

# **What is on the horizon of customer service?**

Implementation of a new leadership framework from the perspective of leaders

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MASTER'S THESIS	
Arcada	
Degree Programme:	International Business Management
Identification number:	7807
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<p><b>Abstract:</b></p> <p>This inductive qualitative case study aims to investigate leadership framework implementation in a big finance company where the author works. It specifically seeks to answer the following research questions: 1. What challenges and advantages do leaders experience with the new leadership framework. 2. What kind of leadership is needed in future customer service? 3. Is the leader's perception of leadership in the future aligned with the leadership framework? In addressing the aim of this study, it draws on a literature review of servant leadership that creates an understanding of the desired leadership approach in the leadership framework. The different forms of collective leadership create an understanding of different ways of sharing leadership. The literature review also discusses self-direction because it is one of the most important objectives of this leadership framework. Future trends of customer service and challenges and advantages are included in this study to understand the requirements that the operating environment imposes on advisors. This is important to take the right things into account in the leadership of the future. The study is conducted as semi-structured interviews among six leaders who have implemented the leadership framework in their teams. The results indicate that the role of three leaders has been beneficial in many ways. The implementation of the leadership framework has increased the leader's time spent with advisors. The tools designed for the support of this leadership framework received praise. Additionally, the results indicate that leaders have a hunger for relevant feedback, and they are eager to develop their skills further. According to leaders, developing an advisor's self-direction is a challenging issue, and it needs long term work. The customer service advisors work is changing, the focus will be on resolving issues and providing insights while the easier problems are handled by artificial intelligence. All interviewed leaders stated that future leadership is increasingly emphasized by emotional skills. Practical implications and indications for future research are outlined.</p>	
Keywords:	Qualitative research, Servant leadership, Collective leadership, Future trends of customer service, Self-direction, Leadership in the future.
Number of pages:	49
Language:	English
Date of acceptance:	

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Background .....	5
1.2 Problem formulation, research question and research aim .....	6
1.3 Structure of the thesis .....	6
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Servant leadership.....	7
2.2 Collective leadership .....	10
2.2.1 <i>Distributed leadership</i> .....	11
2.2.2 <i>Shared leadership</i> .....	12
2.2.3 <i>Leadership in Plural</i> .....	13
2.3 Self-direction.....	13
2.4 Future trends of customer service.....	15
2.4.1 <i>Challenges and advantages of future customer service</i> .....	17
2.5 Leadership framework.....	19
2.5.1 <i>Background and goal</i> .....	19
2.5.2 <i>Framework and roles</i> .....	20
2.6 Summary .....	22
<b>3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1 Research approach .....	22
3.2 Data collection .....	24
3.3 Data analysis .....	26
<b>4 RESULTS.....</b>	<b>28</b>
4.1 Benefits and challenges of Leadership framework .....	28
4.1.1 <i>Roles</i> .....	29
4.1.2 <i>Tools</i> .....	30
4.1.3 <i>Time</i> .....	31
4.2 Self-direction as a goal .....	32
4.3 Future Leadership .....	33
4.3.1 <i>Leadership framework in the future</i> .....	34
<b>5 DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>36</b>
5.1 Benefits and challenges of leadership framework.....	36
5.1.1 <i>Roles</i> .....	36
5.1.2 <i>Tools</i> .....	37
5.1.3 <i>Time</i> .....	38

5.2	Self-direction.....	39
5.3	Leadership in the future.....	40
5.4	Leadership framework development .....	41
<b>6</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>42</b>
6.1	Practical implications .....	43
6.2	Limitations and suggestions for future research .....	44
	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>44</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis is a case study of implementing a new leadership framework in a big finance company where the author works. The aim is to investigate how leaders have experienced this leadership framework and what kind of leadership is needed in future customer service. The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with leaders. The interviews have been inductively analyzed. The case company's leadership framework implementation takes place in a contact center environment where the advisors, i.e., employees, of the contact center are receiving customer phone calls.

### **1.1 Background**

Service quality has become essential for companies' survival in an emerging world. The employees are the key to delivering excellent quality service. Customer service has major impacts on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. These two relate to organizations success (Akbar and Parvez, 2009). Without loyal customers, the existence of business is in danger. Developing a talented workforce is essential for a sustainable competitive advantage (Kundu and Vora 2004). To make this happen, the leaders must have time to develop the skills of employees in their teams. In this context, it means the advisors should have clear instructions about what they are responsible for in their work and they should feel they receive sufficient support in achieving their goals. Customer service in the future must invest in supporting the success of leaders and advisors qualitatively and effectively in a hectic and changing customer service environment.

The customer service of the future is built upon artificial intelligence and automation where digital channels are in the center and the most demanding situations are handled with people. This is the reason why it is extremely important to have talented and motivated customer service advisors at work. Artificial intelligence will be discussed more in the future trends of customer service chapter in this study. The case company is aware of all these challenges and wanted to create a leadership framework to tackle the challenges and to be prepared for the future. The main purpose was to create a unified leadership framework where leaders have more time for their team members and the advisors in the

team receive support and coaching to succeed in their work. In practice, this means that the customer service advisors are supported by more than one leader.

## **1.2 Problem formulation, research question and research aim**

The purpose of this study is to examine the new leadership framework that is being implemented in my workplace and I wanted to study how leaders perceive this leadership framework and what are the benefits and challenges experienced by leaders. I am interested also in future leadership, and this study examines whether the interviewed leaders views on future leadership correspond to the goals sought by this leadership framework. The case company has defined the goals for the framework, these will be examined later.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

What challenges and advantages do leaders experience with the new leadership framework?

What kind of leadership is needed in future customer service?

Is the leader's perception of leadership in the future aligned with the leadership framework?

## **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. In the second chapter, I review prior research and academic literature that is relevant to the study. I will also provide an in-depth description of the leadership framework implemented in the case company. In the third chapter, I present the chosen methodology for this study. In this chapter, I establish the research approach and motivate the selection of the sample. I present the methods applied for data collection and analysis. In the fourth chapter, I describe the findings of the research. In the final chapter, a summary of findings is presented and discussed, and practical implications of the findings are provided. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are explored.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews relevant literature and research about the concepts presented in this study. First, I provide an overview of servant leadership. Second, diverse perspectives of collective leadership will be formed. Then I will explain the meaning of self-direction. After that, I discuss future trends of customer service. The last part explains the leadership framework which is implemented in the case company and what are the expectations for it. Finally, I conclude the chapter by summarizing prior research and findings.

Based on discussions with the company representatives, the leadership framework has been inspired by servant leadership. Interviews with leaders also highlighted the themes of servant leadership and for this reason the natural choice for theory was servant leadership. The case company wanted to increase the leaders time with their team members and one of the major changes in this leadership framework is the allocation of the leaders' tasks for multiple leaders. When leaders duties are assigned to more than one leader, the leader has more time to "serve" employees, this contributes to the servant leadership and theories where leadership is shared in a way or another. These kinds of aspects are covered in collective leadership, distributed leadership, and leadership in the plural which are discussed in this study. The company representatives underlined the importance of self-direction as one goal of this leadership framework, therefore self-direction will be studied. To look at the direction in which this leadership framework should be developed, the needs of future leadership will be examined. In the following sections, I will open up these theories.

### **2.1 Servant leadership**

Servant leadership has been defined in many ways. The definition provided by Greenleaf (1970) occurs frequently: The servant-leader is servant first and it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Servant leaders put the needs of others first and offer direction and guidance but from behind and they help people to grow. Spears (1996) has said that: Servant leadership emphasizes increased services to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making.

Greenleaf (1977) coined the term servant leadership over forty years ago. Servant leaders, by definition, place the needs of others first and center their efforts on helping subordinates to grow, reach their maximum potential and achieve optimal organizational and career success. Greenleaf was skeptical about traditional leadership styles that focused on more authoritarian relationships between leaders and team members. Greenleaf observed that leaders should approach situations from a servant perspective first. This old theory has been rediscovered in recent years by van Dierendonck and Nuijiten (2011). Servant leadership moves management and personnel interaction away from “controlling activities” towards a more synergistic relationship between a leader and a team member (van Dierendonck, 2011).

