long been analyzed by Hofstede (2003) as well as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) among many others. All of these researchers suggest that cultures can be analyzed through different dimensions. However, some critics have differing opinions of the relevance of cultural dimensions in today's more globalized world. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the significance of ethnicity as it has become clear that not everyone can be led in the same way. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 211) World can be observed through one lenses, but it is more efficient to change those lenses every once in a while to gain new viewpoints. A part of cultural competence is the ability to see one's own culture through the eyes of an outsider. (Karhu, Salo-Lee, Sipilä, Selänne, Söderlund, Uimonen & Yli-Kokko 2005, 302)

The so called multicultural lens becomes useful when considering both business strategies and HR strategies. In order to attract diverse talent worldwide, one also has to appeal to a wide audience. The key is to engage and motivate regardless of one's background. Leadership skills will thus be shaped by former experiences, travels, open mindset as well as adaptive approach to learning. Leading multicultural teams has its challenges and they have a greater risk of running into misunderstandings or other conflicts. Usually challenges are created due to different geographical locations and time zones. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 212-213)

According to Adler (1991) multicultural teams may, however, have more potential for increased productivity in comparison to homogeneous groups. However, they bear more risks due to the difficulties seeing and understanding things eye to eye. Diversity may make reaching an agreement more difficult as different cultures also communicate differently. (Adler 1991, 128-129) At worst, distance, time and cultural differences may lead to mistrust within dispersed teams. Collective communication competence may also suffer from negative humor, debating or even communicating boredom whereas spending time together, talking about tasks and negotiating meaning are foundational for establishing collective communication competence. (Hedman & Valo 2015, 1014) Thus, it is essential to build good communication as well as use different ways to get the message across. Participation needs to be highly encouraged and performance shall be managed. However, open-mindedness is what matters the most, and leaders may need to be prepared to set aside their previous managerial methods. (Ulrich & Sutton 2011, 212-213)

These types of multicultural task forces are also known as collaborations. The collaborators may never meet each other face to face or they may be geographically dispersed. Thus, their primary means for staying in contact can solely rely on communication technology. The participants in these kinds of collaborations may feel that they share a common purpose, yet they may not view themselves as a team. This proposes a challenge for the team leader to come up with a solution

on how to build trust and an open communication between the team members. (Schein 2010, 385-386) Hence, it is likely that a team with geographically dispersed members will adopt strategies and policies that differ from teams that are collocated. (Trent 2004, 95)

3.4 Leading from a distance

Leadership in a virtual work environment can be defined as a social interaction process which strongly manages collaborative work. It enables flexible and creative way to work but as a downside it may include breaks in communication and create a sense of distance and separation from other team members. (Humala 2015, 427)

Virtual team leadership is part of the change that is currently taking place and replacing the traditional operations model that typically is associated with manufacturing industry and leading from one place. As organizations start to globalize and the staff is scattered around the world, online work is the only and usually the most efficient way to work. Virtual leadership should primarily be seen as an opportunity rather than a necessary evil. As opposed to what is expected, leading online requires more diverse leadership than a regular face to face cooperation. Essentially, it all comes down to the ability to inspire and motivate the team to work together towards a common goal. It is also equally important that the division of tasks and documentation processes are agreed upon beforehand. In global teams, it is also important to take cultural differences and different communication styles into account. Online leadership calls for distribution of authority and responsibilities within a team, which requires an open exchange of information and the opportunity to be involved and have an influence on the team. (Juholin 2008, 190, 217)

Leaders also face the need to reach out and check in on the team's progress more frequently in a virtual environment. (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 48) Succinctly, compared to other teams, virtual team members require additional hand holding and specific instructions, as well as opportunities to express any uncertainties they may feel. (Kurtzberg 2014, 6) Personal connections build trust in relationships and require careful, intended planning in order to be established and maintained. That is why creating a sense of unity and wholeness is often seen as the most challenging part of online team leadership. (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 48-49)

Virtual work can also be referred to as people who work in geographically dispersed teams by using information and communication technology as their main tools for work. (Humala 2015, 426) According to The Nemertes Research Group, during the past five years alone, there has been approximately an 800 percent increase in virtual workers. (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 48) The possibility of sharing information through ICTs has redefined today's organizations, as members that are separated by time and space can easily work together in virtual teams. (Ziek & Smulowitz 2012, 106) Nevertheless, there are also many leaders that look over dispersed teams even within the same culture and time zone. This essentially entails working in a distributed environment, having staff in different client sites as well as teleworking. (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 47) All in all, most jobs require some level of virtual work in addition to a more traditional interaction. (Kurtzberg 2014, 2-3)

Leading a virtual team can be quite similar to leading a traditional team that usually works in an office. Organizing of tasks, guidance, evaluation and rewarding are equally important to virtual teams' leadership. However, what differentiates a virtual team from a traditional one is the leadership style. When leading a virtual team, it is not concerned with how well one can give orders or supervise the per-

formance, but how well one can co-operate with the team. Motivating and inspiring as well as creating positive energy within the whole organization thus becomes an even more important part of the leader's daily operation than usual. When the whole team plays by the same pre-agreed rules and works together in good spirit, misconceptions can be avoided. (Ojala & Pöysti 2008, 128)

Many different studies show that planning the timeline of a virtual team from beginning to the end is necessary in order for it to work. (Vartiainen, Kokko & Hakonen 2004) Studies suggest that after assembling the team, it is important that a kick-off meeting is being held so that the team members can get to know each other. In the meeting, the members then agree on the different roles and responsibilities, and come up with the right tools for the job. When working together on a project, the team will also need to agree on when it is going to end. (Ojala & Pöysti 2008, 129)

As working from a distance has become more and more common, being online has evolved into a way of life. Thus, also the line between work and leisure has slightly faded. Working from the comfort of one's own home, whether whole time or partially, sounds tempting to many but has also its downsides. Some may find the distinction between work and spare time to be blurry which may cause unwanted stress and anxiety. (Juholin 2008, 45) Hence, the satisfaction towards working conditions vary between virtual workers. In addition to the lack of face to face contact, many view the time zone differences as the main challenge in virtual work as it hinders the ability to collaborate with others in real time. Thus it may result in missed deadlines and other work related issues. (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 48)

Especially in teams that collaborate online, having a clear vision of the big picture and specific goals is important. Thus, communication of goals is essential. Having regular virtual meetings helps with the process. However, anything routine may

result in lack of interest. So even though it is important for the functionality of the team to have fixed check-ups, they can be ineffective without the attention of the attendees. Hence, it is essential to pay attention to how the issues are being communicated. (Kurtzberg 2014, 83, 151)

4 Communication

4.1 Internal communications

“The greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished” (Smith & Kanki 2001, 95).

