Making the road by walking
Enhancing employee engagement through more effective online leadership communication
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Abstract

Many studies indicate that only a small number of employees are truly engaged in their work. Engagement is heavily impacted by the interaction between employees and their immediate and senior managers. It happens on three levels: between the employee and their manager, between teams or functional groups, and within the organisation as a whole. Companies often miss opportunities to become more cooperative, engaged and productive workplaces because their management practices alienate employees. Lack of positive communication programmes can systemically undermine organisational performance, and lacking connections between senior managers and the workforce is a key obstacle to employee engagement.

Leaders need to embrace a new mindset and master new skills. Social technologies are gaining ground in organisations but leaders are still struggling in utilising them in their daily communication. Some leaders feel threatened, but new technologies also provide opportunities for more transparent and timely communication, making it possible for leaders to engage in discussions with their employees in ways that were not possible before.

This thesis examines the relation between employee engagement and leadership communication, analysing the impact of social technologies in leadership communication. The focus is on company-wide aspects. The situation in the case organisation, Uponor Group, is analysed using semi-structured thematic interviews and a qualitative survey. The research aimed at gaining deeper understanding of the current status of engagement in the case organisation, while also creating a framework for leadership communication in online environments to serve as the basis for future communications planning.

There was general interest among different organisational players in developing leadership communication. The Group’s top-level communication was considered very CEO-focused. The need to develop strategy-sharing practices was raised by the majority of respondents. Strategic themes should be ensured good visibility also in online environments. Having the new intranet and the possibilities it brings, including enhanced interactivity and opportunities for more open and timely communication and dialogue, does not automatically mean that information is shared more effectively but the leaders should lead by example and start sharing, too. With their blog, the leaders have already demonstrated their ability to step out of their comfort zone and try new ways to communicate. A good approach is to make the road to the future by walking, i.e. introducing one thing at a time. That way it would be easier for everyone to familiarise themselves and start using new ways to communicate. Technology is just the enabler, but a more fundamental change is related to the way leaders are expected to communicate – openly, in a timely manner, and without management jargon.

Keywords

Employee engagement, leadership communication, social technologies, online environments
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1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research project and highlights the motives behind the selection of the topic. The structure of this report is also described.

In office cubicles and management meeting rooms across the world, big changes are afoot. These changes are related to the fundamental shift in the ways people communicate and interact. While most business-related discussions used to take place behind closed doors or – during the past 10-20 years – through email, they are now happening more and more within a public domain. Opinions differ as to whether these changes are driven by social media, or whether they would have happened anyway, but the fundamentals of how we carry out business are nevertheless different from those a decade ago.

Changes are taking place in other aspects of business as well. While the business logic is changing and competition is growing more fierce, technology alone no longer provides a long-term competitive advantage. While trying to find sustainable ways to enhance their competitiveness, organisations are now also looking inside, and employee engagement is gaining in importance. Many companies claim that employees are their most important asset, but the simple recognition of this fact does not bring value per se. To provide a real competitive edge for the company, the employees need to understand where the company is heading and how they can contribute. Many top executives are now realising that the engagement of their personnel has an impact on the bottom line, and are accordingly taking action to enhance it.

There are numerous ways to enhance employee engagement. The usual drivers at the top of the list are compensation and benefits, rewarding work content, career opportunities and work security. In a way, these can be considered “hygiene factors” i.e. things that need to be in place anyway. To ensure real engagement, more is needed, and that is where leadership comes into the picture. Leadership takes shape in the form of communication, and it happens on three levels: between the employees and their managers, between teams or functional groups, and within the organisation as a whole.
While all of these are important, this thesis focuses on the company-wide aspects rather than the relationship between the individual employee and their immediate manager.

Leaders play a crucial role in creating the settings where employees can carry out their work. Many people believe that charismatic leadership plays a role in increasing engagement. According to this view, people are born with specific leadership characteristics that cannot be learned. This view has been challenged, and one can justifiably question whether good leadership is a question of charisma or about a leader’s ability to combine business and emotional intelligence and effective communication. Leadership is nonetheless experiencing a crisis of some sort as the confidence of employees in their leaders is decreasing rapidly. The leaps in technology have, no doubt, played a significant role in this. The advent of social technologies and the immense amount of information available at everyone’s fingertips have made people press for more transparency at the workplace, too.

No one can lead alone: to be a leader, one needs to have followers. The single most important tool that leaders use to ignite action is communication. In the past, communication was largely seen as a task handled by a separate communications function. Today, things are gradually changing. The change stems from the increased complexity of today’s business environment – matrix and virtual organisations, increased diversity of the workforce, speed of change, and constantly increasing requirements for efficiency. Leaders know that to commit and perform, employees need to have a clear understanding of what the company is trying to achieve. This clarity can be achieved through effective communication.

The typical company mantra that leaders have been preaching during the past years is the need to make things better, faster and cheaper – not the most inspiring and engaging message from the employee perspective. There is growing appreciation for employee communication that helps to increase awareness of the company’s objectives and brings results even in a challenging business environment.
There are numerous ways to enhance employee engagement, and many of them have a common denominator: communication. As simple as it sounds, practice has often proved that things do not always work in reality. There are numerous improvements that leaders can make in their communication. The opportunities offered by new social features open up a completely new arena for leaders to share, listen, ask and interact with their employees. At the same time, leaders may feel intimidated by the new tools, methods and ways of communicating. Technology alone can never be the solution, but smart leaders will grasp the opportunities it provides and utilise them to increase their influence for the benefit of the company.

This thesis is a synthesis of many aspects – leadership and leadership communication, employee engagement, and the opportunities that new social technologies are bringing to the workplace. The first chapter introduces the general themes and motivations underlying this topic of research. The second chapter discusses the objectives of the research as well as the questions examined. Chapter 3 focuses on presenting and analysing, from a theoretical point of view, employee engagement, its drivers and impact on contemporary organisations as well as individual employees. Chapter 4 discusses leadership and leadership communication, the related challenges, and the major trends. Chapter 5 brings the two previous chapters together in the context of social technologies, discussing major trends and phenomena, trying to identify which of the traditional practices and opportunities still exist, what major changes are elicited by the increased use of social technologies, and what challenges and opportunities they provide. Chapter 6 provides background to the empirical research, including information on the case organisation. Chapter 7 elaborates on the method, and the findings are reported in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 summarises the results. Finally, discussion and conclusions can be found in Chapter 10.
2 Objectives and research questions

This chapter highlights the objectives of the thesis and introduces the research questions. This thesis discusses leadership communication in online environments. The focus is on communication that has a potentially positive impact on employee engagement.