A lot of research on servant leadership with different approaches has been done. For example, Harju et al. (2017) have been researching servant leadership, job boredom, and job crafting. Their findings suggest that servant leadership may encourage teams to create a more stimulating work environment. There is a positive link between servant leadership and employee well-being (Hakanen et al., 2017). Servant leaders help their team members to grow and succeed in their careers. Servant leaders provide support and mentoring, and they empower their team members to develop their individual strengths and capabilities at work (Liden et al., 2008). Lacroix et al. (2017) have said that servant leaders help their followers to see leadership responsibilities as an attractive challenge instead of something to be afraid of. According to Liden et al. (2014), it can be said that servant leaders can become attractive role models for their followers because they take good care of followers and they have strong ethics. Servant leadership may impact followers inclinations to become leaders themselves. Followers seem to react somewhat cautiously to leaders who consistently place the good of followers over their own self-interest (Lacroix et al., 2017).

Spears (1996) has detailed “The Servant as Leader”. These dimensions are based on Greenleaf’s (1977) ideas.

**1. Listening:** Emphasize the importance of communication skills. The leader understands people’s needs by listening attentively to them. She seeks to recognize the group’s will and help clarify it. She listens receptively to what is said and what is left unsaid.

**2. Empathy:** The Servant leader strives to understand others. She accepts them for who they are and sees that people are trying to do good. The most successful serving leaders are those who are skilled empathetic listeners.

**3. Healing:** The Servant leader improves relations with others. She solves challenging situations in the work community. She tries to defragment people and the organization.

**4. Awareness:** The leader is generally aware, and especially self-conscious. Consciousness helps to understand ethics, power, and values. The Servant leader is present in the moment and has inner serenity.

**5. Persuasion:** The Servant leader is good at building a consensus in the group. The leader does not take advantage of her position as a leader but convinces others of the great value of their own views. The leader does not want to force employees to follow orders, she convinces the workers to her side.

**6. Conceptualization:** The Servant leader thinks about the long-term implications and solutions to the future. The leader can look at things from different angles. She is trying to make her dreams come true. The Servant leader needs to balance between conceptual thinking and day-to-day operational thinking.

**7. Foresight:** Foresight is very close to conceptualization because it makes the leader able to anticipate situations and strive to see the Result. She knows how to combine the events of the past, the realities of the present, and the effects of future decisions. Foresight also takes root in intuitive thinking.

**8. Stewardship:** The Servant leader has a genuine desire to serve the needs of others. She is a reliable partner and committed to serve the needs of others. She is reflected in transparency instead of control.

**9. Commitment to the Growth of People:** The Servant leader will do everything in her power to support peoples personal, professional, and mental growth and development. She appreciates and encourages people. She respects every human being. In practice, she is deeply committed to the growth of the personal and professional development of employees. She is interested in the ideas and proposals, encourages employees to participate in decision-making, and helps redundant workers to actively find a new job.

**10. Building community:** The Servant leader builds a community and strives to serve a wider society in her activities. The Servant leader can create a true community among those who work in businesses and other institutions (Spears, 2010).

These ten characteristics of servant leadership are by no means exhaustive. However, Spears definitions reflect the power and promise that this concept can offer. Various researchers have made different definitions of leadership theory and the dimensions of servant leadership vary a lot. Common to many definitions appear to be essentially the idea of serving employees.

Riquelme et al. (2019) have tested the direct influence of servant leadership on an organization's serving-driven capabilities. They prove that an organization's serving-driven capabilities are directly influenced by servant leaders interactions. When a servant leader puts the followers first, and acts ethically, she shows sensitivity to others personal concerns, empowers others, and helps them to grow. All this have an impact and employees observe, interact, and have a good relationship with their leaders, which also develops employees capabilities. Therefore, good acts and relationships between a servant leader and employee develop good relationships with employees and customers.

Servant leadership and work engagement relate strongly, that is why servant leadership is considered a suitable theory for leading good customer service. Several studies indicate a significant relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. A theoretical contribution to this relationship is provided by Coetzer et al. (2017) who highlighted in their study that servant leadership and work engagement have a positive relationship. Another study by Carter et al. (2014) and De Clerq et al. (2014) indicates that servant leadership itself can be considered as a separate variable influencing positively into work engagement.

## **2.2 Collective leadership**

Endres and Weibler (2019) conclude that collaborative non-hierarchical forms of organizing are fashionable. According to many scholars, traditional and hierarchical organizations would benefit from more collaborative and cross-organizational ways of organizing

to respond to the changes in the society, economy, and technology (Raab and Kenis, 2009; Miles et al., 2010). There are many perspectives where leadership is shared in one way or another and they are complicated to compare. This study is concentrating on distributed leadership, shared leadership, and leadership in the plural. Distributed leadership and shared leadership theories are close to one another in meaning. The result of the study by Goksoy (2016) indicates a relationship between shared leadership and distributed leadership even though this relationship is not very distinctive. Because these theories share many common points, Goksoy (2016) suggests using the term “collective leadership” to bridge the gap between these theories and to prevent cognitive complexity. For this reason, I have placed other theories of sharing leadership under collective leadership.

### **2.2.1 Distributed leadership**

Traditionally, leadership theories have established clear boundaries between leaders and employees. The role of the leaders was emphasized, and leadership was assessed through leaders’ qualities. Spillane (2005) writes about the problem of the “heroics of leadership”, no leader can achieve victory on her own. It always involves an array of individuals. Distributed leadership has disparate restricted definitions from leading remotely using technology-based communication (Kayworth and Leidner, 2000) to broader definitions, such as Spillane clarifies.

Distributed leadership is more about a leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, or structures. Of course, all this is important but the distributed leadership starting point is the leadership practice. Distributed leadership is more than just multiple individuals who take responsibility for leadership. In distributing leadership, the leaders practice is spread across two or more leaders, they work separately but are interdependent. Shared leadership is not a synonym for distributed leadership, but a distributed perspective allows shared leadership in suitable situations. Spillane (2008) explains that the interaction between three components: leaders, followers, and the situation must be understood together. The followers are one constituting element in leadership practice.

Bennet et al. (2003) have studied distributed leadership to identify distinguishing elements of this concept. Three main premises can be found, first leadership is an emergent

property of interacting individuals in a group. The second premise is about opening boundaries of leadership. Though distributed leadership is not suggesting how wide these boundaries should be set in this concept. The third premise concerns the varieties of expertise distributed across the many. According to Bennet et al. (2003), the idea is that numerous distinctive, perspectives and capabilities brought together represent more than the sum of individual contributors.

### **2.2.2 Shared leadership**

According to Porter-O'Grady (1992) the roots of shared leadership go back to the philosophy of shared governance in the 1980s. The idea of shared leadership is based on responsibility and leadership practice that expects all members to participate in its performance (Porter-O'Grady et al., 1997). Pearce and Manz (2005) indicate that shared leadership takes place in teams where all members are fully engaged in the leadership of the team. This means a simultaneous, ongoing, and mutual influence process within a team where alongside official leaders, unofficial leaders arise among empowered teams. Pearce and Manz also indicate that several studies have stated the importance of shared leadership in predicting team success. Porter-O'Grady (1992) and McCrea (1998) write about possible positive effects of shared leadership, including an increase of participation in decision-making, the sense of commitment, the improvement of quality of service, and effective operational practices.

Konu and Viitanen (2008) write about the two different perspectives from where shared leadership can be approached according to Ropo et al. (2005). In the first perspective, managerial tasks are shared. In the second perspective, shared leadership is a sharing process where experience, knowledge, ignorance, appreciation, and trust are shared. Common to both perspectives is that good leadership is not based on the need to know more or better (Konu and Viitanen, 2008). There is no right or wrong way to implement shared leadership because it needs to be based on the needs of the organization (Oosterhoff and Rowell, 2004).

### **2.2.3 Leadership in Plural**

Denis et al. (2012) have used the term “leadership in the plural” to describe leadership theories where leadership is seen as a collective phenomenon shared among different people. They have identified four different forms of plural leadership where the leadership is not seen as the property of an individual and their behaviors. In three of the identified forms, the leadership functions are shared in teams and the fourth form takes a different view, where leadership is seen as an emerging process that occurs in the interaction among people and the environment. The idea is the same as in distributed leadership, on plural leadership, the focus is on sharing leadership in teams and pooling leadership in dyads, triads, or other constellations on the top of organizations. The aim is to spread leadership across boundaries and produce leadership through interaction (Denis et al., 2012).

In conclusion, servant leadership highlights the capabilities of a leader which are desired in a company’s leaders. The collective leadership theories reflect the way leadership is shared in a case company. These collective leadership theories contain a lot of similarities. Distributed leadership and leadership in plural take the view of sharing leadership tasks and shared leadership concentrates more on sharing leadership among team members through empowerment. Case company’s idea of leadership framework fits the most in distributed leadership and leadership in plural aspect. When this implementation is successfully completed and team members and the organization see the benefits of this entity, it contributes to the possibility to add shared leadership in the teams. The next section explains self-direction, a feature that is useful in both, achieving goals and also in shared leadership which was mentioned above.