Communication can be described as an on-going process by which people formulate their understanding as well as how they act when collaborating with each other. (Hedman & Valo 2015, 1013) Essentially, the employer-employee relationship forms the basis for all internal communications network. Till this day, regularly carried out meetings are seen as the most effective form of communication. (Åberg 2006, 108) Formal communication such as large meetings and memos as well as the informal day to day communication are vital for organizations' success. It is also essential that the employees receive timely, transparent information and feel entitled to ask questions themselves. (Workforce 2015, 41)

One of the best channels to accomplish effective interaction is through development discussions held between a team leader and an employee. (Aarnikoivu 2011, 11). In brief, these meetings consist of discussions regarding all daily matters such as delegation of tasks, organization, prioritization, challenges faced and how to solve them, as well as planning and developing. (Karhu et al. 2005, 81). At best, development discussions improve job performance and increase employee

engagement and wellbeing at work. Also, when conducted successfully, development discussions enable new innovations and ideas for development in terms of operation. However, if for some reason the discussion falls through it can result in a negative effect on the employee's contribution and engagement, in addition to waste of time. In many organizations this is the case as the benefits are not fully concretized. Alternatively, development discussions can also be held as a group. (Aarnikoivu 2011, 11, 120)

However, most of the operative information is passed vertically from one employee to another or through grapevine. Nowadays also online networks have replaced some of the traditional communication methods whilst complementing the still existing channels of communication. (Åberg 2006, 108-109) Nonetheless, employees who depend first and foremost on grapevine often come to very different understanding than those who rely on formal network for more detailed information. (Clampitt 2010, 14)

Without proper leadership of internal communications, a team cannot accomplish tasks with efficiency, let alone grow as an organization. To learn how to manage internal relationships and develop communication can only be done by working together on assigned tasks. All in all, most communication breakdowns are often a result of misconception. People may not be aware that what they assume is totally different from what the other person is suggesting. (Schein 2010, 93-95) As communication also contributes to obtaining goals and gaining results, it is essential to learn the different semantics in order to create a common language and build a functional communication system. (Åberg 2006, 96)

When asked to list the most important skills that a leader must possess, most often the answer that the CEO's around the world give includes good communication skills. Based on the sheer amount of time spent on communicating on a daily

basis explicates the necessity to master leadership communication. (Barret 2006, 385)

Essentially, communication skills can be divided into four divisions. First, one must be able to express their thoughts and opinions, both orally and in writing. This includes also the capability of having discussions and dialogues in different forms. Then comes the relationships with other people, organizations and networks, such as colleagues or customers. In third place is the ability to make good use of phone, email and internet as well as other digital platforms at work in order to reach goals. Lastly, as the fourth division of communication skills comes the strategy. Strategy can be seen as a form of communication that sums up all the previously mentioned divisions and implies the way one makes use of these skills in different settings. (Juholin 2008, 30-31) A work community can thus decide for themselves how they want the communication to support team operation. All these aspects combined form a result oriented communication that is crucial for accomplishing goals. Substantially, there is a direct link between satisfaction towards communication and motivation. The more satisfied the staff is with communication, the more motivated they will be. Undoubtedly, this highlights also the leader's role in communication. (Åberg 2006, 97, 110)

Communication is a big part of leadership and the adopted communication skills play an important role in running the organization efficiently. Communication has become a more visible part of the organization and a good leader is expected to possess the ability to lead people. This means that the leader should be able to express even the most complicated questions in a simple way, motivate and strengthen the employees' commitment. (Juholin 2008, 186, 188-189) Leadership communication in a nutshell can be seen as a part of leadership that emphasizes the ability to interpret, generate and share the required information as well as to set the direction, organize, supervise and motivate. Additionally, communality

and interaction are seen as a vital part of leadership communication. (Åberg 2006, 93)

Leaders that integrate strategy in terms of communication and direction are comparably more successful than the leaders who do not. All globally focused world-class organizations have a common belief in vision and shared values with a specific mindset. That specific mindset is based on the ideology that there are no bosses, only leaders that people are eager to follow, and who possess the ability to create a community that people want to belong to. As Schein (2006) puts it, leaders cannot choose whether or not to communicate. However, they can decide how much they manage what to communicate. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 1, 3)

Compared to other team members, the leader has also more responsibility when it comes to exchanging and processing information. In this case, responsibility refers to the ability to understand the meaning of visible and silent knowledge to others, and how to communicate that information onwards. The position and tasks at hand give in many ways a cutting edge for the leader. In many cases, the leader has firsthand knowledge and vision that others don't. A part of that knowledge is silent information that is triggered from discussions and personal deliberation. (Juholin 2008, 92, 96)

All in all, leadership communication relies heavily on the ability to present a positive image, inside and outside the organization. Both image and charisma are aspects that can be used to describe leaders. Thus attaining a positive combination of these two factors should be a priority for leaders that wish to master leadership communication. According to an article in Harvard Business Review, Cialdini (2001) argues that "no leader can succeed without mastering the art of persuasion". Thus it is essential for a leader to understand what motivates its audience to act and listen, which also highlights the importance of emotional intelligence. At worst, deficiency of emotional intelligence may lead to misunderstandings in

communication, which in turn can cause problems in the corporate culture. (Barret 2006, 387-390)

Substantially, there are six factors that constitute the staples of internal communications and communality. (Juholin 2008, 63)

All critical matters are handled through interactive discussion with the team. It is crucial that everyone understands the subject at hand, even if all may not agree on the matter.

Up-to-date information is shared with the affected parties. Additionally, everyone should be aware of their role and responsibilities in producing, refining and sharing information.

The atmosphere is relaxed and informal in a way that everyone dares to speak up and express their thoughts and views as well as to ask and question.

Taking part and influencing is open for everyone regarding the whole organization's issues, big or small.

The whole community contributes to learning together and sharing knowledge, involving seamless communication as well as mutual and ongoing feedback.

The organization's reputation is part of the job. Each employee presents the organization through their actions and what they reflect on to the environment.

4.2 Team communication

As team work is guided by vision, communicating a clear vision ought to be emphasized. Operating in flexible and mixed teams requires effective and coordinative communication, delegation, functional meetings as well as making use of information networks. In addition to operative information, team needs to be aware of all other general information in order to look over the progress of their work. Many times teams face challenges such as lack of synergy or communality within the team. According to a leader theory created by Åberg (2006), teams would benefit from a so called "*joy leader*". Communication wise it would thus call for good people and interaction skills, diplomacy as well as negotiation skills and creative techniques. Tools such as mind maps, think tanks or action lists would thus be boosting for creativity and productivity of team work. (Åberg 2006, 197-198)

As individual knowledge workers are also shifting towards a more team oriented model, team-based productivity has become an important part of the whole team operation. It emphasizes the importance of promoting shared understanding between co-workers and establishing a common communication style. Enabling an environment where people understand each other helps the team to improve their communication, build trust-relationships and eventually become more productive. Every team member has an individual communication style that characterizes the way one interacts with each other. The four essential types are called: director, encourager, facilitator and tracker. (Workforce 2015, 40)

The director type encompasses authority and control, and talks only about relevant matters in a very direct sense. Thus, interaction with persons of this type is really factual and emotionless. An encourager, on the other hand, is more "fun" and sometimes exaggerates when making a point. These types of communicators also prefer to work with people who share their enthusiasm. Then again, with facilitators, it is all about harmony and security. A facilitator type is often reserved yet friendly and speaks in gentle tones. They listen carefully when others talk and

expect similar appreciation from their co-workers. Last, there is the tracker type that focuses on details and makes effort to understand the received information. This type will thus also pass the information onwards in detail and strive to be understood with clarity. The more closely these core values are aligned with the team, the more likely they will usually be engaged. Engaged and collaborative teams that work together for achieving the same goals are also commonly more innovative, driven and productive. It also enables a pleasant work environment, which in turn is very important for engagement and retention. (Workforce 2015, 40)

According to researcher (Campion 1996), there is a positive correlation between employee satisfaction and the amount of interaction and communication within teams. When studying the nature of teams and their core competencies, the ability to communicate group goals, resolve issues and build consensus among team members is emphasized. Thus, it is essential for the team leader to possess effective resolution skills as well as communication capabilities. A willingness to communicate, openness and development of relationships are extremely beneficial for the team. Openness in terms of communication will thus also enable the team members to evaluate more accurately on their own behavior and its effects on team processes, as well as their attitudes towards other members' behavior. (Jeanquart Miles & Mangold 2002, 114-115)

Eventually, this will improve the whole team's well-being. Factors such as transparency, mindfulness and synergy all contribute to active collaboration. Transparency occurs when the participants are equally aware of the existing agenda and motivations within the team. Mindful team members further display a deeper understanding of the concerns existing in the team. Synergy is thus achieved when a team comes up with creative alternatives through interaction. In conclusion, it can be said that all these factors are important to most teams in order to attain optimal effectiveness. (Jeanquart Miles & Mangold 2002, 114-115)