This thesis explores the significance of leadership communication and its impact on employee engagement. Special focus is given to virtual environments and social technologies, as their impact on modern organisations is so far-reaching. The significance of employee engagement in contemporary organisations and the impact of leadership communication on employee engagement will be explored through a literature review. Furthermore, the springboard that new social technologies provide for powerful leadership communication will be illustrated, again keeping in mind the ultimate target of enhanced employee engagement. Finally, these theoretical aspects will be mirrored against the (situation in the) case organisation, and a framework will be presented for developing leadership communication in the case organisation.

The reason for narrowing down the research to online environments was simply the broad extent of the concept of leadership communication. It was further supported by the topicality of the theme in the case organisation – a recently launched intranet had just opened up a vast array of new possibilities that leaders were about to start exploring. The company values were in the process of being renewed during the research phase of this thesis project, hence corporate values are not discussed in detail in what follows.

Following the framework for the thesis, the research question was formulated as follows:

− How can leadership communication be improved in an online environment to enhance employee engagement?
The research question has three main themes that need to be considered, for which the following sub-questions were defined:

a) What elements constitute employee engagement and why is it important to organisations?

b) What is good leadership communication and how does it impact employee engagement?

c) How does the transition to online environments impact leadership communication and what opportunities and challenges does it create?

d) What is the current status of leadership communication in the case organisation and how can it be developed using virtual tools so that it enhances employee engagement?

Question a) will be answered through a theoretical study of the concept in Chapter 3. Relevant studies and other literature will be used to build a comprehensive picture of the concept.

Through question b), discussed in Chapter 4, leadership communication will be approached first through a brief introduction to aspects of modern leadership. This will help to form an understanding of the changing environment and requirements for leadership communication. The literature review will focus on aspects that are relevant in terms of employee engagement.

Question c) will help to shed light on the changes stemming from social technologies and virtual work, and their impact on leadership communication and, consequently, employee engagement. Chapter 5 focuses particularly on this question.

Through question d), the theoretical aspects reviewed in the previous questions will be mirrored against the case organisation, and a framework will be developed for improving leadership communication and employee engagement in the said organisation. The current status analysis will heavily rely on the discussions with the top management of the case organisation and the responses received through a qualitative survey among
selected key persons in the organisation, but other existing background materials will be used as well to help build a comprehensive picture of the situation.

Three bodies of literature are relevant for addressing these questions. First, the chapter on employee engagement highlights the reasons why organisations are so interested in making their personnel feel more engaged. The drivers and impact of engagement are also discussed. Second, the chapter on leadership communication introduces the biggest leadership challenges in contemporary organisations and looks at the changing concept of good leadership communication. Finally, social technologies and the related challenges and opportunities are described from the perspective of leadership communication and employee engagement. The focus of the literature review is on identifying key drivers, factors and phenomena that bring value to the organisation and help build the basis for future development.
3 Employee engagement

Employee engagement is not rocket science. Leaving the office in the evening feeling satisfied, being absorbed by the task at hand, looking forward to coming to work day in and day out – these can all be categorised as manifestations of employee engagement on a personal level. They are things that anyone can recognise and relate to. But why is engagement on a larger scale such a hot topic in business circles these days? Why is it on the lips of every successful executive? Why is it just now that it is creating such a buzz among organisations? What is the real impact of having – or not having – engaged employees? How does engagement show? And if engagement is the desired state of affairs, what are the means to increase and cultivate it?

This chapter attempts to give answers to these fundamental questions related to employee engagement and business success.

3.1 Employee engagement as a concept

For a number of years, organisations have been talking about employee satisfaction, trying to find ways to improve it. More recently, the focus has been turning to engagement. There are several definitions of employee engagement but it seems there are some key aspects that differentiate employee engagement from employee satisfaction. According to Macey, Schneider, Barbera and Young, energy and strive are the key elements of employee engagement while satiation and contentment form the core of employee satisfaction. It seems that engagement amounts to something more than just simple satisfaction. (Macey et al. 2009, 4-6.)

Fleck and Inceogly state that “engagement is a psychological state that employees can be in when they are performing their work roles,” and Kahn, the pioneer of engagement, describes “engaged employees as being fully physically, cognitively and emotionally connected with their work roles.” According to Kahn, there are three elements that need to be in place in order to enable engagement: meaningfulness, safety (which includes management style), and availability (Albrecht 2010, 4, 35; also Welch 2011, 332). These definitions focus on the feelings that people have inside them. Federman
(2009, 22) takes another view and defines employee engagement as “the degree to which a person commits to an organisation and the impact that commitment has on how profoundly they perform and their length of tenure.”

Perhaps the most extensive definition is offered by Macey et al. who divide employee engagement into psychic energy (the inside) and behavioural energy (how it is shown to others). Psychic energy means that people put more energy into the task at hand and spend less energy focusing on something else. This is often known as being absorbed by something, being in the “flow.” It goes without saying that organisations that are able to tap into this kind of energy are better equipped to outperform their rivals. It is, however, rare for employees to be working in a constant state of “flow” all the time. Rather, most people might have such experiences now and again, and the common denominator to such experiences is that people usually have a clear objective or goal they are trying to achieve, there is a sense of urgency, and they put intense effort into reaching the objective. It is not realistic to assume that people would be constantly “in the zone”; it is more likely that engagement comes in degrees. The behavioural part is about how the engagement is visible to others. Engagement is what produces results, because when employees are proactive, they anticipate opportunities and take action, they think beyond what is necessary and they expand their thinking and their roles to match new needs and demands. Further, employees take ownership for their personal development and actively develop their own skills to tally with the needs of the organisation. An important part of engagement as behavioural energy is persistency: engaged employees do not give up when facing obstacles; it is about having employees who do not need reminders or prodding. Finally, engaged employees are able to adapt to change – and not only adapt but they often actively embrace change, or even take initiative in making change happen. (Macey et al. 2009, 4.)