### **2.3 Self-direction**

Case company’s interest is to increase its employee’s self-direction through the new leadership framework. The term self-management is often referred to in literature. It refers mostly to time-management and issues related to that. Therefore, I have chosen to use the term self-direction to reflect the wider meaning of internal drive. Self-direction refers to a person’s ability to act on their own initiative without the need for external control. To be self-directed, there needs to be self-motivation and a desire to keep moving and do things

without external coercion. There must be a goal which a person is heading towards. The person must have the necessary skills to pursue her goal. If skills are lacking, a person needs so much support that self-direction is not going to happen. In addition to the actual skills of a specific task, the ability to lead yourself is also required. These tasks include time management, and the ability to prioritize and setting tasks (Martela and Jarenko, 2017).

According to Martela and Jarenko (2017) there are three reasons why self-direction is so important right now. The first relates to the environment; globalization, as a result of a faster flow of information and automation, the business environment has become more complex and it is changing fast. To survive in such environment, organizations need to be increasingly adaptable and agile. Traditional rigid structures can be an obstacle. The second reason relates to nature: routine work is a fading resource, and more and more jobs require creative expertise and independent decision-making, to which commanding from above is poorly suited. The third reason relates to technology, modern information technology enables such decentralized structures that would not be able to held together without the opportunities offered by modern technology (Martela and Jarenko, 2017).

Pearce and Manz (2005) are underlining the relatively new view of leadership, where all organizational members are capable of leading themselves to some degree. This self-influence process is addressed under the label self-leadership. This view is based on self-influence, yet this aspect is overlooked even though it is an important aspect, particularly in knowledge-based organizations and self-managing teams. According to Pearce and Manz (2005) self-leadership is described as involving intrinsic motivation and self-influenced skill development. These are similar qualities that belong to self-direction.

Such self-driven strategies are promising and needed to enable less hierarchical and dynamic organizations to operate. As case company's interests are to increase employees self-direction, it fits well with the concept of empowering employees through teams, and creating a condition of less dependence on traditional leader authority as Pearce and Manz (2005) describe.

## 2.4 Future trends of customer service

Organizations have made a big effort to provide multiple engagement channels to their customers to create seamless service between them. Today's trends such as cloud technologies, embedded with the latest trends such as AI (artificial intelligence) are available to every organization. When products and services become more similar, the success factor is the great customer experience where every step of the customer journey is smooth (Deloitte, 2020).

Time moves on and a new generation of workforce and customers is entering the market. Deloitte (2020) has provided an insight into five predominant trends that are changing the scene in 2020.

**The first trend** is the future of work. Talented customer service advisors are hard to find and even more hard to keep. Evolving automation requires more and more from advisors and at the same time the fear of chatbots replacing them is present. Future is going to give new tools for customer service advisors, less time is spent worrying about standard operating procedures and more time focusing to deliver excellent customer service. In the future customer service advisors need different skills than today's advisors. The focus will be on resolving issues and providing insights while the easier problems are handled by robots. Traditionally call center advisors mainly spoke to their customers on the phone, but this is changing while the arena is becoming more text-based assisting of customers. Therefore, higher skills in written language are required. The customer service advisor needs to understand the impact of social media channels, a response from customer service advisor can go viral in seconds. This can have enormous impacts on the company's brand image. Customer service advisor needs to manage many conversations or messages at the same time. Customer service advisors need to be trained to have more in-depth knowledge of the company's products and services because customers expect more and deeper information from an advisor that can be read from the company's webpages. In the future, remote work for customer service advisors will be more common because they can help customers from any location. This is possible because of the accessible technology, central databases, and remote contact centers.

**The second trend** is The Elevated Human experience. In a digital experience, the human touch is the thing that makes companies stand out from competitors. Contact centers need

to be developed to support and manage the omnichannel experience, which plays important strategic role in the customer experience. Contact centers are turning into customer engagement centers, which better reflect their tasks. Customer journeys need to be monitored, measured, and coordinated thoroughly to achieve an excellent customer experience. In case of any anomaly's, interaction is proactive. AI-powered technology can recognize situations when a customer is having trouble with completing a service or transaction and can offer webchat to guide through problems. AI tools are very important to identify and effectively reach out to the customer. A virtual assistant in the company can increase customer satisfaction without increasing operational costs.

New interactive channels are emerging. We are familiar with messaging platforms like Chat, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger, but digital voice assistants are also entering the market. Customers can use the digital voice assistant to figure out which companies are the cheapest and deliver fastest, and thus save themselves from this trouble. This has a big impact when thinking about who is controlling the customer experience in the future. Customer self-service is increasing with the help of chatbots which provide a conversational interface for customers to find out the information they need. Companies still have the potential to fully deploy these solutions.

**The third trend** is Digital to the Core. Companies need to understand how customer journeys evolve, and understand the expectations inside and outside the business. The quality of data has major impacts on customer journeys, if the data is inconsistent or misinterpreted it can ruin all the hard work done for the customer journey. Deloitte describes that there is a need to move towards a new “service journey” innovation, where the whole thinking is consumer-centric, and business is jobs-to be done instead of single tasks to be completed. Digital to the core is more than automating processes, it means providing the best digital outcomes and customer experience.

**The fourth trend** is the value of Data. Data is of huge value to all companies. Data is gathered for many purposes; for example training, data, and marketing purposes. The biggest damage can happen in case of a data breach. It damages the brand image of a company and it can cause damage to individuals. Companies and individuals need to be aware of risks which are always present. Evolving IT systems means that security systems around them need to be evolved as well to prevent hacking or a data breach.

**The fifth trend** is the Digital Center of Excellence. This means sharing knowledge and innovating to optimize processes and disposal of unnecessary systems and tools. Teams who are agile, deliver work in shorter periods, and review during the next period if it is still relevant. This way of working allows a broader scope. The goal is to look forward and improve more than just technological aspects but also strategic vision, change management, and vendor management.

#### **2.4.1 Challenges and advantages of future customer service**

New technologies can be leveraged in many ways. AI can be used to add more analytical power and predictability to service interactions. Dixon (2018) wrote about an opposite example where AI was used to strengthen the old operating model by reducing customer service advisor's own judgment skills. One large insurer used AI to provide real-time sentiment analysis to its customer service advisors. A picture of a coffee cup appeared on their screen, if the advisor needed to have more energy in handling a phone call, or a scowling face informed the advisor that the customer is getting upset and the advisor should act fast to turn the conversation around. Another example of annoying discouraging innovation was from the telecommunication industry, who deployed AI to remind advisors to use company-approved greetings, thank customers for their loyalty and pitch upsell offers (Dixon, 2018).

Dixon describes another kind of example where companies have invested time and resources to create a knowledge work environment for customer service advisors. The AI-powered digital assistant was built to help customer service advisors. This digital assistant retrieved information during service interaction and saved the time of the advisor. The last example Dixon wrote about concerned utilizing machine learning to find out the best phrases and conversational techniques used by the best customer service advisors, that has led to positive customer outcome. This information was used in the training and coaching purposes to get insights to achieve better expertise.

When talking about challenges and advantages in customer service, it is difficult not to mention Covid-19 when we are in the year 2020. Ramachandran et al. (2020) wrote in their article about the urgency and severity of the Covid-19 situation which has forced to

find ways to overcome huge operational challenges including logistical, technical, and security issues. As a result, many of the customer service workforces can work from home now. The pandemic has changed the way customers access services and organizations have had to change the way they deliver their services. Now companies have an opportunity to build on this momentum, to improve the ability to survive and find advantage in the new reality after the postcrisis world (Ramachandran et al., 2020).

Companies have been trying to persuade customers to use digital services for at least the past ten years and even more. Covid-19 has been a catalyst for the change, now customers are adopting digital services at unprecedented rates (Ramachandran et al., 2020). The behavior of customers is well described in a press release by Nordea Bank, which is just one example of real-life situations. Nordea informs that Finns use digital channels for multiple things, many people have favored face-to-face meetings in branches in banking related issues to mortgages and savings. However, the coronavirus showed that Finns can change their way of doing business quickly if necessary. Almost all bank meetings turned into online meetings overnight. Customers logins to online banking had, by the time of the press release, increased by seven percent compared to February 2020 (Nordea, 2020).