The success factors of a synergistic team can be listed down to nine different factors. (Åberg 2006, 198-199)

- *Supportive leader*
- *Active employee*
- *Positive image*
- *Genuine interaction*
- *Constructive atmosphere*
- *The liberty to influence*
- *Clear comprehension of goals*
- *Cooperative environment*
- *Transparent communication*

All in all, the role of effective leadership is important from every aspect of communication. A leader creates the base for communication and leads by example. In order to be effective, the communication should also lead to results. The desire to make creative solutions and be supportive of the team leader increases only after the suggestions are being taken seriously and one can see the final results. Cooperative environment leads more likely to productiveness than a strict hierarchy. (Åberg 2006, 200)

One of the most important responsibilities of a team leader is to coordinate the collaboration and the use of resources between teams. It is substantial to motivate the teams to work for the benefit of the whole organization instead of operating in isolation. Thus, it is the team leader's duty to organize the meetings between teams, and identify the needs and expectations of both teams. (Spiik 2004, 210-211) Essentially, a team is functional when comprises members who complement each other to achieve common goals. Teamwork skills ought to be developed constantly as these skills do not come naturally to most people. In addition

to effective teamwork and interpersonal communication, some companies are also promoting diversity in their teams in order to gain a competitive edge as well as to boost creativity and innovation. In theory, the more diverse a team is the more creative and productive it can be. (Winter, Waner & Neal-Mansfield 2008, 265-266)

4.3 Online communication

The new technology has revolutionized the way people operate by enabling interaction, cooperation and sharing as well as creating new information by replacing the old ways with various easy to use methods. Today's work, organizations and staff call for communality, which ought to be accomplished without physical presence and interaction. Communication is said to be the richer the more face to face interaction it involves. Based on this assumption, one could think that the most effective communication can be achieved only by having a face to face discussion in the same space. Nonetheless, the same results can be achieved through online networks if using the latest and most sophisticated technology. (Juholin 2013, 212)

When the traditional eye to eye discussion is not possible, it creates a need for alternative methods. All in all, virtual meetings have many benefits. It is an efficient way to summon all team members together at the same time and there is no need to travel, which saves both time and expenses. In virtual meetings all discussed matters are documented simultaneously, which is beneficial also for the operation. However, as the whole range of communication tools are not in use, the risk of misunderstandings and –interpretations increases. On the other hand, if there is a trusting atmosphere within a team, all matters can be discussed along the way to ensure that all is understood correctly. (Juholin 2008, 257, 262-263)

Communication that uses communication technology is also known as mediated communication. (Åberg 2006, 91) All teams that collaborate online face the need to overcome certain communication barriers at some point of their life cycle in order to prevail. (Ziek & Smulowitz 2012, 106) Consequently, the modern communication technology has changed the way we work. Communication technologies consist of all the tools that are being used to communicate, such as email, blogs, instant messengers and mobile communication networks. Online based cooperation platforms and environments are gradually replacing the traditional workspace and becoming a common place for individual and team work. Virtual meetings in particular have become increasingly popular among international organizations and projects. Online teams represent a novel communication culture where the focus is on interactive discussion and involvement as many people are able to participate to a meeting regardless of their current location. Online platforms create endless opportunities for leadership with the right attitude and skill set. However, virtual meetings do not fully replace a traditional face to face interaction as it lacks in nonverbal communication. Additionally, on some occasions, the team members have never met and do not know each other. This may cause issues in trust and thus the members may be reluctant to express their thoughts. (Juholin 2008, 74, 97)

4.4 The power of motivation

As productivity is a function of motivation and abilities, motivational communication can be seen as one of the most important part of leadership communication. Motivational communication requires careful preparation from the leader's side. It is essential that one knows exactly what the desired result is. Thus it links to the individual's and the whole team's goals, relationships between team mates

and the effort to change attitudes or behaviors. It is also important to recognize the difference between a direct and indirect motivation. Hence, in a direct motivation, action satisfies a certain need whereas in indirect motivation action satisfies a certain goal at a certain phase, which eventually leads to satisfying the ultimate need. Thus the link between motivation and needs should be utilized.

(Åberg 2006, 162-163, 29)

Interaction is also extremely important when it comes to the motivational communication. Only through interaction one is able to discover the individual motivation factors, whether it is tangible or intangible factors, reward or punishment, or even hidden motives. It also enables commitment if the goals are communicated clearly and they are perceived as meaningful and important. However, communication does not have a direct impact on commitment as it is always a matter of personal conviction. Thus through effective leadership communication, one can only create a positive ground and conditions for commitment. (Åberg 2006, 163-164)

In many instances, work is also seen as a part of one's identity. Self-actualization is one of the work's basic qualities and the feeling of success is essential when it comes to being satisfied with one's input. The need to get feedback is also crucial as the lack of it may rise feelings of inadequacy and frustration. The joy of work on the other hand is attained by going beyond the customer's and one's own expectations. Both of these aspects are thus relevant when it comes to employee commitment. Feedback is also a tool that gives motivation, cheer and new ideas. On the other hand, negative feedback may be perceived as discouraging. Thus the way to provide it requires careful consideration. Nevertheless, feedback is essential to development and growth, and sometimes criticism is in order. Simply flattering one another does not help with the process. (Juholin 2008, 38-39, 245)

However, negative critique should always be given in a constructive spirit. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, so the solution is not to look into who did what wrong. Instead, the situation should be solved by figuring out what to do differently in the future to avoid the same negative outcome. Giving feedback is always the leader's responsibility. To receive an honest answer one must also ensure that the message is understood correctly by giving concrete feedback. (Åberg 2006, 162) In order to sustain a positive employer-employee relationship it is important to both give and receive feedback. Essentially, feedback is a prerequisite for development and thus it is also an integral part of a development discussion. (Aarnikoivu 2011, 147)

Often leaders who are active at providing both formal and informal feedback demonstrate specific characteristics. They place importance on individuality, objectivity and timing of feedback, and avoid emotions of any kind. If the feedback is negative, the focus will be on the issue, problem or behavior rather than the individual itself. Hence, feedback serves solely as means for correcting a problem or improving the team's performance on a group or individual level. This ideology is based on trust-based feedback process, which focuses on five fundamental principles. In addition to focusing solely on the issue, the process should also seek to maintain the self-esteem of those receiving the feedback whilst maintaining constructive relationships among the concerned parties. In a way, the feedback process also helps to strengthen the relationship between a leader and a team member. Additionally, the trust-based feedback process emphasizes the team leader's role in taking an initiative to solve the issue in case as well as lead by example. (Trent 2004, 97)

Sense of community plays also an important role in developing functional team dynamics. Open discussion and the opportunity to express opinions gives the employee a feeling of acknowledgement and appreciation which in turn strengthens the communality within a team. It can also be seen as a means to creativity and

innovative thinking, as in an energizing and inspiring organization, one is more inclined to share their ideas. An energizing work community can only be built on a base comprised of effective communication, common culture, seamless exchange of information and a possibility to take part in decision making in a team. (Juholin 2008, 48, 60)

A high value is thus placed on the communication style of a team leader as it may provide an open field on which the team members can freely express their opinions. A supportive communication style is also more likely to advance creative thinking and increase individual motivation when compared to a more controlling communication style. (Thacker 1997, 146) The level of motivation also varies when one is told to do something as oppose to when one decides to do something that they come up with on their own. Hence, being creative increases motivation when compared to just following instructions. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 68)

It can also be hard to motivate a team to take action by using only numbers and logic. By presenting goals as quotas may result in lack of motivation as the team may feel that they are doing the work just because they are instructed to do so. Instead, they need something that inspires them and encourages them to use their imagination. All in all, people have different factors for motivation. Thus it is essential to know what motivates each team member. According to the Herzberg theory, there are two types of motivational factors, hygienic factors and motivational factors. The hygienic factors comprise of all the things that are seen as dissatisfying if not fulfilled, such as a proper salary or work conditions, whereas the motivational factors are the ones that are seen as satisfying when fulfilled, like achievement and recognition. However, a person's motivation rarely rises in proportion to a higher salary or better work conditions. Even though the hygienic factors are important, the motivational factors are the most motivating to an individual and thus they should be paid more attention to. By feeling a sense of accomplishment, one is more likely to try as hard the next time to be successful.