Embedding the components of psychic and behavioural energy, Macey et al. (2009, 7) define engagement as “an individual’s sense of purpose and focused energy, evident to others in the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort, and persistence directed toward organisational goals.” This definition is used in this thesis as the basic description of employee engagement.
There are several drivers of employee engagement. First, employees must experience psychological meaningfulness. According to research, the simplest way to achieve this is to give them more autonomy. Greater fit with work roles, variety in tasks and skills, increasing job challenges, and feedback also play a role. Formal pay is not, however, a strong contributor in how employees invest their energy in their work. This is good news for organisations, as many changes with a positive impact on engagement are not costly but rather a matter of rethinking job design. Second, employees must have a feeling of psychological safety. This means that they should be able to feel safe to invest themselves without having to fear negative consequences. It seems that the role of leadership is significant, and so is a healthy and fair climate. The constant changes in the current business environment may undermine employees’ sense of security; thus, efforts to ensure and enhance job security can enhance psychological safety and, consequently, employee engagement. Third, psychological availability i.e. the employee’s personal resources such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and optimism, have a major impact on a person’s readiness to engage. It seems that urgency is a good catalyst for making people to apply their energy, but it is a double-edged sword. If people get exhausted, they require periods off-work to rest and recharge their batteries. This is called psychological detachment. If employees are continually overloaded without any chance to detach, they gradually lose their capacity to engage. (Truss, Delbridge, Alfes, Shantz & Soane 2014, 58-71.)

A sense of belonging is also an important aspect of engagement. If employees can identify with the groups they are part of, it increases meaningfulness. According to Rosso (in Truss et al.), a sense of belonging is developed “through interpersonal connectedness, generated in certain interactions through which people feel supported.” These include high-quality connections, relations of compassion, and facilitative leader-follower relations. According to Bass (in Truss et al.), “leader-follower relationships can offer a sense of connectedness as well as a place of attachment to purposes and missions,” creating relationships “in which followers feel connected to leaders whom they work with as well as work for.” Such circumstances are created by transformational leaders who attend to, communicate with, and challenge their followers; chal-
lenge assumptions, ask for ideas and develop other people’s independent thinking; articulate appealing and inspiring visions; and provide role models. Transformational leadership is characterised by the leaders’ ability to create shared missions that enlarge the meaning of the individuals’ collective efforts. (Truss et al. 2014, 83-86.)

According to Robinson et al. (2004, 21), the sense of feeling valued and involved is the strongest driver of engagement. It means that employees are involved in decision making, they are able to express their ideas, and managers listen to the employees’ views and value their contributions.

There are some common characteristics to what engages people. They need to know that their contributions have an impact, and that they are part of something bigger. They need to have a sense of belonging and, no matter what they do, the journey should be meaningful. If people are asked to “just do their jobs,” it is clear that they do not understand the big picture and how their tasks contribute to it. (Haudan 2008, 17-19.) It is also clear that this kind of approach makes people less self-directive and significantly reduces speed when changes are needed. It is like asking people to start constructing a 1000 piece puzzle without letting them see the entire picture of what is supposed to be the end result. But simply knowing what is not enough. It is equally important for employees to know why they are supposed to do something. According to Hawkins (2013, 178), it is important that people have a reason for their efforts, be it something that needs to be achieved or something that needs to be avoided, and good leaders utilise this when they want people to do something.

While people are working harder and work is becoming more stressful, business executives are demanding more productivity. But in most cases productivity is not just about how many hours people spend at the workplace or how many things they can do during a normal workday; productivity is more about working on the right things, taking the business forward. If leaders are more interested in when employees are punching their time clock instead of the quality of their work, they create a culture that hinders productivity. (Federman 2009, 19.)
While the drivers of employee engagement vary somewhat depending on the source, leadership is typically always a contributing factor. How leadership materialises to employees is in most cases through communication. Creating a common purpose, connecting, articulating inspiring visions – all these have proven somewhat challenging in reality. The importance of communication is in many cases acknowledged, but the reality speaks another truth when good intentions are not implemented for various reasons, whether lack of understanding, pressure to carry out tasks that create immediate, visible results or lack of vigour, resources, etc.

3.2 The bottom line – the business case\(^1\) for employee engagement

Companies have realised that in the race to win business and make profit, they can no longer solely rely on recruiting top talent. It is equally important that they make sure their employees are inspired, applying their full capabilities in their daily work. Otherwise important resources are not used effectively, and not many organisations can afford such inefficiency in today’s tough competitive environment. What companies need are employees who are energised and dedicated: that is, engaged with their work. (Bakker & Leiter 2010, 1.)

Quite alarmingly, and despite increasing understanding of the importance of employee engagement, many studies across the world indicate that only a small number of employees are truly engaged in their work. The level of engagement somewhat varies in different studies. In a recent Gallup study, the results show that only 13 per cent of employees worldwide are engaged while 24 per cent are actively disengaged (Gallup 2013, 6). Federman (2009, 3-5) has also made the same observation, claiming that only 11-29 per cent of employees are fully engaged in their work, while Jue, Alcalde Marr and Kassotakis (2010, 79) present a very different figure when they claim that nearly 20 per cent feel disconnected from work. Being a “soft” topic, there are no exact definitions of what engagement really is and how it can be measured. Hence, different sur-

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\(^1\) A business case is used to refer to an argument that intends to convince decision makers to approve some kind of action. Its format can vary from a simple spoken suggestion to a thorough document. The common denominator is that it aims to explain the business rationale (typically in financial terms), thus giving a compelling reason why the planned actions should be taken (Source: http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/business-case).
veys cannot always be directly compared as they may have utilised different criteria and methods as well as different definitions of the elements of engagement.

There is a widespread conception that companies with engaged personnel are better off compared to their rivals with less engaged employees. Yet, decision-making in companies is often driven by financial factors. Of course, companies need to make money; it is the key to their existence. Federman, however, argues that if success is measured by the financials, it is like looking in the rearview mirror of the car, looking at a picture of the past. The numbers stand for actions that have already been taken. Reacting to financials leads to short-term decisions and makes the company lose sight of the real business. Old definitions of employee engagement have focused on satisfaction or happiness or union activity, disregarding its capacity as a business driver. (Federman 2009, 20-22.) The figure below illustrates that employee engagement is a significant indicator to success.

![Figure 1. The bottom line. Impact of employee engagement on financials. Adapted from Corporate Leadership Council 2004 Employee Engagement Study (Federman 2009, 21.)](image)

Macey et al. state that there is indeed clear evidence that engagement and superior financial performance are interrelated – that engagement shows on the bottom line.
Companies with engaged people outperform other companies in terms of Return on Assets (ROA), profitability and shareholder value. The difficulty is that the methods used to measure the benefits of employee engagement vary and do not always provide reliably comparable data. Macey et al. use three indices of financial performance: return on assets, profitability, and shareholder value, claiming that compared to other, accounting-based measures, shareholder value is forward-looking and allows for better comparability between companies and even different lines of industry. Companies that “have higher such ratios have greater anticipated market returns relative to the investments that have been made” – in simple terms, they are better investments for the money. (Macey et al. 2010, 2-3.) One can question, however, whether the success of the company is reinforcing the feeling of being engaged, i.e. are people generally happier and more motivated when the business is going well, and the opposite when sales are plummeting. This aspect was not discussed in the above sources.