Still, many first-time users need help navigating technology. Ramachandran et al. (2020) state that human-supported digital journeys have a higher success rate. Therefore, companies should take the opportunity to offer the human capacity to support a sustainable shift to digital self-service channels. Ramachandran and colleagues refer to bionic tools i.e., biologically inspired engineering tools, that can be deployed to achieve seamless integration of human and digital support. These tools use natural language processing to understand the customers intention and to find the right solution. Bionic tools can help with, for example, providing relevant answers based on the context. It can be used to automate repeatable tasks, such as data entry into multiple systems and it can be also used for providing real-time guidance and coaching (Ramachandran et al., 2020).

Ramachandran et al. (2020) presents encouraging numbers of how AI-driven knowledge based tools have improved the first-contact resolution by five to seven percent and is reduced handling time by 20-30%. A positive effect has been noticed also in training new employees, where training time was reduced by 25-40%. All these improvements have an impact on better customer satisfaction (Ramachandran et al., 2020).

## 2.5 Leadership framework

### 2.5.1 Background and goal

This chapter opens up more precisely what the new leadership framework is about, and from what starting point it was created. The goal was to create a unified leadership framework for customer service in a contact center environment. The idea was that the contact center employees i.e., advisors, experience the importance of work and are motivated by a common direction. The advisors should be clear about what they are responsible for in their work, and they should feel they receive sufficient support in achieving their goals. The aim was to increase the leaders' time with the team members and the inspiration for the idea started from servant leadership. The customer service in the future must invest in supporting the success of leaders and advisors qualitatively and effectively in a hectic and changing customer service environment.

Before the leadership framework implementation, a big part of the case company's leaders' working time was spent in something else than developing team members' i.e., advisors. According to the company's "pain point-analysis" in September 2019, leaders did not have enough time to be present for their advisors. Issues that caused the lack of time included many things, for example:

- each leader planned and prepared the materials for team meetings
- each leader created and maintained advisor-specific follow-ups and collected data from different places
- each leader took care of HR-tasks (absences, holiday applications, changes in team members, etc.)
- each leader took care of customer complaints by phone and prepared written replies

Big organizations have a lot of leaders, some are brand new and some have a lot of experience. The effectiveness of management activities varied and the ways to lead teams and individuals were not unified. Therefore, unified tools were designed to promote the leadership framework. At first, the advisors were trained to meet the customers in the same

way to achieve a consistent way of working. Also, three tools were designed to support the unified way of leading individuals. These tools were:

- a joint meeting form** to help to improve the quality of customer encounters.

- a scorecard** on the results of the work on a weekly basis, which includes the first-time resolution rate, the average handling time of a phone call, customer time as a percentage and the sales numbers.

- **a monthly discussion form** stores the monthly successes and mutually agreed issues. It also includes the development plan based on observations of joint meetings between the People lead and the advisor.

Communication and implementation of new things are challenging in a hectic environment. There were differences in the expertise of advisors and the available support and training did not reach all. The aim is to explore what kind of effects this leadership framework has brought along, and how the leaders have experienced all this. As a result of this, the leadership framework aims to ensure consistent encounters, increase the performance of customer encounters and shorten the duration of encounters.

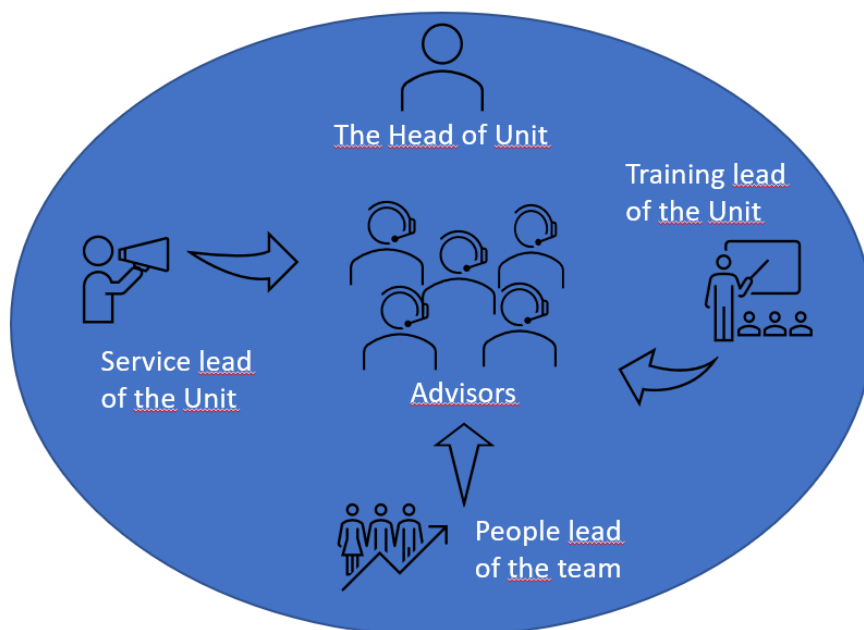
### **2.5.2 Framework and roles**

The leaders roles in this leadership framework are shared into three different positions. Leaders of all roles work together to achieve common goals.

**The People lead** of the team has a strong presence in the everyday life of the advisors and the team. People lead enables the development of advisors through coaching and supporting the achievement of goals. People lead has monthly conversations, joint meetings, and performance and development discussions with the advisor. Responsibilities also include communicating the key issues related to the direction of the company. Advisor and People lead are making the career-related plans together. People lead is the one that takes care of the HR-related tasks.

**The Service lead** is the one who leads the ongoing service situation in close cooperation with the team responsible for demand and supply of whole customer service in the contact center. The aim is to ensure that the work flows smoothly and the information on the need for change caused by the service situation reaches the right parties. The Service lead supports advisors in their daily work and makes sure everyone knows the most important topics of the day. The Service lead is the one who takes care of changes in advisor situations during a day and supports a good team spirit in the Unit.

**The Training lead** is responsible for training new things to advisors. The Training lead makes sure the changes in operating models, processes, and working instructions are shared in learning moments with the advisors. One of the tasks is to ensure the quality of competence according to the Unit’s needs. Training lead also coaches individuals according to their needs through joint meetings and listening to recorded meetings of advisors.



*Table 1: The leadership framework*

## **2.6 Summary**

This leadership framework is designed to improve the effectiveness of responsibility and accountability. The purpose is to improve communication and make the implementation of new things more effective and simultaneously to all advisors. The aim of the increased time with leadership and training is to increase the performance of customer encounters and shorten the duration of encounters. One goal is to brighten the role and responsibility of the advisor, and to achieve a unified way of working and to meet the customer. All this is aiming for a more efficient way of doing things.

My purpose is to explore this leadership framework, and to find out how the leaders have experienced it. I am exploring what kind of benefits and challenges leaders have faced, and whether they are in line with the objectives. I am also exploring what kind of changes and improvements leaders are suggesting for the future, and how they meet the expectations of the future leadership in customer service.

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research approach**

This thesis is a case study examining a leadership framework in customer service contact center in a large company in finance sector. The case study methodology facilitates understanding of an issue by exploring a case of interest, often examining extreme or unique cases, involving the description or analysis of a phenomenon, organization, or community (Creswell, 2007).

This is a qualitative study. In practice, this means the focus is on rich textual descriptions of the phenomena being studied, as opposed to quantifiable data. Bryman et al. (2015) indicate that the qualitative method is helpful to generate a detailed and intensive examination of a case. One of the features in qualitative research according to Bryman et al. (2015), is the intention to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied. Sometimes qualitative research is discussed only in terms of how it differs from

quantitative research, this kind of interpretation is narrow, and it only ends up defining what qualitative research is not (Bryman, 2012). The source of data in qualitative research is often based on conversations, interviews, life experiences, or observations (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2006). The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide the “human” side of the researched issue or topic. Qualitative research seeks the understanding of a given research topic and it provides complex textual descriptions of people experiencing a given research issue (Mack et al., 2005).

The data is gathered through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are selected because this structure is suitable for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sensitive issues. This method enables to get more information and clarification of the given answers (Barriball & While, 1994). The intent was to conduct semi-structured interviews with leaders working on this leadership framework, and to get input on how these leaders perceive the implemented leadership framework, and what kind of thoughts they have about leadership in the future. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted. To obtain credibility, the research process must be accurate and trustworthy. In a semi-structured interview, questions do not have to be presented in the same order to all the interviewees. Still, all the themes need to be covered to be able to compare the data between respondents. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage that the interviewer can make focused questions to solve misunderstandings during the interviews. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2000).

The approach where the data comes first, and the researcher tries to discover categories, patterns and themes is called inductive reasoning (Patton, 2002). Inductive reasoning moves from specific observations to broad generalization, and theory can be an outcome rather than the starting point. In practice, this means that data analysis and review of previous literature is done iteratively.