Giving responsibility also makes the job more interesting, which is a great motivator for many. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 53-54, 62-64)

5 Results

This chapter presents the results from the data that was gathered through semi-constructed interviews. The data is thus divided into different themes based on the findings of the research. The interviewees represent different roles in the team and departments within the organization. The results are presented by reflecting them to the theoretical framework discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

5.1 Current state of communication

Communication channels

Within the organization, there are many different communication channels in use. A big part of the daily communication is done face to face in the office or over the phone. In addition to the traditional e-mail, many different online channels are also being used to discuss all daily matters among team mates. Most of the respondents, however, prefer face to face communication due to its effectiveness when in need of problem solving.

--Face to face communication is definitely the most effective because you get instant, like, feedback for your questions or concerns--

--I think face to face is much faster. It's like the fastest way of communication, even faster than instant messaging. You can get to have a lot of your questions cleared in the most direct way possible--

When comparing face to face interaction to other means of communication, most of the respondents consider face to face as superior in terms of getting the message across correctly. It is also perceived equally important that the tone of the message is understood accurately. This is in line with Juholin's view presented in chapter 4.3, in which she points out the risk of an increase in misunderstandings when lacking in nonverbal communication. (Juholin 2008, 263)

--Face to face decrease misunderstandings – compared to messaging it's much more open, more stable communication—

--Being able to ensure that the tone of the message gets across [seen as a challenge]--

--Sometimes when we write things, it's just facts, right. But when you do like a face to face and when you have more close relationship with the person, it's much easier to explain and get things done. So that's a bit of a challenge there--

The face to face interaction is highly valued by the respondents as it is seen as the easiest way to exchange information. An interviewee also points out the importance of two way communication on several occasions.

--Whenever we need something, we just ask – so there is a lot of two way communication here--

However, in addition to the communication that takes place in the office, a lot of communication is carried through multiple online channels. Apart from email, the most commonly used tools are the instant messenger service *WhatsApp*, a cloud based team collaboration tool *Slack* and a project management application *Asana* that is used for tracking tasks and documentation. Some also communicate

through a video conference by *Skype*. For a distance worker, communicating online is not just an option but a necessity.

--For me most of the time I won't be around the office, so I depend a lot on emails and WhatsApp and calls to actually communicate with them [team mates]—

--Just emails and probably WhatsApp [when asked about the online tools in use]. I do Skype meetings with the Malaysia team if I'm in Singapore for the week--

--Most of the communication is done within the office or through emails. So if it's through Skype like in this occasion, it's rarely --

The variety of different messaging tools divides opinions among team members. The traditional email is perceived as an effective communication tool by many. However, some regard for example *WhatsApp* as the most effective channel for “on the fly” messaging whereas some prefer *Slack* to be used for communication with the team.

--On the fly kind of messaging we use WhatsApp. We tried slack but somehow the product team loved Slack but the people team prefers WhatsApp--

--I find email actually quite effective – to me it's quite straightforward--

Online communication is also seen as more problematic when compared to face to face communication.

--There was once this incident where both of us kind of like forwarded the same email on to another member of our team, so we kind of just like clashed with each other. So I think communication is important since that

we make sure we don't repeat whatever task that the other team member has already done--

--In our own internal teams we communicate a lot more frequently online whereas between teams not as frequently though as we tend to do in weekly meetings or maybe face to face--

--Sometimes in an email when I am unsure if the person understands where I'm coming from, I will just do a clarification, so I'm just like "do you know what I'm saying"—

Meetings

In both teams, meetings are conducted every Monday. During these meetings the teams will go through weekly tasks, goals and issues as well as planning related to product development. On some occasions, the product team may have several meetings per week for planning e.g. roadmap for a product that is going to be released.

--Sometimes on certain weeks then we have like two or three meetings a week--

--Every two weeks we do kind of like planning to make sure that our last release is fine, our next release is, it's well planned--

In addition to weekly meetings, shorter daily meetings are held every morning for about 5-10 minutes to discuss the day's schedule and if there are any problems that need to be solved as first thing in the morning. Morning meetings also serve as a good kick start for the work day.

--We sort of have a twofold approach where the big issues we log them and the smaller day to day problems that we face – we tend to have short meetings just to work things out--

--I also quite like short meetings where we discuss smaller problems that we face on a daily basis--

--Every morning like a stand up meeting for about like five, ten minutes just among the product team members to ensure what task are you working on today, you're on track to meet our target for this release, so that's helpful because it gets everyone kind of like pumped up for the day.

Frequent one on one meetings are also held between the leader and each team member twice a year. The one on one's are seen as the most effective communication channel as it enables open discussion and allows both parties to give and receive feedback. From the leader's point of view, the one on one meetings are essential for understanding what is happening "on the ground"

--As much as we see each other, like almost every day, but when you have like a one on one session, that's where you can really dig up the information about what they're facing, what rewards them, meaning that what gets them up you know every day – and where they face problems--

--I think it helps you to put to words certain feelings that you have which maybe otherwise you didn't know where to file them--

--The one on one's are pretty essential--

--Initially, the one on one meetings are good because I feel that they allow us to open up, like it improves communication. Not purely because of the exchange of information but also because it opens up the channel--

--She [team leader] will get feedback from us and we give feedback to her based on what we've been working so far – so that's very useful--

One on one meetings are central also for communication of goals and tackling issues. Additionally they are seen as essential for building unity and team spirit.

--They actually give feedback based on our performance – how we can better improve ourselves, what will be the goal that they have for us for the next few months or the next year and that kind of thing--

--To understand from us like – are we happy here or if we're not happy what are the problems that we face--

--It's like again two way, so – they will work on it to see how to get better, you know, build the team and bond--

In addition to above mentioned communication channels is the documentation of all matters that are being discussed during meetings. This includes the weekly meeting minutes that are communicated onwards via email and different tasks. Many find the *Asana* system useful for keeping track of tasks as it is available for everyone to read and comment on.

--That follow through I think is very important to have a system for – If you send out an email you cannot make sure people read it and know the task but in the system you can know that someone's working on it--

--We do have a task tracking system where we document all issues that we discussed. And I feel that this works quite well cause then we – tend not to discuss the same issues over and over again--

However, due to the fact that new systems have been introduced previously, one of the respondents feels a lack of consistency in the process as one needs to familiarize with a new tool on a regular basis.

--We do keep track of everything that has been communicated by the different departments during the meetings. But probably like over the years we have tried different type of a structure within the company. So there is probably a lack of like consistence of process, as we always try different type of approach--

The diversity of different tools also causes confusion among team members if they are uncertain of which tool is used for what purpose. This creates a challenge and would require additional training whenever new tool is introduced to the team.

--I think online some of the challenges I face include, say, too many tools available. So we have WhatsApp, we have email, we have Asana which we use for tracking tasks, we have some other team mates – use slack, so because of that we have too many channels and that sometimes other, rest of the team, may be hesitant to use certain tools—

--It's a lot of devices--

--One of the major challenges [is] like finding the right set of tools to use for communication and everybody understanding what each tool is for and how to use it properly--

When asked about their communication style, almost all of the respondents prefer directness when discussing work related issues.