![Shareholder value](image)

Figure 2. Shareholder value as a measure of employee engagement. Shareholder value (q) reflects the company’s value on the capital market to the replacement cost of its assets. (Macey et al. 2010, 2-3.)

According to Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004, 30), the impact on business has been widely demonstrated, including factors such as increased job satisfaction, increased job performance, increased total return to shareholders, increased sales,
decreased employee turnover and intention to leave, decreased intention to search for alternative employers, and decreased absenteeism.

In an attempt to capture the process that translates the energy into financial outcomes, Macey et al. (2009, 8-9) introduce a schematic overview conceptualising employee engagement: the employee engagement value chain.

![Employee Engagement Value Chain](image)

Figure 3. Employee engagement value chain (Macey et al. 2009, 8)

According to this model, engagement helps to create both tangible benefits, i.e. enhanced productivity, and intangible benefits such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, and improved brand image, which are usually not measured by HR metrics. The fact that employees are more inclined to create value for the organisation, more consistent in their actions, and less likely to leave the company, all lower the company’s risk profile. This means that there are positive implications which are not usually connected to increased shareholder value. (Macey et al. 2009, 9.)

Euan Semple, although not specialised in engagement but on the use of social technologies in organisations, is somewhat doubtful about organisations’ attempts to increase
employee engagement. He looks at it from the employee perspective and argues that
“we have ‘employee engagement’ and other mealy mouthed attempts to re-invent the
language of the workplace to be more acceptable to people who have realised that
there is more to life than being a wage slave.” He further defines organisations as
“loosely held networks of individuals who turn up at the same place at the same time.”
Still, he sees that efficient and effective organisations are made of engaged, thoughtful
and tolerant employees who take responsibility for themselves. (Semple 2012, 254-
256.)

Current research indicates that there is no single solution to enhancing engagement. It
all starts from the premise that the organisation has recruited the right kind of people
and provided a suitable work environment. The basic prerequisites include good line
management, two-way communication, cooperation, employee wellbeing, and focus on
development. Engagement is heavily impacted by the interaction between employees
and their immediate and senior managers. (Robinson et al. 2004, xii, 29-30.) Much of
the research and development is focused on the interaction between employees and
their immediate managers. The role of senior management in enhancing engagement,
especially in large international organisations and through the means of social technol-
ogies, has gained less attention.
4  Leadership communication in contemporary organisations

This chapter begins with a brief look at the key aspects and challenges of modern leadership, as they are relevant triggers and enablers of effective leadership communication. The focus then moves to leadership communication, particularly elements of good leadership communication and the ways leadership communication is changing. The content of this chapter reflects on the question: What is good leadership communication and how does it impact employee engagement? It should be noted that this overview is by no means exhaustive; there are elements that are not discussed, or are mentioned only briefly. The emphasis is on aspects that are relevant to this thesis.

4.1 Leadership in contemporary organisations

The world today is very turbulent. Globalisation has brought about not just opportunities but also threats, insecurity and constant change. The relationship that people have with their work and work community is also changing. Long gone are the days when people worked in the same company their entire lives. People see different jobs as building blocks in their career, and engagement to a particular organisation has decreased significantly. (Juholin 2009, 22-23.) Layoffs that have become the norm rather than an exception, and constant requirements for cost savings and enhanced productivity have taken their toll and further weathered employees’ engagement.

Contemporary organisations are by no means an easy place for leaders, who likewise face increasing expectations and demands. Not only should they be visionary leaders, but they should also understand the business and anticipate changes, run a successful business and keep all stakeholders happy, understand the behavioural and motivational aspects to engaging employees, and, furthermore, be great communicators.

Some people argue that great leaders are born. This view has recently been challenged by many researchers. For example, Kouzes and Posner state that leadership is not about who you are but what you do. In their research, they have identified what they call the five practices of exemplary leadership. These practices require the leaders to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and
encourage the heart. (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 15.) And while there are things that are more natural to some people – for instance some people find themselves at ease in situations where they need to present something in front of a large crowd while others find such situations very uncomfortable – most of the things required from good leaders can be learned and developed.

### 4.1.1 Leadership is not a one-man show

Being a leader and having formal authority no longer guarantees power in the organisation. Instead, the key capability is the ability to influence people. According to Semple, a culture still exists in many organisations which assumes that people do not do anything until the management tells them to. Outside the business world, it has become more and more common for people to come together in online environments and solve complex problems and make extraordinary things happen, and these types of environments are becoming more common in business as well. This calls for new leadership styles. (Semple 2012, 116-117.) Kouzes and Posner also talk about the importance of followership, stating that leadership is “a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow.” They argue that the quality of these relationships is the key. If there is mutual respect and trust, and if the leaders are able to engage people to achieve shared aspirations, the organisation is bound to achieve results. (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 30.)

To be able to lead effectively, leaders need to be more responsive to the needs of their audiences, and adjust their communication accordingly. Common characteristics of good leadership can be identified and applied to a number of different situations. Our society tends to be very much about celebrities, and strong leaders are often considered to be something out of the ordinary – people with lots of charisma. This view puts the emphasis on the individual and ignores the social processes of leadership. No one can be a leader alone. Leadership is born in the interaction between leaders and their followers, and it is heavily dependent on communication. Leaders need to be able to change their leadership style if circumstances change. This is sometimes referred to as situational leadership. (Gamble & Gamble 2013, 4-6.)
Followership is central to the transformational leadership concept. According to Bass & Riggio, transformational leaders “behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers’ work.” They also state that “leaders get followers involved in envisioning attractive future states; they create clearly communicated expectations that followers want to meet and also demonstrate commitment to goals and the shared vision.” (Bass & Riggio 2006, 6.) Again, the importance of clearly communicated expectations is emphasised.

An important notion is that leadership happens between people, “leaders lead when they connect with others in ways that help them to seize opportunities or tackle problems that otherwise they could not address.” Successful leaders do not all come out of one mould; there are many leadership styles that can bring results. The most important thing is that the leader feels comfortable in his role, that he can be himself. (Binney, Williams & Wilke 2012, xi, 7.)