*“Most writers agree that the goal of case study analysis is to concentrate on the uniqueness of the case and to develop a deep understanding of its complexity”* (Bryman et al. 2015 p.65). My goal is to have a deep understanding of the case, which in this context means the leadership framework implemented at the case company; the leaders thoughts and how they have experienced this framework, and what aspects should take into consideration if this leadership framework is developed further. It is worthy of noting that it

is impossible to generalize the results to all leaders involved in this leadership framework or beyond the case company within the limits of one study. Lee et al. (2007) suggest that particularization is the strength of case studies instead of generalization. By providing a rich description of the context, I hope that the results are applicable also elsewhere.

### **3.2 Data collection**

The primary source of information for the research at hand is collected through semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were formulated based on a discussion with three company representatives who have been involved in building a new leadership framework for the company. The meeting with the trio took place through Teams, during which we discussed the new leadership framework and what issues are of interest to the company in the topic. These issues were taken into account when I considered the questions and added my view on the subject. The data consist of voice recordings of the interviews. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim from the voice recordings. Typed transcripts are the most common form of utilizing interview data. (Mack et al., 2005). Leadership as the main theme of the interview was communicated to the interviewees beforehand.

The interview questions were divided into different subcategories (Figure 2.). The theme around the questions related leadership in overall, leadership framework and leaders' thoughts about future leadership. The questions were designed to get a broad understanding of the personal perspective and opinion of the interviewed leader of leadership in general, and how they have perceived this leadership framework.

#### Thoughts of leadership

- What is good leadership for you?
- What are the most important features of a good leader?
- What are the three most challenging tasks in leadership?

#### Impacts of new leadership framework ( LF ) to your work

- How do you think you have managed to implement leadership in this LF?
- If you think back and compare your leadership before and now, what has changed?
- Give three examples of this LF which help you perform better?
- Give three examples of this LF which help advisors to perform better?
- Give three examples, what do you think there is to improve on this LF?
- Describe practical situations where this LF has been useful for you as a leader?
- Some of the old managerial work is centralized, how have you used the "free" time?
- What kind of support have you received from your own supervisor?

#### Impacts of new leadership framework to your team

- How do you think team members have embraced this leadership framework?
- What feedback have you received from team members?
- How have you supported team members self-management?
- What should happen to make team members more self-managed?
- Has there been a change in the team's performance after joining this leadership framework?

#### Leadership in the future

- What kind of leadership skills is needed in the future?
- What elements do you think should be maintained of this LF?
- What do you need more to support your leadership in the future?
- What advice would you like to give based on your experience to other colleagues in this LF?
- Do you want comment on something I did not notice to ask?

### *Figure 2: The interview questions in English*

Six interviews were conducted from September 2020 – October 2020. The selection criteria for the interviewees were more than one year of experience in leadership, and they had to be people leaders according to this leadership framework. The contact information of eight interviewees was received from the case company. From this selection, the first six respondents were selected. All interviews were conducted in Finnish, allowing the interviewer and interviewees to communicate in a shared language both the interviewer and interviewees are proficient in. Communicating in a native tongue allows participants to explain their ideas and opinions more comprehensibly, which improves the quality of the interview answers (Leech, 2002). This also guaranteed that central concepts and definitions were understood as similarly as possible, and no misinterpretations due to language barriers occurred.

I called each interviewee in advance when a suitable interview time was agreed upon. In the phone calls, I outlined the upcoming interview, and that the participation was voluntary and the responses anonymous. The interviewees did not have to prepare for the interview in advance. The interviews were conducted by Teams meetings and varied in length 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo. All interviews were transcribed anonymously, as agreed with the interviewees. The purpose of the study was explained, and interviewees had an opportunity to ask questions from me at any stage. The interview participants are listed in Table 3. below, it includes the information on leadership experience in years. Two of the

interviewed leaders had almost one year of experience in working with this leadership framework and the other four had about six months of experience. The more detailed coding is not revealed to further protect the anonymity of the respondents. The interviewees were:

Code	Job description	Years as a leader
#1	People Leader	4+
#2	People Leader	1-2
#3	People Leader	1-2
#4	People Leader	1-2
#5	People Leader	5+
#6	People Leader	30+

*Table 3: Interview participants*

### **3.3 Data analysis**

In the data analysis phase, after data collection, transcripts were coded according to interviewees responses to each question and the most salient themes emerging across the set of interviews. (Mack et al., 2005 p.30). Theoretical ideas start to generate when outlining connections between concepts and categories. In this point, the connection to the literature review needs to be considered and creating hypotheses, and linking them to the data (Bryman, 2012).

I have used NVivo software to assist in analyzing the data. The interview transcript documents were imported to NVivo and after that, the documents were visible in NVivo and they could be read and edited. The use of NVivo software helped to manage multiple codes and detailed analysis of the material. The data was coded under five main headings: Future leadership features, Leadership, New leadership framework, Other and Self-direction (Figure 4). Each heading has subheadings to categorize the data most appropriate way. The code headings in NVivo adapt the subcategories of interview questions.

Codes			
Name	Files	References	
FUTURE LEADERSHIP FEATURES	0	0	
improvements	6	43	
maintain	5	9	
remove	4	8	
LEADERSHIP	0	0	
challenges	5	18	
good features	6	47	
NEW LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK	0	0	
advisor feedback	0	0	
negative	5	8	
positive	4	11	
benefits	6	98	
challenges	6	55	
lack of support	3	10	
support	5	16	
results	6	15	
timetable	6	20	
Tips	5	11	
OTHER	6	73	
SELF-DIRECTION	6	34	

Figure 4: Coding in NVivo

NVivo is particularly appropriate for the analysis of free-flowing text. The task was to explore and compare the interviewees’ answers. The interviewed transcripts needed to be reviewed many times to find the most salient themes, as Mack et.al. (2005) recommends. In NVivo, the data was managed by creating case codes, with each case code acting as the “container” that holds all data. The NVivo software does not replace the researcher, but facilitates the coding of the data for easy identification and helps the researcher’s inductive approach and critical thinking (Bazeley et al., 2013). After the codes were created and categorized, it was time to organize them. Hierarchical code organization helped with the inductive approach and made it more visible to reflect the data. In Bryman’s words (2012), creating categories and generating an index of terms helps to interpret and theorize the relation of researched data. With the help of NVivo, it was very quick to trawl

through the documents and search for text. Coding the data is one of the key phases in the whole process of qualitative data analysis (Bryman 2012).

## **4 RESULTS**

This chapter details the findings of this study. The interview questions were based on the case company interests, and the questions were targeted to find out how leaders have perceived this leadership framework, and what are the benefits and challenges experienced by leaders.

First, I reveal the findings from the interview data regarding the interviewees perspective of this leadership framework. I also outline the interviewees opinions on self-direction and how they have experienced it in this change. Second, I reveal the interviewees opinions of the future leadership and how that relates this leadership framework

### **4.1 Benefits and challenges of Leadership framework**

One of the themes discussed was the leadership framework that interviewees have implemented in their teams. According to the responses, all leaders highlighted the benefits of this leadership framework. The data considered 98 comments on the benefits of this approach. The most mentioned benefits are related to the roles, the tools, and the time spent. One of the aims of this leadership framework was to increase the effective interaction between advisors and leaders. According to the opinion of all interviewed leaders, they have experienced that their time with the team members had increased.

All interviewees also found challenges in this leadership framework. The range of challenges varied a lot. There were concerns about the development of the leaders. Some interviewees speculated whether there is enough effort in developing the leaders competence. Do leaders receive sufficiently developing and relevant feedback of their work?

The discussion also revealed the challenges of team members diversity. How to motivate everyone? Many of the interviewed leaders felt that there is a need to exchange views with a colleague on how to move forward from challenging situations.

Half of the interviewees commented that, especially at the beginning of implementing the leadership framework, there was uncertainty about which task belonged to whom, and there was some overlap in the tasks. During the interviews, some also wondered whether the tasks included in the roles should still be reconsidered. A few of the respondents believe there are still tasks on People leads desk that they believe could be elsewhere. From the effectiveness point of view, there is still room for improvement of the implementation.

#### **4.1.1 Roles**

One of the benefits pointed out by all leaders was the efficiency of the role of three leaders. Sharing the tasks among leaders was perceived as beneficial for all. People lead can focus on developing team members because some of the tasks such as training and acute counseling have been transferred to the Training lead and to the Service lead. The majority of the leaders interviewed felt this leadership framework allows them to focus on what is important in leadership, helping the team members to grow into what they can become.