--I tend to be a lot more factual, a lot more direct – usually I try to be as rational as possible—

--It depends on who I'm talking to – if there is someone who actually understands where I'm coming from, I can be a bit more direct--

5.2 Communication of goals

An effective integration of strategy and goals as part of communications often equals successful leadership. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 1) Also in the client company, goals are viewed as essential in terms of motivation as well as the overall job function. In addition to meetings, goals are communicated through presentation or via email. However, email is sometimes seen as ineffective as there is always the possibility that the message does not get acknowledged by the recipients.

--Basically it's [strategy] communicated through like a presentation and then – we are shown like slides of what needs to be done [and] who is in charge of doing what--

--I feel that it's communicated through our products and even the team, the people and all--

--Sometimes the message gets lost along the way because we just get carried away with what's happening on day to day--

Like in many other organizations, the current goals of the client company can be divided into short term and long term goals. When it comes to teams that also collaborate online, it is imperative to have a clear vision of the bigger picture and

specific goals (Kurtzberg 2014, 83.) Also in this case, the overall long term vision of the company is clear for all of the respondents and serves as a motivator to reach desired results. However, some respondents raised out the issue of clarity when it comes to short term goals.

--I think they're [goals] communicated quite well right now in terms of long term vision, but sometimes maybe in the short term it's not as clearly conveyed--

An interviewee also mentioned that it can feel demotivating if the goals are repeated on a regular basis even if they are not achieved as planned. This can be linked to the need for setting realistic goals instead of setting the objectives too high. Especially the timeline of the short term plan was sometimes perceived as unrealistic.

--Maybe over period of time -- if we still can't reach that certain, like, the goal that the company has set out to achieve, right -- if it's repeated too many times then we wouldn't feel motivated anymore--

--I think we have to set realistic goals -- meeting those goals and set the next step, rather than setting a goal -- something that we can never achieve--

--I think probably just like the timeline, which might really not be realistic--

--We have set some goals, but being able to achieve it again is sometimes a bit hard to engage at this stage -- to me I think is still probably a bit unsure whether we can achieve it--

However, the vagueness of short term goals is also seen as a positive aspect when considering the short term strategy. It was perceived as an enabler to adjust the strategy when faced with a roadblock.

--I guess mostly because we're a small company and, so because of that we want to be free to decide how we wish to reach our goals – we try not to be too focused on defining various tricks or goals in the short term--

--We do have goals but I would say yea it's not as clear sometimes. But that actually is one of our strengths I feel, because it allows us to take a different path when we feel that we should--

During the interviews, the respondents were also asked about other communicative behaviors that they wish a team leader to possess. What was seen as the most important factor was decisiveness when it comes to making choices. Also the clarity of role in the team and tasks given were seen as essential to effective and motivating leadership communication.

--A leader who is very clear on what they want – when it comes to making decisions they're usually quite clear on their choices. So even though you may see they make mistakes sometimes, but they consistently are very decisive, I prefer that style. At the same time obviously they're not overly assertive--

--To understand like maybe from my superior what do you need from me and then when I like give you a report, I need to – also give a correct and concise report to you and – whatever information that you need--

From the leader's point of view, communicating goals was viewed as essential both from the leader's and the team's end. A small team was seen as a community where the focus was on enabling open discussion where also problems can be

raised without hesitation. However, the size of the team was seen as a crucial factor for successfully conducting effective communication.

--Goals are important – an overall vision that we are trying to get to here. And also – to be able to tell them that not to worry, we’re going to all work on this together--

--Right now getting a clear update on how we’re progressing in terms of goals, that has been very, very important and useful--

--When I do the one on one’s, I try to kind of figure out what’s the problem – or if they face any roadblocks, are they able to come to me and say and I can help them solve it--

--I think in a small team it’s still quite possible. I’m not sure what would happen if the team grows a lot bigger--

In addition to the weekly check-ups, like a Monday morning report, presentation and e-mail, goals have also recently been made visible by using an iMac screen in the office. It is seen as increasing the visibility of goals as the staff is able to see them flashing by via slides. It is also considered helpful in measuring progress more systematically. As discussed in chapter 4.1., the ability to make good use of phone, email and the Internet as well as other digital platforms at work is considered essential in order to reach the goals. (Juholin 2008, 30-31)

5.3 Transparency

One of the issues that came out during the interviews was the importance of transparency of information. As discussed previously, it is essential that employ-

ees receive transparent information and feel entitled to ask questions when needed. (Workforce 2015, 41) However, the exchange of information between team members was sometimes seen as challenging. Insufficient briefing may thus create a sense of not being in the loop which can cause frustration as people are not aware of how to operate. This is also in line with the theory of different success factors of effective team. (Åberg 2006, 198-199) Without sufficient exchange of information the effectiveness of team decreases.

--I feel that information should always be as transparent as possible – and there shouldn't be any obstruction to information. So for example somebody who's maybe a junior should never have to question his actions as to whether or not he should voice out on anything at all--

--In the beginning when I joined I felt that certain information was kept from certain people or sometimes even misinformation was being transmitted within the company. But now I think we've tried our best to work those issues out--

--I think one of the reasons why there was some issues in the beginning was – we weren't aware of how things worked – everybody had their own idea of how people should work or how people should go about doing their business--

However, the issue has been acknowledged by the team leader and actions have been taken to solve the issue and thus provide a more transparent environment as well as more open interaction.

--I think collectively as a team, she [team leader] has tried to come up with a way where everyone can communicate more effectively and is more comfortable talking about certain things--

A regular exchange of feedback can be seen as one way to promote transparency within a team. Feedback is preferred to be given in a constructive manner which gives concrete suggestions for development rather than being dismissive. Giving constructive feedback also decreases the risk of misunderstandings. Getting a clear view of what is expected is also perceived as essential. Feedback is also a tool that gives motivation and new ideas at best. At worst, negative feedback may be perceived as discouraging and thus it requires careful consideration before given. (Juholin 2008, 38-39)

--Usually when I receive feedback I tend to process it and find out like ok can this help make me better or does this just make me feel bad--

--It has to be something useful that I can actually learn from it, that I can, you know, progress--

--The kind of feedback of whether the things that I design actually match their expectation--

--I don't necessarily feel the need to receive feedback as often right now--

On the other hand, feedback can also be linked to creating a sense of communality and team spirit. Usually, feedback is concerned with only work related matters, yet on the other hand, personality of feedback is seen as equally important to building a bond between team members and thus improving transparency. It is in accordance with Trent (2004, 97) who also argued that giving feedback ought to be based on the ideology of trust based relationship.

--Occasionally you might receive feedback that is purely just what other people think of you as a person maybe, and even though I feel it's quite irrelevant I still appreciate such comments because I think what your colleagues think of you as a person or your actions are also important--

--I guess it places to the whole mutual respect--

5.4 Communality

In addition to clarity of goals and transparency, communality is often raised up as an important factor for teamwork to be perceived as effective and engaging. Hence, seamless collaboration and harmony play a big role in building a successful team.

--Liking your team mates, getting along with them—

--I think collaboration is also very vital – being able to understand each other’s ideas and be on the same page, that’s important—

--So that would require I suppose each team player being able to give and take, accommodate, to me if someone is difficult on that front it becomes very challenging to form a team around that--

--If you had, say, a couple of guys who are maybe just average in terms of skill, but if they can get along together, they can usually – come up with something quite good versus a team of guys who don’t get along yet they’re all very skillful individually--

Also, an open office and casual meetings are seen as a way to enhance communality and improve communication with team members. Everybody in the team are sitting by the same table which suggests that there is a flat hierarchy. The common culture is created also through casual situations, such as sharing lunch

with co-workers. Food itself is essentially seen as a way to build relationships with other team members as well as to get to know the new faces in the office.

--Our office is a very open concept, so it's not like the traditional office where you get like rooms and spaces – It's a rather flat hierarchy in a way when it comes to that, so that makes communication a lot easier as well--

--We don't sit in cubicles – it's very casual, so in a sense it like removes these barriers, you feel more at ease when you're trying to communicate with your colleagues and try to seek help from them--

--I guess it just helps us to bond better. It creates just like team spirit, like especially when we go out to eat.