### 4.1.2 Now you see me, now you don’t – leading in virtual organisations

Globalisation, working in matrix organisations and requirements for increased efficiency and decreased costs have forced companies to move more and more of their interaction and work to online environments, outside the confines of the traditional physical office space. Companies want to make use of the best available talent, which means that they need to look further, even to the other side of the world, to find the best fit. With the support of modern technology, it is easier to organise and manage teams that are geographically dispersed, but it does not make things any easier from the leadership point of view – quite the contrary: all the old challenges exist, accompanied by a number of new ones. Leading co-located teams and virtual teams are two completely different things, and many organisations have not realised this critical truth. They may have invested in supporting technology, but having the right tools in place does not guarantee the success of a virtual team. Neither do processes and models if they are not used effectively. According to Lojeski, organisations have failed to implement leadership models that would effectively utilise the possibilities of the virtual world, but instead continue to use outdated, obsolete models to lead their
workforce. Technology has brought about many changes in the way people work but the social dynamics have experienced little changes. (Lojeski 2009, 9-10, 13.)

The same applies to communication in virtual organisations. The old rules of communication no longer apply. As the physical distances grow and people rely more on communication technology, the virtual distance increases, which leads to individuals and groups experiencing that others are far away. But this is not happening only with people that sit thousands of kilometres apart – virtual distance also exists among people who sit close to each other. When virtual distances are great, collaboration technology does not provide much help. It also leads to a decrease in perceived leader performance due to increased unclarity related to roles and goals. (Lojeski 2009, 10-11.) Organisations tend to focus on the cost savings achieved with reduced travel costs, as people can work and attend meetings from their own desks. Cost savings should not, however, run counter to decreased efficiency or clarity of roles and goals.

The virtual distance formula is presented by Lojeski:

![Virtual Distance Formula](image)

Physical distance consists of geographical distance, temporal distance and organisational distance. Geographical distance means, as the term indicates, that people are geographically apart, far away from one another. Temporal distance includes separation by the time zones but also differences related to work schedules. Organisational distance is a sense of separateness that can emerge even between people working in the same team toward a common goal. Operational distance is the individual’s feeling that there is no connection with colleagues, and one part of it is communication distance, which happens when there is lack of shared context and when there is repeated use of non-optimal communication modes. Communication
distance evolves into feelings of disconnecteness, but use of appropriate communication tools and techniques will help bridge the gap. Affinity distance includes cultural, social, relationship and interdependence distance. Relationship distance indicates the lack of relationship connections, which are a crucial element in building communication. Interdependence distance represents people’s commitment to each other. If there is lack of interdependence, people feel less motivated. Uncertainty regarding a shared vision or mission hampers people’s willingness to participate, which can cause inefficiencies for companies. (Lojeski 2009, 142-150.)

Most leadership skills in virtual environments are the same as in the traditional face-to-face environment. They are, however, executed differently. It is important that there is a strategy in place defining how leaders should lead virtually, and the metrics in place to measure their success. It is important to have planned, disciplined and intentional actions. According to a study by Wiley on leading the virtual workforce, performance declines as virtual distance accumulates: trust falls off by 83%, job satisfaction decreases by 80%, role and goal clarity drop by 62%, project results dive by 50%, and leader effectiveness declines by more than 50%. Leaders have a huge challenge in creating a sense of belonging and togetherness in organisations that are geographically dispersed. The success of organisations heavily depends on how effective leaders are in leading in the new environments. (Dennis, Meola & Hall 2013, 46-51.)

4.1.3 Demographics – when old rules no longer apply

Generation Z, Millennials, digital natives – there are many names for people who have been surrounded by technology all their lives. Gen Y is used to refer to the people who were born in the late 80s and early 90s. Gen Z – the Millennials – are the next generation born around the arrival of the new millennium.

Contemporary organisations are filled with people who are used to constant travelling to ignite action and achieve results. While there are of course still various occasions where meeting face-to-face brings better results, digital natives are used to making things happen over the internet, regardless of where they are located. For them, the distance from home or the office to the other side of the world is very short – the
world is just one mouse click away. Whether they are online or offline makes no
difference to them, because being able to connect and handle things virtually is such a
natural part of who they are and what they do.

But being able to act online is not the only thing that separates the different
generations. Work is not everything to them; these people do not live to work but
rather strive to balance work and leisure and not drudge from morning till night. They
also want to do work that has a purpose. If the company’s business or values are in
conflict with their own values and priorities, or if the company’s way of working is not
comforming to their own lifestyle, they are more inclined to leave the company than
the preceding generations. Making money is no longer the most important thing. In
fact, the Millennials place higher priority on companies acting responsibly toward their
employees, customers, society and the environment rather than acting as pure money-
making machines. Despite this, the Millennials are also more apt to leave the company
if they are offered more money or better opportunities working for another company.
They feel that they have no obligation to be loyal to their employer if the employer has
not shown much loyalty for their employees, either. (Qualman 2009, 232-233.)

Federman lists some issues people are facing in today’s workplaces, such as increased
pace, layoffs, the need to do things differently from how previous generations were
accustomed to doing them, and lack of consistency in leadership. Federman also
questions whether organisations are run in a transparent manner. It is not just the
younger generations that would benefit from increased transparency; it would be
welcomed by all age groups. (Federman 2009, 10-11.)

The Millennials are used to collaboration. Just looking at the mushrooming
crowdsourcing and peer review sites on the internet confirms that the logic of
collaboration is changing rapidly. Digital natives have grown up with social media.
They want constant feedback, they want transparency and honesty, and they want
everything fast. (Qualman 2009, 233-234.) The old command-and-control approach no
longer brings results, and position and title no longer give authority; leaders need to
earn their power.
The way these people have learnt to use media also impacts the way they behave at work. Having several conversations ongoing simultaneously and using a mix of different tools and media formats to access and share information and collaborate is in contradiction with the traditional leadership and communication practices of organisations. Leaders are used to crafting their messages and pondering every word, polishing every release to perfection, trying not to annoy anyone, nor use excessively bold words or expressions, nor promise too much, and – most importantly – without inviting any feedback or conversation, let alone differing opinions. All this conflicts with the practices that younger generations have grown up with. Furthermore, the attention span of Gen Y and Gen Z is also much shorter, which makes it hard for them to read lengthy management reports and long articles.

### 4.2 The changing concept of leadership communication

The traditional model views communication as a process of transmitting information from the sender to the receiver. Information was viewed as something that can be transferred and that is not impacted by any other factors. In organisations, communication typically meant that information was poured down from management to employees. In this model, the employees were passive objects. In the information-intensive organisations of the new millennium, however, this model is no longer working. (Juholin 2009, 58-59.)