“This new approach is staggering. The teams continuous maintenance of its data and skills. Now we have the Training Lead whose main task is to ensure that teams receive up-to-date coaching that our department needs right now. And when it comes to current topics, they are handled at the learning moments and that there are sufficient knowledge and skills.” (#5)

“Service Lead in the sense that he or she is always present if any questions appear. So... if the People Leader is in a monthly conversation... at first what I got from the advisors...what does the leader do if she isn't here and you can't ask any questions....So even if you are in an hour meeting, there is someone who advisors can turn to.”(#2)

“How different nowadays you feel about what you come here to do. Now when I think about it...In last spring I came here to take care of things...and did some managerial work and tried to develop (laughs)...The days went by taking care of things. Now when I come here, I'm able to do real leadership work.” (#1)

A few interviewed leaders mentioned that the change to the new leadership framework was so fast, that not everyone had time to internalize what this leadership framework was all about. There was confusion in understanding what each of the roles involved. The leaders commented that confusion was experienced by both advisors and leaders. As seen from the citations below, advisors, and leaders have faced challenges in adapting the new roles based on this framework.

“The team members didn't take the change that well. Of course, some of them did, but from their point of view, it was a quick change. [...] It was a very painful change for the team, my help in

acute everyday cases stopped right there. I have been very busy with those things earlier and the team members have felt I have helped them a lot and suddenly after this framework came, it stopped. It reflected very strongly in our atmosphere and team members felt like I have abandoned them, and many were against this.” (#1)

“You must be very consistent with this Service lead role. Create yourself a clear understanding of the Service lead role and what are the People leads role and then stick to it... So, you don’t bounce on the side of Service lead role and confuse advisors.” (#2)

Almost all the answers highlighted how it has been challenging for advisors to give up “asking a colleague” and try to find the information needed by themselves or ask the help of the Service lead instead.

The leadership framework sought an increase in job satisfaction and meaning of work. Based on leaders’ answers, advisors get good coaching from the Training lead and the Service lead is an invaluable help in customer service ad hoc situations. All leaders commented their work is no longer interrupted as much it was before. Responses revealed many different benefits. Leaders commented that meetings with advisors are now much more effective because they can fully concentrate on one task at a time, and can provide relevant feedback. One leader had experienced a decreased number of errors in tasks requiring concentration. One of the comments was that there is no longer the same sense of urgency at work, and that tasks assigned to you can be done during working hours.

#### **4.1.2 Tools**

All leaders reported that they have benefited from the tools built for this leadership framework. The tools were perceived to bring systematicity to the work and the monitoring of their work together with the advisor had improved. There were comments that these tools had brought unity to the leadership.

“The planning has increased as a result. Now we have new tools and templates with this approach. I think it’s clarified the management and... and now we work roughly the same way. So, leaders’ meetings...they are much clearer. That’ll help me, too.” (#5)

“The leadership model has also come with various tools for leaders. They serve both me and the advisor. I can quickly get that information from that tool at the team level or even at the site level, at the national level... and at the level of the advisor. I can easily find out the information needed in the same place. Which has become an efficiency, and sales perspective, and a customer experience perspective.” (#4)

“The monthly conversation form and scorecard is definitely good... because the advisor can follow the doings by itself... and the advisor is also more interested in the development that

happened. It helps the advisor and the leader to develop further. It also brings more responsibility to the advisor.” (#2)

Based on the comments, the tools had helped the discussions become more effective. Leaders commented the advisors have become more interested in their own actions and results. It seems that advisors´ have taken more responsibility for their actions with these tools, and this was one of the objects of this leadership framework. The leaders also appreciated the ease that all the information needed for the results monitoring is now conveniently obtained from the same place, and does not need to be collected using different tools.

Almost all leaders had experienced also challenges related to these tools. According to leaders, some of the advisors have had technical challenges in the use of tools. The reasons behind this were assumed to be due to a lack of technical skills or motivation. One respondent criticized that the tools implemented in this framework were not that appropriate for their team. The data they received was not usable, and it showed worse results compared to reality.

#### **4.1.3 Time**

The leaders opinions were also consistent with the fact that the leadership framework had increased their time with the team members. Many of them pointed out they felt being able to spend more time developing their team members. The increased time has also been spent in preparing for team meetings and individual meetings better. Many of the interviewed leaders commented they had managed to fit time for self-improvement as well.

“In the past, my management was such that there was fire extinguishing. I went from place to place to put out fires, and helped with the single cases..... This has been removed now, so I have been able to spend my time on what really matters, that is monthly conversations or sales control discussions, or follow-ups... and so on. Now they are more those conversations... and those meetings with the team are... more focused on where we are from the goals point of view and the career paths point of view.” (#4)

“I have more time now...for them as individuals. Now, I have the opportunity to book us an individual time and react to things immediately.” (#3)

“This is clearer now, because I don´t have to interfere with the instant help or training...before I had to think about how I was going to train...when do I plan it, when do I schedule it. That time is now for the staff too, and it´s increased for me.” (#6)

Based on the replies, it appears that the leadership framework has helped to increase the People leads time with prioritized tasks. Some respondents noted an increase in effectiveness, as there are many more repetitions and encounters with advisors than before. The frequency of the meetings with advisors, was now considered to be at a good level. Now there are more frequent meetings with advisors; the leaders responses makes it easier for them to give positive feedback even on the small progress they are making. According to the leaders comments, the majority of advisors are looking forward to these meetings. Advisors are now more prepared for the meetings by familiarizing themselves with their own figures in advance. All respondents also said that, there are those in their teams who still need a lot of help and guidance in this matter.

## **4.2 Self-direction as a goal**

One of the purposes of this leadership framework is to promote the self-direction of the advisors. It should be noted that the frames set in at the contact center environment are tight, advisors need to work within the given context for the whole contact center to work effectively. The advisors customer serving time is measured and efficient way of working is vital for customer satisfaction reasons. Self-driving work is encouraged but the prescribed standards and targets should not be forgotten.

Most leaders commented that this leadership framework had increased the self-direction of advisors. When asked how leaders have been able to support team members with this, it was seen as a challenging issue. Some leaders wanted more tools to help with the implementation of self-direction. A few of the interviewed leaders responded that not everyone could be self-directed. According to many interviewed leaders, guidance towards self-direction requires long term-work and more cooperation with the Training lead and with Service lead.

“Responsibility for one’s own work, it increases as the leader has more time to develop it. So, it also contributes to the fact that it is the responsibility for their own work more... and the responsibility for their own development. In my opinion, this somehow extends this understanding.” (#1)

“We are required to do things that are sometimes impossible for certain individuals. No one can change a person no matter what they say...we can’t turn people into that.... Some have a finance career of more than 30years, they have come to work in a totally different place. You can no longer

turn them into what today's requirements are. Yes, they do change, and they do their part and do an incredibly good job. But if you know what I mean, why are they advisors after that 30 years in it. They have a certain challenge in that and should also be understood. It's not my inaction or unwillingness, it's also understanding for people." (#6)

"Now that we are being guided so hard to that self-direction and that everyone is responsible for his/hers own ability...and signing up to the learning moments, but not all the people are that kind...they don't care, or they don't want to...I don't know." (#3)

Two interviewees commented that lack of time prevents advisors from internalizing things and become more self-directed. One of the reasons for this was said to be the effectiveness of working time, which has been pushed to the limit.

Not all leaders saw self-direction as goal. One comment of self-direction was that it is overvalued. Half of the respondents couldn't really accurately describe how they had supported their teams towards self-direction. If self-direction is not considered an important objective of all leaders with planned measures on how to implement it, then it is hardly conveyed to the advisors.

### **4.3 Future Leadership**

The interviews discussed future leadership in general and what aspects should be taken into consideration in this leadership framework for the future. Questions related to future leadership prompted a wide range of reflections. All interviewed leaders underlined the growing importance of emotional skills, and many saw an increased need for individual leadership in the future. Based on the responses, most of the leaders felt that in the future the leadership skills will focus on motivation and coaching.

"In the future...yes, those emotional skills are even more important" (#3)

"Focusing into a person, finding the motivation factors of the person. Understanding the emotions and understanding of the individual...(hmm)... and maintaining it in the work and exploiting the strengths, that can be found there." (#1)

"A leaders' job is more like that...like being a career planner and helping to achieve goals for the individual...You don't have to spend time leading the efficiency or teaching the substance or anything like this." (#4)

Based on the interviews, it can be said that the leadership framework has brought more time for individual leadership. This is very much in line with the leaders ideas about future leadership in general. In this regard, this leadership framework supports future leadership. On the other hand, a leadership framework that is applied in the same way for everyone can compromise individuality. Another issue that came up in all interviews was the growing need for emotional leadership skills. The interviewed leaders did not reveal any component in this leadership framework that would develop their emotional skills as leaders. Half of the leaders said, that they wanted to have more feedback on their work from their supervisors. Comments revealed there have been joint meetings with an advisor, leader, and his/her supervisor but relevant and active feedback is still wanted more.