--When I was new they actually were like very nice to me and they introduced me to everyone, took me out for meals –make you feel like you're part of the team--

A touch of personality is integrated also to the organization by introducing new methods for giving feedback and reviewing one another. The methods currently in use in the client company are peer review harness and *badges*. Both of these methods are based on a monetary incentive, yet they promote team spirit and communality at the same time. They can also be seen as a way to build corporate culture.

In the peer review harness each team member is given a small amount of money. Thus one can give an estimate of 100 dollars for each or reward the ones they feel are contributing most to the success of the team, e.g. by giving one thousand dollars to one particular person.

--That I've found to be pretty interesting because not just are they giving out the money to their team mates, they are also giving out encouragement and also advice on the areas they improve in – and this is not anonymous--

It is given by filling up an online form, where a team member consolidates the amount as well as the comment for the team member they wish to reward.

--So at the end of it you get a nice little like encouragement, paragraph from a team mate – so that I've found so far has been one of the best things because that way they're directly receiving the love from the team mates--

The other method is called *badges*, which has just recently been put into use. It is conducted by setting up a wall of badges in the office. Thus the team collects badges by doing things that improve them professionally, such as reading books that are helpful to their career or job function, or completing various tasks.

--Our idea is to basically reward, celebrate little successes – it's also about trying to get the people around you to improve together--

However, neither of these methods were raised up by the respondents when discussing different motivational factors.

5.5 Communication from a distance

When communicating from a distance, the respondents perceived the differences in terms of work culture, communicating online and building trust relationships as challenging.

Different work cultures

What was seen as the main difference between the Singaporean and Malaysian work cultures was essentially the perception of time. This affected both online communication with the team and overall interaction as the other culture is more flexible with their work ethics.

--At first it was kind of difficult because like I expect things, you know I sent an email and – it would take like a week to reply--

--You call them and they don't answer the phone and if like they were supposed to end work at five – 4.30[pm] they're off--

--The culture, work culture itself is different – say for example sometimes in terms of work ethics, it's common for them to be late for half an hour or hour in Malaysia. And their excuse is traffic jam, cause it's in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and there's always a traffic jam. So it becomes a standard excuse for being late--

Essentially, Singapore is considered more of a fast pace culture whereas from a Singaporean perspective, Malaysia is seen as more unhurried. As could be expected, this was seen as frustrating when faced with the challenge for the first time.

--In Singapore because we are always in a very fast pace – but over there [Malaysia office] they are more laid back--

--They are more laid back in a way, so and as compared they don't see the urgency, so at a start you get a bit frustrated--

A different work culture also affects operation in terms of communication with clients.

--This is just one of the many differences that I hear from the ground – things like they try to sign a new school [client] -- so you'll talk about often everything under the sky except the system [product] itself--

The different cultural backgrounds also raised a need to work around certain issues.

--Sometimes you need a little more explanation and time to explain to them the reasons why I need this particular report from you – so it's a bit different that way--

--Sometimes it may present challenges I think, because of certain things or aspects of culture. You realize that there is no.. for example there's no compromise from the other party. So then you may feel oh that you're constantly having to work around certain issues that the other party may have because of their culture--

--I try to be careful not to say certain things. So if we want to get ideas across, we know how to tactfully put it across because maybe this person's background is such--

However, within the Singapore office, multiculturalism is not perceived as a challenge. Even though in Singapore there are many different nationalities and cultures, growing up knowing all the differences have essentially molded the mindset into one Singaporean culture. Multiculturalism and diversity were also seen as a considerable strength as different viewpoints often generate great ideas.

--Especially here in Singapore I think it's never really been a problem for us because we've grown up knowing the various cultural backgrounds of one another, the ethnicity, the diversity that we all have as Singaporeans and I think yeah we've grown to be very comfortable with each other--

Due to the challenge that lies in the collaboration between the teams, effort is placed to replicate the work and the ways from Singapore to Malaysia.

--When we started the Malaysia office, we found it a huge challenge to be able to kind of replicate the work that we are doing here to Malaysia, and be able to kind of understand what kind of problems they're facing there – because I don't get to see them face to face--

--We try to mirror the same kind of culture and image we have in Singapore--

--Work culture that we have in Singapore [try to] map it exactly to there as well in terms of working because they, they're not used to the fast pace--

Challenges in online communication

Online communication is also seen as challenging, mostly due to the diversity of different tools but also due to the lack of nonverbal communication. However, effort has been made to tackle the issues and find the best possible method by trial and error.

--I honestly haven't quite figured out how best to communicate – how to say, virtually--

--Slowly we are working towards it [improving virtual communication] so it's not something where we correct at one time and try it out. I think we

progressively try to improve it as and when we see – a thing is not working out so well--

--We're always looking for better ways to do online communication--

Yet, few of the respondents did not see an issue with online communication.

--Not really [see online collaboration as challenging] because within the team we have WhatsApp group chat so they [team Malaysia and Singapore] do communicate quite frequently on that as well -- so they will still keep in contact even though they may not have – physically seen each other--

--Online communication is quite straightforward for me and is a faster way of communicating to get things done. Especially let's say in Malaysia, I send something over and they can reply as soon as they review it--

However, these viewpoints are not in line with the team leader as she strongly feels that the current communications between the teams is insufficient.

--One of the representatives do like an update on Monday morning. So that's about all I am getting right now, which I honestly think is insufficient and I don't have a brilliant solution to it yet--[Leader]

Remote teams

When talking about the concept of a remote team, the ability to have an effective communications through online networks is seen as challenging. An inability to be physically present and interact face to face is seen as resulting in lack of trust when e.g. during a video conference, all of the time is spent discussing work related issues. However, as the need to develop online collaboration remains, the current solution relies on the ability to work independently. This was seen as a crucial factor for establishing a successful remote team.

--We do find that people, good people that we have hired, they are pretty prompt with communications. And if we continue to do that – I believe that would help with ensuring that we can work remotely. Like the independence level.

--I do think that there is a minimum, a certain amount of a view, interactions needed to get that level of understanding for the team and the leader, and that takes time to build--

--To be able to problem solve together.. through online collaboration I do think tools have some way to go to help with that – when it comes to the complex problem, I have yet to see that being solved online.

--The discussions and disagreements actually make great things happen – it would be lovely to see it happen for remote teams--

6 Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions based on the results from the qualitative research. The aim for the research was to explore the significance of leadership communication as well as internal communications and their impact on team operation. Additionally, focus was placed on understanding the effects of distance to leadership communication and the use of online networks as a communication tool. Thus, the concept of online collaboration is used when referring to collaboration with the distant team members, whereas online communication refers to the use of social technologies for communication purposes. Motivation was also discussed during the interviews in terms of leadership communication.

The research problem defined for the thesis was *“What is the significance of*

communications for team leadership?”. Due to the variety and magnitude of the topic, three sub questions were formulated based on the research problem, which will be further discussed below.

As the thesis was conducted for a case company, it was fundamental to find out *“What is the current state of communications in LittleLives Inc.?”* in order to map out the basis for the research. The data for this was gathered through semi-structured interviews by studying what are the current communication channels in use, which of them the respondents perceive as the most effective and if they have faced any challenges using these channels. One of the main findings was the importance placed on one on one meetings or in other words, development discussions as a communication channel. Essentially, the one on one meetings were seen as fundamental for sharing information as well as giving and receiving feedback which would otherwise been missing. Many of the respondents also valued the shorter meetings which enable open discussion related to all day to day matters and problem solving on a daily basis. However, some of the respondents perceived the variety of different communication tools as challenging due to the amount of training it would take to know how to use them properly.