In practice, organisations are communication networks, and if the connections break, the whole network becomes dysfunctional and eventually falls apart. For organisations, communication is the key to their existence. Without it, there would be no service, no sales, no production, and no willingness to cooperate or work toward common goal. (Wiio 2009, 117.) Communication reflects, creates, shapes and explains the relationships of all actors in the organisation. As Varey (in Hargie & Tourish 2009, 5) put it, “Communication can be viewed as dealing with how socially constructed institutions are reproduced and transformed by the accounting activities of people in interdependent (joint) action as they make sense of what they do together.”
People are social by nature, and they want similar things at work than they do in their private lives: a sense of belonging, appreciation, being able to express one’s opinions, being able to impact on things and work together to solve problems. Such things do not just mystically spring into being. They are always based on thinking and pondering, and the more complex the matter, the more collective thinking is needed. The most successful work communities are those that are able to ask, question and disagree. The communities are reinforced with an open communication culture where people can express themselves freely and be themselves, accepted as they are. Inspirational work communities have certain common denominators: learning and doing together, interaction, responsible leadership as well as responsible communication where the members of the community have initiative and are self-directed. Today, interactions and communication in organisations are going through changes. The way people talk, negotiate, discuss, argue, email, blog, and disagree is changing. (Juholin 2009, 23-25, 48, 52.)

The importance of communication is increasing. Organisations run into problems because leaders have not received much education related to people’s new behaviours or communication practices. For the knowledge workers of today, communication skills are an essential professional competency, regardless of their position. It is no longer possible to carry out work successfully without the ability to talk understandably, listen, give feedback and write clearly. (Juholin 2009, 25.)

In organisational settings, there are certain characteristics that are necessary for an open and communicative culture to develop:

- Major issues are dealt with through the interaction of organisational members. People discuss and test understanding. Different opinions are valued.
- Topical information is available whenever needed, and everyone understands their role and responsibility in creating, developing and sharing information.
- The atmosphere is relaxed. People are not afraid to express their opinions, challenge, and ask questions.
- Anyone can participate and influence. The influencing can extend from minor issues to matters impacting the entire organisation.
- Learning and sharing is enabled through smooth communication, including feedback.
- Everyone contributes to building the employer’s brand and reputation through their actions.
- All of the above are connected through forums, which are open spaces for information exchange and dialogue. (Juholin 2009, 63.)

Communication is no longer a separate action or function. It is an integral part of all operations within the organisation – the bloodstream and respiratory system of the organisation. In practice this means that while in the past people were informed of decisions when they were made, now major issues are dealt with together, in an open dialogue, although the decision making still remains the responsibility of the management. This is the essence of the new agenda for communication: significant things are discussed and handled so that everyone understands them. The traditional model in hierarchical organisations is based on the cascading model where information gradually trickles down through the organisation. This can easily lead to a situation where people do not truly understand what the organisation is trying to achieve, especially if the management is using management jargon. According to Juhola, people may not even know why the organisation exists and what its core purpose is. (Juholin 2009, 64-65.)

The old communication model is based on the assumption that the management always knows what the employees need to know and when. They pay a lot of attention to the format and wording of their message. This approach can easily lead to a situation where only certain “safe” topics are discussed. However, people have learned to use unofficial channels and networks to get the information they need. The problem is that this information may be incorrect. The reality is that timing is often the most important thing – whoever gets their message through first is the winner. It is no longer possible to filter the information to meet everyone’s needs. People need to be active themselves, too. (Juholin 2009, 66-68.)
According to Gamble and Gamble, leaders need to be able to identify and confront problems, and turn those problems into opportunities by communicating a strong and compelling vision, “one that sets the problem in a context that others are able to visualise.” They need to ensure alignment to support the vision, and motivate and mobilise their staff to take action, and continue working persistently toward the common goal. (Gamble & Gamble, 6.) But how can one communicate a compelling vision when people are strewn like confetti around the world? This is where technology can help by providing channels and tools to reach audiences in different locations.

Leaders need to tell their stories in a way that is engaging and motivating. According to Lojeski, “leaders now need to weave together bits of information about themselves, others, and organisational goals to form fiery stories in text and pictures for audiences that can vary by as many as four generations, are culturally diverse, and are strewn throughout landmasses sprinkled around the globe.” They know how to “use technology in a more socially adapted way to impart vision and inspire others.” (Lojeski 2009, 43, 77.)

An important notion is the aspect of glocalisation – thinking globally but acting locally. Employees work within their local context but they must be ready and able to act on the global mission. Leaders need to be able to create messages that address both of these. Sometimes it means translating issues to more global views, and sometimes it means translating issues to more local needs. (Lojeski 2009, 109-110.)

4.3 Poor communication eats leaders for breakfast

There is a common saying (originally by Peter Drucker) that culture eats strategy for breakfast, which means that regardless of the strategic intentions, they will never be achieved if the culture fails to support them. Culture is something that guides the employees’ actions and overrides activities that are in conflict with it. The same metaphor can be applied to leadership: leaders – no matter how bright and knowledgeable – who are not able to deliver a compelling message and get people to engage are not effective leaders. They cannot move the organisation, they cannot trigger action, and they cannot motivate people. Unfortunately, it seems that many organisations spend too much
time thinking about the technicalities and too little time thinking about the content and its impact on igniting action.

Leaders talk a lot about openness and transparency, but there are many obstacles in the way. While the executives discuss matters among themselves, they develop an understanding that may feel difficult to convey to others. The timing of communication is also somewhat problematic: people want to know about what is going on, but communicating matters while they are being processed requires a shrewd and disciplined approach. If not handled properly, it may give rise to insecurity and speculation. External restrictions on openness pose another challenge, as there are often things that cannot be openly shared due to listed company regulations or competition, for example. In such cases, honestly informing employees that not all details can be shared would be a good approach. (Juholin 2009, 191-192.)

Employees require authenticity and trustworthiness. They want to be informed of what is happening, even if the news is bad, and they require consistency in internal and external messages and actions. But that is not enough. In their private lives, people are used to communication that is fast, direct and informal, and the same applies to employee communication. Management jargon is not accepted. Leaders should learn to communicate like bloggers and let their personality show. (Burton in Caywood 2012, 133.) Communication is no longer top-down; instead, leaders should engage themselves in active dialogue with employees on all levels of the organisation. The era of management command and control is over.

In today’s world, leaders must be able to inspire and motivate their staff so that people are ready to act on their behalf. It is no longer enough to have a big boss with a pompous job title give a speech or write an email – that does not move the masses. One of the most effective ways to communicate matters so that people will remember them is through narratives. Use of stories in business varies a lot. Some executives have embraced the idea and are utilising the potential of storytelling to its full. Others claim that they base their decision-making on pure facts and thus rely on pure facts in their communication as well. There are some critical deficiencies in the latter
approach. First, it is very hard to create enthusiasm and engagement with pure facts. Time and again people complain about boring management presentations that are packed with expressions such as economies of scale, competitive advantages, leveraging synergies and thinking out of the box. To trigger action, more is needed. Second, research reveals that even management decisions are often based on things other than pure facts. A recent study by the Economist Intelligence Unit found that 9 leaders out of 10 make decisions based on intuition in cases where their gut feeling is in contradiction with facts (Roland 2014). According to Wiio, communication is largely based on the assumption that the receiver is a sensible human being who accepts the message when it is explained to them. Research however reveals that strong emotions can make people fully reject sensible reasoning. Emotions are indeed an efficient filter in the way we process information. (Wiio 2009, 58.)