“as leaders, we are hungry for feedback, we want that feedback, and it is part of our values and culture. I would somehow...like to have more feedback, so we could develop and maintain our skills differently. I hope that it will be encouraged and...more attention will be paid in a positive sense of how leaders develop and use their time...mmm...develop own skills and know-how.”

(#4)

A few of the interviewees also commented on the change as general and the leaders skills to change the direction of the team when needed. It was seen as an important feature to occasionally stop and evaluate the situation, “take a balcony moment” as one of the leaders said. The other interviewee commented that whatever leadership framework is used, it should be actively questioned. Honest reflecting on things that work and what needs to be changed, it is no longer possible to make a leadership framework and get stuck in it for five or ten years. It can be said, there will always be changes. From this point of view, it is important that the attitude towards changes is open and the readiness and willingness to question current practices remain.

#### **4.3.1 Leadership framework in the future**

Based on the result of the interviews, it can be concluded that this new approach has been perceived to have more benefits than disadvantages. There are many things in this leadership framework that support the needs of the future. However, when asked, the

interviewees found aspects that should be developed and considered for the future when this leadership framework is developed further.

The roles of a Service lead, Training lead and a People lead were a good solution. All interviewed leaders noted that sharing the managerial tasks had increased their time to focus on the most important issues in the leadership work. Based on the replies, five out of six respondents would retain the roles of Training lead, Service lead and People lead.

“Well, I’ll take these three roles we have... Because then our advisors get the most and highest quality and most thought-out support for their work.” (#3)

“I think this kind of sharing the roles is really good. Then the fact that it should be put into practice so that the roles are kept clear. That’s really important.” (#2)

The importance of continuous learning was underlined by all interviewees and a few comments raised concerns, that there is not enough time to learn and internalize new things now. One of the respondents who did not want to retain the role of three would remove the role of Service lead but strengthen the role of Training lead instead.

“I wish we could forget the role of Service lead....We should have...the working instructions should be so clear and simple that Service lead is not needed...the internal counseling.. or what it is called...should be enough. I’d strengthen the Training lead role for even more. In the sense that these people can’t... if they can’t learn and they don’t get time to learn it. This is what I would like to change. Our people should be allowed to spend more time in learning, so they can do things better and faster. Now it is not the case.” (#6)

Some of the interviewees brought up an issue concerning the development of the leader. In this leadership framework, the development of an advisor is at the heart of the model, but should more attention be paid to the development of a leader in the future?

“I feel...(hmm) should we put the leaders’ self-development on a higher pedestal...maybe. How to maintain the leaders’ development. How to get such a staircase here, in a way, that in the future the leaders’ have their own Service lead when they need sparring. Because it is often hard to reach the Head of Unit.” (#4)

All the interviewed leaders commented that the importance of emotional skills will increase in the future. Development in these matters should be considered better. For leadership to become effective, managers need to be able to lead individuals and to have good

emotional skills. One of the interviewees commented that should leaders have a Training lead of their own to make sure they develop as leaders.

The benefits of this leadership framework highlighted a lot of the benefits of tools designed for this. The tools were considered to bring unity to leadership and save time when the necessary information can be found in one place. In the future, the tools should be even easier to use, so that everyone could use them without difficulty as mentioned in a few interviews.

Some leaders commented that in the future there should be a better capacity to experiment with different management methods. Flexibility is needed to find the right motivation styles for everyone. To achieve such flexibility more emphasis should be put on the development of leadership skills.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

This chapter includes a more detailed discussion and interpretation of the research results with reflections on previous studies. Based on the interviews, the author was able to identify both benefits and challenges of the leadership framework. The interviews also aimed to find out what is important in the future leadership and what should be considered in future development of the leadership framework.

### **5.1 Benefits and challenges of leadership framework**

#### **5.1.1 Roles**

All interviewed leaders stated that their work is no longer interrupted as much as it was before. Responses revealed many different benefits related to that, one of the main points was that the leaders had experienced their meetings with advisors are now much more effective. According to Beal et al. (2005), individuals perform better when they can focus on one task at a time. People may have experiences that they can perform two or more

things the same time, but a persons attempts to focus attention on more than one event at a time decreases a persons ability to perform. (Schneider & Fisk, 1982).

The leadership framework implemented in the case company reflects the idea of distributed leadership and leadership in the plural. The leadership functions have been shared among Training lead, Service lead and People lead. This role sharing can be considered to have similarities as Dennis et al. (2012) has described; pooling leadership in dyads, triads, or other constellations on the top of an organization from where specific tasks are shared among multiple actors. Greenwood et.al (2011) have also indicated that plurality is a natural solution when there is a need to handle complex decisions and diverse internal groups. The case company has a multi-locational and team-based contact center environment which can be said a diverse group indeed. Empirical studies also speak on behalf of sharing leadership. Dennis et al (2012) is suggesting that shared leadership has the potential to generate better team performance. However, as Dennis et al. (2012) state problematic issues of accountability and internal competition do not disappear. Many of the interviewed leaders mentioned the importance of clear roles and accountabilities, these need to be clear to everyone for the cooperation to be smooth. There was no interview question about the internal competition and the topic did not arise in the leaders interviews.

To make these roles of People lead, Training lead and Service lead to function at full capacity the overlaps in the tasks should be reviewed. According to many leaders, there are still duties on People leads desks that could be done elsewhere. Distributed perspective argues the development of leadership capacity throughout the organization (Day, 2001). This would benefit the development of ownership through organization and sharing tasks. When there are many leaders, it challenges the organization which needs to be flexible and enable this to work in practice (Coleman et al., 2002)

### **5.1.2 Tools**

All the interviewed leaders highlighted the benefits of the tools designed for this leadership framework. The tools are said to save time and bring systematicity to the leaders and advisors work. As good as the tools might be, they are still “only tools”. The main thing is to achieve a genuine interaction between a leader and advisor and these tools support leadership by providing up-to-date result information. As leaders commented the advisors

have taken more responsibility for their action because of these tools. It seems that until now with the help of tools and conversations with advisors and leaders, it has become clear to the advisors what is expected of them. This resonates with servant leadership where everything starts with a desire to serve, followed by an intention to lead, and develop others, to ultimately achieve a higher purpose objective to the benefit of individuals, organizations, and societies (Coetzer et al., 2017). When thinking about the attributes of servant leadership like empathy, listening, and enabling, those are considered as soft values. On the other hand, the results must be achieved, there is a need for command and control. The leader needs to be versatile to deploy these attributes as appropriate (Ehrenkranz, 2016). It can be said that the tools have brought the goals to the concrete level. These tools created for this leadership framework are useful to leaders as management tools and advisors, so that they can monitor and develop their own performance.

### **5.1.3 Time**

According to van Dierendonck (2011) Servant leaders prioritize the well-being and growth of the followers, from this point of view, it is good that the leaders felt the leadership framework had given them more time to spend with team members. On this basis, the interview answers support the intended purpose of this leadership framework that leaders should have more time for their team members. Leaders commented that meetings with advisors are now much more effective because they can fully concentrate on one task at a time and can provide relevant feedback. A few leaders had experienced a decreased number of errors in tasks requiring concentration. The role of a Service lead had calmed People leads working days.

Academic literature supports the idea that organizations can influence individual employee attitudes and behaviors. Both Grizzle et al. (2009) and Schneider (1980) have written the positive effects of supportive climate into customer service employees' customer-focused behavior. Wilder et al. (2014) argue that customer service employee's ability to adapt service offerings is based on organizational values. If employees are expected to alter or adapt a service through creativity the expectations need to be clearly expressed to employees. Both empathy and anticipation have a strong and positive relationship with

creativity. Based on the interviews, it can be said that leaders have now more opportunities to participate in the work of advisors, for example in the form of “joint meetings”. Through these meetings, the understanding of advisors work and its ‘challenges become more concrete. On this basis, it becomes easier to show empathy and, on the other hand, through practice, it is easier for the leader to share expectations related to work.

## 5.2 Self-direction

Most leader’s commented that leadership framework had increased the self-direction of advisors at on some level. The leader’s commented that they had noticed an increase in self-direction, for example, in practical situations where self-initiative was needed such as enrollments in training and for example, in preparation for discussions with leaders.