The fact that many of the respondents perceived the current state of one on one meetings as useful is the ideal situation in terms of communication. After all, the one on one discussions are essential as they enhance employee engagement and work wellbeing. (Aarnikoivu 2011, 11) However, in order for the benefits of the discussion to be fully concretized it would be useful to do for example a follow through in the form of a self-assessment after the meeting. Alternatively, it might also be beneficial to arrange a group discussion once a year as suggested by Aarnikoivu. (2011, 120) The one on one meetings also provide a great platform for giving concrete feedback, which was also seen as crucial by the respondents. Focus should thus be placed on two-way communication as it is important for the

employer-employee relationship as well as the overall development to both give and receive feedback. (Aarnikoivu 2011, 147)

In most cases, the respondents seemed to place high value on face to face communication and other rich channels when compared to other means of communication. This was partly due to the variety of different online communication tools that were seen as confusing. To be able to solve the issue, the team should thus be provided with proper instructions on how to best utilize all these communication tools in their work. However, as the challenge was addressed as *too many tools*, it would do well to ponder on whether there are tools in use that are unnecessary at the moment. Yet, the results were not univocal, and even though most issues were preferred to be solved face to face, many found for example email as an effective communication tool. Though on a larger scale, establishing effective online communication was seen as a major shortcoming, especially in an asynchronous discussion through which it is not possible to receive instant feedback.

The second sub question aimed to find out *“What factors are seen as important for developing effective team communication?”* The research revealed that the respondents valued communality above all other aspects as the most important factor for team communication. A lack of synergy was seen as decreasing the effectiveness of communication. Thus, a high importance was placed on building the relationships between team members. Different aspects such as having an open office and shared lunches were thus seen as crucial for sustaining synergy within the team. Synergy is thus achieved when a team comes up with creative solutions through interaction (Jeanquart Miles & Mangold 2002, 114-115.) Another aspect that was raised during the interviews was transparency. Sharing information throughout the organization was seen as a challenge as sometimes the information did not reach everyone in the team or even misinformation was transmit-

ted onwards.

Both synergy and transparency are regarded to contribute to active collaboration according to Jeanquart Miles & Mangold (2002, 114-115) which eventually improves the whole team's well-being. Transparency in the organization will thus be fulfilled when all the members are equally aware of the agenda and motivations of the team. This could be carried out by making an effort to produce more accurate documentation in order to avoid any misunderstandings. Ultimately, promoting shared understanding and establishing a common communication style between co-workers would thus enhance team based productivity. This can be established by enabling an environment where people are able to understand each other, which is a prerequisite for improving communication, building trust-relationships and becoming more productive as stated in the article by Workforce (2015, 40) Thus, the team would most likely benefit from e.g. separate time integrated into the weekly meetings which would be devoted to discussing any issues that there may be, and to gain a deeper understanding of the concerns existing in the team. Though this already occurs perhaps to some extent during the short meetings as discussed in chapter 5.1.

As establishing an effective leadership communication is a common objective for all aspects of this research, studying the leader's role is central for developing communications. Hence, the third and final sub question aimed to discover "*What communicative behaviors are identified as essential to a leader?*" from the employee's perspective. Most of the respondents acknowledged a clear communication of goals and determination when it comes to making decisions as the most important factors in a leader. Both of these aspects also enable commitment, if the goals are perceived as meaningful and imperative. However, it is important to keep in mind that commitment varies individually and it can be only reinforced through effective leadership communication. (Åberg 2006, 163-164)

Concerns about insufficient communication related to short term goals were however expressed by few interviewees. Surprisingly, the lack of clarity in terms of goals was seen both as a threat and an opportunity by the respondents. Differing views were justified by the fact that the case company is a small startup. As previously mentioned, startup companies' policy needs are often more unique as compared to larger businesses. Thus creative leadership is perceived as central for startups (Humala 2015, 427) Based on this assumption it would stand to a reason that as a startup it is preferable, if not recommendable, to make your own rules and explore different styles and ways to operate to see what works best for the team and the business individually. After all, promoting creativity also increases motivation when compared to just following instructions, as acknowledged by Abe & Chowdhery (2012, 68)

Creative leadership is also actualized through methods that are taken into use to motivate the staff. It appears that the peer review harness and badges –system are essentially seen as a way to increase communality and further enhance employee engagement. Especially in peer review harness, the attached review adds some personal touch to the feedback which adds to the constructive atmosphere that also Åberg (2006, 198-199) regarded as one of the success factors of a synergistic team. However, neither of these methods were raised by the respondents which begs the question if they are in fact perceived as effective.

As stated by Åberg (2006, 162-163), motivational communication is seen as one of the most important part of leadership communication. However, one should also take into account the individual motivation factors which can only be revealed through interaction. For example, presenting goals by using only numbers and logic may result in lack of motivation. More often the team needs something inspirational which also encourages them to use their imagination. (Abe & Chowdhery 2012, 53-54)

It remains unclear whether the money reward is seen as motivational in the eyes of the respondents. Particularly, the amount of 1000 dollars as a monetary incentive, as mentioned in chapter 5.4, seems considerably large if the gained benefits are limited. Though it appears that the team would benefit the most from including activities to their everyday work that primarily promote communality.

This ultimately raises the question: *how important it is to actually like the people you're working with?* Based on the research, one can come to a conclusion that synergy is seen as fundamental to the success of the team. As previously stated in chapter 4.2., a team is functional when it is comprised of members who complement each other to achieve common goals. Thus, also teamwork skills should be developed on a regular basis as they do not come naturally to most people. (Winter, Waner & Neal-Mansfield 2008, 265-266) The findings are also in line with Campion's (1996) research results which suggest that there is a positive correlation between employee satisfaction and the amount of communication within teams. Especially the ability to communicate group goals, resolve issues and build consensus can be seen as the core competencies of a team which calls for effective resolution skills from the team leader's end. (Jeanquart Miles & Mangold 2002, 114-115) Thus, the importance of developing relationships should not be overlooked. Instead, one should pay close attention to the level of interpersonal communication when studying the effectiveness of a team.

A surprisingly few considered online collaboration as challenging. Communication with the remote team through a WhatsApp channel was seen as sufficient in addition to all the other online tools in use. However, when interviewing the team leader, the reaction was quite the opposite as the weekly memo was all that was received from the other team in terms of operative information, which was seen as insufficient. It is not possible to draw a definite conclusion based on that, yet it gives a reason to consider if there is a disconnect between the teams. Could it be that the views of the current state of communication between Malaysia and the

Singapore office are based on an illusion that communication has been accomplished, like Smith & Kanki (2001, 95) demonstrated.

Whether or not that is the case, it highlights the importance of a frequent check-up when overseeing a team's progress in a virtual environment. It is evident that also in this case, the remote team members require additional handholding and more specific instructions when compared to the other team. It is also important that the remote team is provided with opportunities to express any uncertainties they may feel on a regular basis. (Kurtzberg 2014, 6) It is a safe assumption that a WhatsApp chat or a weekly memo is not a favorable platform for that. It comes as no surprise that creating a sense of unity and wholeness is usually seen as the most challenging part of online team leadership. Thus it is important to take into account that building trust in relationships requires careful and intended planning in order to be established and maintained (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 48-49) which was also acknowledged by the team leader (see chapter 5.1.3).

Overall, providing a more favorable channel for online collaboration would enable more open discussion and thus also strengthen the communality within the organization. This would be beneficial for both parties and help the leader to further promote the wholeness of the organization and foster team spirit. Also Juholin's (2008, 48, 60) theory of an energizing work community supports this view as addressed in chapter 4.4. Thus, effort should be placed on investing in effective communication, enabling seamless exchange of information and encouraging involvement in decision making in a team.