Although the storytelling method as such is old, its systematic use – and the study of its use – in business is new. A narrative is a short story or a description of a chain of events, even a brief anecdote illustrating the daily operations of the work community. In a narrative, there are usually characters and a storyline. The narrative answers the question “what happened”, and the reasons are explained through the plot. People often complain about the management using difficult terminology and jargon. The language in stories, by contrast, is more action-oriented. (Juholin 2009, 117, 132.) Stories are a powerful way to make complex things more understandable, or describe situations that people can relate to. Compared to common slide shows that usually prompt people to lose interest and yawn, good storytelling has the ability to capture people’s attention and create a more emotional bond, as listeners can reflect on what they learn based on their own experience, putting the story in a more practical frame of reference. In fact, it activates different areas of our brain, thus making it easier for the messages to stick.

If leaders really want to ignite action, they need to give reasons. The most effective way to do this is in the form of stories. Stories provide an emotional context for pure facts and figures, thus making the message more memorable. The process of effective storytelling is very simple, containing only three steps: getting attention, stimulating
desire for change, and presenting reasons that reinforce the desire for change. 
(Denning 2007, 36-37.)

One of the basic principles of effective communication is the compatibility of the sender’s objectives and the attributes of the message. If the sender wants to motivate or persuade people, the message needs to be framed in a very different way than a simple notification. Communication often fails because the objectives are in conflict with the content and style of the message. If the leader wants to motivate the employees, the message should not be overly complex. Management jargon and excessively general content do not help to motivate either. Different technologies and channels also have their limitations. A good example of how channels shape messages is email, where the nuances and emotional cues often get lost or misinterpreted. Non-dynamic channels such as reports or bulletin boards should not be used to communicate very complex matters. Similarly, when leaders want to evoke emotions and commitment, a rich channel – e.g. video – should be used. Furthermore, the background and characteristics of the receivers also matter. When using metaphors, for example, this should be duly noted. Leaders should also ensure that their selection of channel is not based on what is most convenient for them but the channel should be suitable for the receiver. (Clampitt 2010, 98-102.)

Leaders are often eager to know how employees react to different initiatives and changes. Traditionally, information flows through the chain-of-command reporting lines. In many cases, bad news is filtered out or softened while they travel up these lines. Clampitt claims that leaders whose choice of channels goes beyond the traditional often get a more complex and more accurate view of the organisational landscape. (Clampitt 2010, 103.)

Relying too much on one channel is never a good thing. All channels have their special features, so the choice of channel should be based on its suitability for transmitting the message. It is, of course, natural that people prefer channels that they are most comfortable with. However, overuse of certain channels may not be the best option for the organisation as a whole. Different channels have different strengths and weaknesses.
Writing, for example, should be an important part of the channel mix because it forces people to think in a more linear style. There are other channels that encourage a rapid give-and-take, and they should be included in the mix, too. Using multiple channels to convey the message helps to compensate for the shortcomings of various individual channels. (Clampitt 2010, 102, 104, 107.)

Clampitt divides different channels into two categories: *What* channels focus attention on the message and *Who* channels focus attention on the communicators. Email and web pages are examples of *What* channels as they are low in social presence and do not cater to interpersonal dialogue. (Clampitt 2010, 109.)

Clampitt presents compelling data: half of our brains are devoted to processing visual information; half of the decisions made in organisations are not fully implemented or sustained; almost half of employees claim that they do not receive the information they need to carry out their job well. As Jack Welch has stated, “Business isn’t complicated. The complications arise when people are cut off from information they need.” (Clampitt 2010, 121-122.)

Leaders could hold company-wide seminars to communicate new perspectives from different functions. There are a number of topics that interest wider audiences than just one department or function. (Clampitt 2010, 190.) Such seminars could also be arranged as online presentations. If needed, opportunities for discussions, Q&As and feedback can be provided.

### 4.4 Impact of leadership communication on employee engagement

Leaders can significantly enhance employee engagement through effective communication. To increase employee engagement, people need to know what they are expected to do and why, and what the impact of their contribution is.

Unfortunately, top executives often deliver the messages from within their frame of reference, using typical management terminology that lacks the linkage to concrete day-to-day activities of most employees. The employees’ and the management’s expectations do not coincide. (Armstrong 2006, 111.) When employees do not see the
link between their contribution and the performance of the company, they may lack motivation and feel less engaged. Managers often realise that they need to create enthusiasm and commitment, but they fail – often due to lack of appropriate managerial practice and policies (Hargie & Tourish 2009, 7).

Companies often miss opportunities to become more cooperative, engaged and productive workplaces because their management practices alienate employees. Lack of positive communication programmes can systemically undermine organisational performance, and lacking connections between senior managers and the workforce is a key obstacle to employee engagement. Further, feedback from managers and active listening are critical elements in building employee engagement. Thus, communication is a core managerial competence. Without proper communication skills, managers are not likely to be able to fully activate their employees. (Hargie & Tourish 2009, 8, 18-19.) It is also very common for organisations to acknowledge the importance of communication but still fail to develop a systematic communication plan (Clampitt 2010, 202).

When employees have more information and more authority and when they are trusted, extraordinary results are more likely to follow (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 23).

Especially when times are tough or the organisation is going through major changes, people can get tired. According to Kouzes & Posner, when people are exhausted and frustrated they may want to give up, but leaders can easily “turn the boat” by showing that they care. Showing appreciation for the work people have done is important. This kind of exemplary leadership can have a major impact on people’s commitment and performance. The appreciation can be with many people or one to one. (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 23-25.)
Juholin presents what she has defined as ladders of familiarising and estranging communication:

Table 1. Ladders of familiarising and estranging communication (Juholin 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Familiarising communication</th>
<th>Estranging communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td>Mutual trust</td>
<td>Distrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td>Polyphony, diversity</td>
<td>Monophony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consequences</strong></td>
<td>Understanding of the “big picture”</td>
<td>Uncertainty of what is going on and what is to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Disinvolve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consequences</strong></td>
<td>Availability of relevant information and knowledge</td>
<td>Lack of relevant communication and knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities to participate</td>
<td>No internal discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributes</strong></td>
<td>Multiple communication forums and good communication skills</td>
<td>Shortage of forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication is everyone’s duty</td>
<td>Poor competence in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributes</strong></td>
<td>Relaxed atmosphere</td>
<td>Tense atmosphere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Juholin, people need to have a “big picture” but they also need to be able to make sense of the “big picture.” That happens when people have opportunities to discuss and share issues. To function properly, organisations need to have employees that are aware of topical issues and have access to and are part of the exchange of information and knowledge. (Juholin 2007.)