According to leaders, developing an advisor’s self-direction was a challenging issue overall. All the leaders commented that it needs long term co-operation with the Training lead and Service lead. These comments with the leaders go well with Pearce and Manz’s thoughts. *Developing an employee’s capacity towards self-direction can take more time than it is available* (Pearce and Manz, 2005 p.135). This can happen especially in organizations where the tradition is more leader centric. On the other hand, investing in developing self-direction, is the investment for future effectiveness. Empowering employees towards self-direction, the more capable employees it contributes which leads to valuable results (Pearce and Manz, 2005).

Peace and Manz (2005) writings suggest that more empowered employees become more self-directed and more capable in customer service situations. The importance of an organizations service climate cannot be overlooked. If an advisor is being asked to alter a service experience at their discretion, the encouraging climate is very important (Wilder et al., 2014). Based on this, the entire organization should adopt an atmosphere that guides towards self-direction in all possible situations.

Some leaders commented that the lack of time prevents the advisors to internalize new things. This is something worth of exploring in a case company because if advisors do not have enough time to internalize new things, they can hardly be excellent and knowledgeable advisors online.

This leadership framework is just at the beginning of its journey. Empowering advisors towards self-direction should consider long-term and determined work that considers the diversity of individuals. The result can be as Pearce and Manz (2005 p.136 ) are defining, *“the practice of self-and shared leadership has the ability to strengthen employees sense of ownership of, pride in and commitment to their work”*.

### **5.3 Leadership in the future**

All interviewed leaders stated that future leadership is increasingly emphasized by emotional skills. Literature supports this perspective. *Future leadership skills will rely on stress management, empathy, ability to motivate and energize others, to build trust, to maintain transparency, and accountability* (Jakubic and Berazhny, 2017 p.478). The popularity of empathy is also reflected in Holt and Marques (2011) article where they commented, that companies are deliberately looking for empathy and other soft behaviors in the hiring processes.

But what does this cornerstone of future leadership, empathy, mean? *“Empathy refers to one’s ability to understand the feelings transmitted through verbal and nonverbal messages, to provide emotional support to people when needed, and to understand the links between others’ emotions and behavior”* (Polychroniou, 2009 p.345). Lehtinen (2020) writes aptly in his article that in leadership empathy means, that the leader is aware of other peoples feelings and understands how they affect their perceptions. This does not mean, however, that she must accept their position on matters. The significance is that the leader can appreciate the common opinion of the other person and the thoughts that the other person is going through. Accordingly, many of the interviewed leaders thought the importance of substance skills in leadership decreases and the ability to encourage, and motivate individuals is emphasized in the future.

Allio (2009) have captured the five big ideas he feels are the main concepts throughout leadership books. The first idea: Good leaders have a good character. The second idea: There is no best way to lead. The third idea: Leaders must collaborate. The fourth idea: Adaptability makes longevity possible. The fifth idea: Leaders are self-made.

A few of the leaders interviewed pointed out that future leaders should have the ability to experiment with different ways of leading, not all advisors are motivated in similar ways. The leader must be able to transform. This matches Allio's second idea: There is no best way to lead. Allio defines that effective leadership *depends on the organization's culture and values, the behavior of the followers, the personal traits of the leader, the strategy to be implemented, the resources available for the task, the urgency of the challenge and the externalities facing the organization* (Allio, 2009 p.6). According to Allio, the ideal leader who satisfies the needs of all the stakeholders is a myth, the reality is that the standards for identifying effective leader changes as our perspectives change.

From a leadership perspective, the impact of digitalization is seen as enabling participative. Communication already happens electronically in many contexts. Still, digital tools will not compensate for visionary and wise leadership. Face-to-face connections with discussions and sharing ideas and giving and receiving care will be still required (Jakubik and Berazhny, 2017). The interviews revealed the importance of digital skills and the fact that the leaders should set an example through their own actions. Jakubik and Berazhny (2017) underline that leaders in the digital era should be innovative, encourage others and to have different perspectives, to have the ability to learn and ability to unlearn and be oriented towards the future.

## **5.4 Leadership framework development**

Matthew Dixon (2018) describes in his article the reasons why employees leave call center units. These reasons are the lack of challenging work, inadequate recognition, limited career paths, and the lack of flexibility. These are the main points to be covered in the future leadership framework. The advisors should be seen more as knowledge-workers. The metrics of handling time of phone calls are important, but the most desired goal is to have self-directed employees who can solve each callers problems and improve customer retention, share of their wallet, and loyalty. As in Dixons article, the customers self-serving opportunities have also created a challenge for call centers, the basic transactional calls are in minority and the queue is dominated by complex and varied issues that customers could not solve on their own. To enable advisors to respond to clients complex questions, training and coaching take center stage. In coaching conversations, the focus

is on the business impact of individual decision and how a decision will affect customers loyalty and the teams' financial performance (Dixon, 2018).

From this point of view, the leadership framework has started from the right things, i.e., increased the time with leaders and advisors. The benefits of this leadership framework highlighted a lot of the benefits of tools designed for this. However, tools are only tools for achieving the goals. The most important thing is to achieve effective leadership and it requires more than just tools. For leadership to become effective, leaders need to be able to lead individuals and to have good emotional skills. One of the interviewees commented that should leaders have a Training lead of their own to make sure they develop as leaders. Weinstein (2009) reports that empathy-based behavior can be learned “Individuals can be taught to ask questions to enhance the understanding that builds a connection between people, and helps them to perceive the emotions of others” (Weinstein, 2009 p. 21).

Almost all the interviewed leaders had a hunger for more and more relevant feedback for their leadership actions. This is something to take into consideration when developing this leadership framework further.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

Whatever the future might hold for this leadership framework development, it has so far been both insightful and productive. The implementation of the leadership framework has been experienced as a good thing and as a result, the leaders stated they have now more time for their team members, which was one of the goals of implementation. The interviewed leaders found more advantages than challenges of this leadership framework. The roles of Training lead, Service lead, and People lead was acclaimed. The challenges concerned various aspects, the most frequently mentioned was the development of leaders and the challenge to motivate diverse teams. The leaders have a hunger for relevant feedback on their work, and they are eager to develop their leadership skills further. Guiding towards self-direction was considered a challenging task, changes in the right direction have been observed. Lack of time was said to be one of the things that prevent advisors from internalizing things and becoming more self-directed.

Contact center advisors should be seen as a knowledge worker. Evolving automation requires more and more from advisors. The work is changing fast, the routine problems are handled by artificial intelligence and the more complex problems are resolved by advisors. The advisors should be ensured enough time, and support to develop into a knowledge worker. This contributes to the customer experience in the future.

The leaders highlighted the importance of emotional skills in future leadership. The same message arises from the literature reviewed and from the servant leadership theory which was the inspiration of this leadership framework. As it has been said by Weinstein (2009), empathy-based behavior can be learned, this is worth of consideration how this could be developed further in the case company. Leaders reported that they have more conversations with advisors now, these conversations should include relevant career paths to keep the talented advisors in the company.

The leaders hoped for more flexibility in the future. This approach has focused on creating a coherent way of doing things. Question is, is there enough room for flexibility? How will future leaders experience leadership if everyone must do it by the book of leadership framework? If the procedures and tools are the same for every individual, empathy and other soft behavioral skills are the features that an excellent leader can stand out. The desire to reflect and understand the needs of customers, advisors, and leaders creates the opportunity to create a leadership framework that suits best the companys goals and is the key to future success.

## **6.1 Practical implications**

The results of the study show the leaders have experienced the implementation successfully. The leader's thoughts of future leadership are in line with the goals of this leadership framework, even though the path towards self-direction is only starting. The case company should involve all layers of the organization when planning an even more encouraging and more effective feedback culture. It is important to find out more broadly if the lack of time is preventing advisors to develop. There is a need to make sure the efficiency of working and development of advisors are in balance. The use of AI as

support of advisors should be developed, it could ease the advisor's way into knowledge workers.

## 6.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This is a single case study of a big finance company implementing a leadership framework in a customer service contact center environment. The implementation of this leadership framework is discussed from the perspective of the leaders and how they have perceived it. The results of this research stem from an inductive study of a group of six leaders. The inductive approach was suitable for the exploratory nature of this case study. The answers cannot be generalized to all leaders of a case company or other companies. Studying how leaders perceive this leadership framework and what are the benefits and challenges experienced and leaders' thoughts of future leadership, using a larger sample would provide a more comprehensive view and understanding of the topic. To draw a more comprehensive understanding of the topic it would be interesting to research the opinion of advisors and how they have experienced this leadership framework. Once this leadership framework has been in operation for a longer period, a quantitative study of the results would also be interesting, comparing the results achieved with this leadership framework compared to the time before the leadership framework.

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