Recommendations

In conclusion, among one of the central findings of the thesis was the challenges faced with online communication. Regardless of the fact that email was perceived as efficient in the day to day work, many still favored rich channels such as face to face conversation or telephone for problem solving, as the use of online tools in

general was sometimes seen as confusing. Thus, it would be beneficial to integrate training and outline some instructions on how to best utilize all the different channels efficiently. This would help to avoid a waste of resources and time the lack of clear guidelines may cause.

Another noteworthy aspect was the transparency of information. Thus it would be valuable to look into the organization's documentation practices to ensure that everyone is aware of the current situation and the goals of the team. Also, by arranging separate time for issues to be raised during meetings could enhance the exchange of information. This way every team member would feel that they are on the same page which would fundamentally improve the whole team's efficiency.

The communication with the decentralized unit was also seen as demanding as perception of time along with other cultural differences effected the communication. Also, remote leadership was perceived as challenging by the team leader, who was hoping to find a better solution to the situation. Hence, it would be important to provide the decentralized team members with opportunities to express their uncertainties and challenges they may face in the Malaysia region. Organizing of tasks, guidance, evaluation and rewarding are equally important to remote team's leadership as discussed in chapter 3.4. Thus, the organization could invest in remote leadership by arranging regular meetings with the other team, either face to face or through a video conference. This would primarily enhance the leader's ability to inspire and motivate as well as create positive energy which can be seen as substantial to virtual team leadership. (Ojala & Pöysti 2008, 128)

Additionally, there were aspects that were discovered as already functional and perceived as both useful and motivational. These are the previously mentioned one on one meetings and communality that exists within the team. Hence, it is essential that these two factors will be sustained also in the future. Communality

could thus be maintained by having company outings and other team-building activities on a regular basis as a contribution to an improved company culture. Additionally, with regard to Åberg's theory (2006, 197-198) of a "joy leader" and the benefits it withholds, making use of tools like mind maps, think tanks and action lists would enhance the creativity of team work.

For the development discussions to be further improved, a following framework was formed by utilizing Aarnikoivu's (2011, 170) model "8 commandments of leadership" to provide guidance and ideas for a leader.

Table 1. The 8 Commandments of Leadership

Train	Create prerequisites for success and improvement
Care	Show attention, give feedback and acknowledge the significance of informal communication
Challenge	Dare to develop, set goals and do a follow-up
Inspire	Motivate, cheer and energize
Give responsibility	Show the meaning of doing and the consequences for not-doing
Communicate	Tell, report and inform work related issues
Interact	Discuss, engage and get involved
Empower	Guide the staff to discover their existing resources and the ability to have an impact on individual well-being and results, trust

7 Discussion

The preparation for the thesis started in October 2015 after which the theoretical framework was planned. The original research problem gradually took new forms, and the idea crystalized from what it was at the beginning. In January 2016, the researcher started to design the interview sheet, and opinions and viewpoints of what was considered important went back and forth between the researcher and the client company. Eventually in February 2016, the sheet was finalized but due to the client company's busy schedule at the time (Chinese New Year) the interviews were not able to be conducted until March. The interviews were conducted in English over the video conference service Skype during March 2016. The researcher was located in her home and the interviewees at their office in Singapore. The interviews were audio recorded with permission and treated anonymously.

The interviewed respondents worked in different organizational roles in the client company, which means that a variety of different backgrounds were represented in the research. Due to the small number of interviewees, the focus was placed on ensuring the anonymity of their responses. Thus there is no background information, names or roles attached to this thesis.

The research results were mainly in accordance with the theoretical framework that was built around various key theories. The current state of leadership communication in the case company could thus be mirrored against the literature framework. Viewpoints on the most important factors of effective leadership communication, such as transparency and clarity of goals, correlated with the theories presented by Juholin (2008) and Åberg (2006). Additionally, the research brought new viewpoints to the existing themes by, for example, introducing ideas such as lack of clarity of goals as an opportunity, and multiculturalism as a con-

cept that can be grown into. On the other hand, the research further confirmed the theory of startup companies' more unique policy needs to be true.

Special attention was also paid to the reliability of the transcription process by transcribing everything that was said during the interviews in accordance with the recording. Transcriptions were also conducted shortly after the interviews to ensure that no details were relied on the researcher's memory. Additionally, notes were taken throughout the research process. The accuracy of the documentation can thus be seen as increasing the reliability of the research.

The fact that it was not possible for the researcher to choose the interviewees can be seen as a limitation and could possibly decrease the reliability of the research. On the other hand, it increased the objectivity of the research as the researcher had no foreknowledge of the interviewees. However, all the respondents seemed positive about the research and were willing to discuss the themes in detail. Looking at the research results, saturation was achieved in multiple themes, which reflects the sufficiency of the data thus enhancing the reliability of the research. Nevertheless, for some themes, there was a lack of challenges which made it difficult to come up with suggestions for development. Also, the original purpose of the thesis was to study the current state of communications from both teams' perspectives. However, due to technical difficulties, the Malaysia team was represented by only one respondent, which gave a very narrow viewpoint and thus could not be generalized in the research.

Recommendations for future research

This research only covered a narrow view of the whole leadership communication. The various themes could have been analyzed more thoroughly by conducting more in depth interviews and using observation as an additional research method. It would have been interesting to observe, for example, the communication style which was only partially touched in the research. Many of the respond-

ents preferred a direct and rational communication style. Yet, it would require further observation in order to evaluate the accuracy of the statement.

Additionally, in the future it could be beneficial to get the Malaysia team involved with providing another viewpoint and develop the leadership communication practices more comprehensively. Additional research on the use of social technologies and online networks would also provide a fuller picture of the situation and help the leader to discover new ways to lead from a distance. Alternatively, the focus could be placed on the effects of leadership communication on employee engagement.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide (team)

Background information

- How long have you worked in LittleLives?
- What is your role in the team?

Internal communications

- What do you see as the main channels for communication? Which of the channels you find the most effective?
- What challenges have you faced in terms of communication? How would you solve these challenges?
- What factors are important to you when working in a team?
- Do you find the exchange of information sufficient/flowing? Is it easily available when needed?

Cross-cultural teams

- On average, how often do you communicate with people from different cultures?
- Do you find culture as affecting factor to team dynamics?

Online communication

- On average, how often do you communicate online?
- Excluding email, what tools do you use to communicate online?
- What difficulties have you faced when communicating virtually?
- What steps have you taken to resolve virtual communication issues at work?

Remote teams/Online collaboration

- What do you see as the main challenges in online collaboration? How would you solve these challenges?

Leadership communication

- How would you describe a good leader?
- How often do you receive feedback? What type of feedback do you get? What kind of feedback would you prefer?
- Do you feel the (organizational) goals are communicated clearly?
- Do you feel that you have a clear role in the team?

Appendix 2. Semi-structured interview guide (leader)

Background information

- What is your educational background?
- How many staff do you currently employ?

Internal communications

- What do you see as the main channels for communication in LittleLives? Which of the channels you find the most effective?
- How often do you participate in meetings?
- What challenges have you faced in terms of communication? How would you solve these challenges?
- Do you find the exchange of information sufficient/flowing?

Cross-cultural teams

- On average, how often do you communicate with people from different cultures?
- Do you find culture as affecting factor to team dynamics?
- What factors are important to you when leading a team?

Online communication

- On average, how often do you communicate online?
- Excluding email, what tools do you use to communicate online?
- What difficulties have you faced when communicating virtually?
- What steps have you taken to resolve virtual communication issues at work?

Remote teams/Online collaboration

- What do you see as the main challenges in online collaboration? How would you solve these challenges?
- How do you see the role of online collaboration and utilizing ICT in networking and leadership?

Leadership communication

- How would you describe yourself as a leader?
- What means do you use to motivate your team?
- What aspects do you think should be considered when comparing “regular” leadership to online leadership?
- How do you communicate goals?
- What do you see as the future vision for LittleLives?