To summarise, it can be said that there are a few simple actions that leaders can take to increase and sustain employee engagement. They should ensure that the organisation has a clear vision and strategy which are communicated to the employees so that everyone understands them. Employees are involved in achieving the vision through the tasks they carry out, they understand the value of their own contribution, and how the tasks of different people are interlinked. They feel they are part of community, and that their work has a purpose.
5 Leadership communication and social technologies

In today’s world, leaders face new challenges. Having a leadership position in the organisation no longer automatically equips the leaders with authority. They need to earn the trust of their teams, and constantly inspire them to strive for better performance. They lead in organisations where the physical distance sets additional challenges, and in an operating environment where the only constant thing is continuous change. Coupled with all this, they need to provide transparency and communicate through a variety of channels and using a variety of methods and styles. This chapter is looking at the specific communication possibilities and challenges that social technologies set for contemporary leaders.

5.1 The New Normal

Times are changing, and not least in the workplace. Organisations — once so static and hierarchic — are now diffused and spread across different locations, forming virtual teams that communicate online using an abundance of tools and methods to get and share information. People struggle with increased efficiency requirements, and the matters they are dealing with are becoming more complex by the day.

The organisations of today work globally. People travel across continents and can be reached wherever they are. Boundaries have disappeared. Being available 24/7 has also had many negative impacts, such as health problems and decreased family time. Our work-life balance has become imbalanced as the line between private and work life has blurred. (Federman 2009, 12-13.)

In this New Normal\(^2\) environment, leaders need to look around for new ways to engage their personnel. Here, communication is the key, but it is not the kind of communication most leaders have grown up with. The New Normal is also reshaping employee communications. According to Li, leaders need to have, in addition to good

\(^2\) According to Wikipedia, New Normal is a term used in business and economics, in a variety of contexts, to illustrate that something that used to be rare has become commonplace.
“traditional” communication skills, a new mindset and new skills, and they must be comfortable sharing their personal perspectives and feelings in order to develop closer relationships with their staff (Li 2010, xvi).

Social technology⁴ is redefining industries but many organisations are still trying to find out how to utilise social media to increase their business success. According to Bradley and McDonald, it is not a question of technology but – first and foremost – a leadership and management challenge which calls for a new way of thinking. They define a social organisation as “one that strategically applies mass collaboration to address significant business challenges and opportunities.” Mass collaboration can happen in-house or outside the organisation. The key to success is that there is a well-planned approach with the objective to increase business success, instead of one-time random efforts. The promise of a social organisation is increased agility, better outcomes and new ways of operating. People can contribute directly in the creation of value. (Bradley & McDonald 2011, xii-xiii, 5.)

Given the benefits that many organisations have enjoyed after having introduced a more open and dialogic approach in their employee communication, often enabled by social technologies, it is surprising that embedding social media in daily leadership and communication practices has not spread rapidly in all organisations. The following chapters try to illustrate the promise as well as the potential traps in utilising social technologies in organisations. The focus is purely on intra-organisational aspects.

5.2 The promise of social media

As it often happens with new phenomena, the terminology used of new concepts may be ambiguous. Terms such as social media and social technology are commonly used to refer to the interaction and collaboration that takes place in online environments. (Jue et al. 2010, 44.) In this thesis, the terms social media and social technologies are

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⁴ In this thesis, ‘social technology’ refers to technologies and software that enable and facilitate social interactions (wikis, blogs, social networking applications, etc.) and are usually accessible through web-based platforms such as intranet or the Internet, or mobile devices.
used interchangeably in reference to web-based communication that enables and facilitates social interactions.

Safko and Brake define social media as follows:

Social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios. (Safko & Brake 2009, 6.)

Social technologies are based on the simple fact that people want to have a feeling of belonging and a sense of identity and purpose, but to establish such a connection, it is not necessary to meet face to face (Jue et al. 2010, 43).

A new culture of sharing is emerging. There are more and more people online, and they are doing things that were not possible before. It is very easy for people to distribute information – text, images, video, voice – online through channels such as Facebook or Twitter. Sharing is faster, cheaper and easier than ever before. (Li 2010, 5-6.) Qualman (2009, 2) illustrates the difference between traditional and new ways of sharing information using the concepts “Word of Mouth” and “World of Mouth”:

![Figure 5. Word of Mouth and World of Mouth (Qualman 2009, 2)](image)

As has been witnessed in Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, for example, a simple message can reach millions of people in an amazingly short time. But it is not just the
speed of sharing that makes social media so powerful. Having the information in a
digital format makes it more difficult for it to become distorted. Relying on the
traditional cascading model increases the likelihood for the message to change before it
reaches the receiver. And the more layers there are, the more the content may change.
(Qualman 2009, 1-3.) Clampitt also shares this view. He states that the longer the
communication chain, the greater the likelihood of information getting distorted. This
happens quite easily, as people have different responsibilities, beliefs and concerns.
Some might emphasise different things than the original message, or leave something
out altogether. They may present personal opinions that then become elevated to the
status of fact. (Clampitt 2010, 134-136.) Organisations have traditionally relied on the
cascading model. Face-to-face meetings or discussions have been regarded as the best
way to convey important messages. In practice, this has often proved to be a less-than-
ideal method, as cascading depends heavily on people’s willingness and ability to share
the information. Should someone decide not to share, all the people lower down in the
organisational structure are deprived of the information, or may get different messages
than what was initially intended.

While digital communication⁴ has its pros against traditional communication, many
leaders may feel uncertain or even intimidated by these new technologies and their
power. The good news is that prior experience does not predict the outcome. It seems
that the major contributor to success is an open mindset: the leader’s ability to
surrender control at the right time. (Li 2010, 8.)

Business is built on relationships, and leadership is defined by the relationship between
the leader and the people who decide to follow that person. Li uses the term open
leadership, which she defines as "having the confidence and humility to give up the
need to be in control while inspiring commitment from people to accomplish goals.”
One of the core elements of such open leadership is the constant sharing of
information. This builds trust, which, in turn, is reinforced when people do what they

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⁴ Digital communication refers to communication that happens in or through different media, e.g. video, audio,
text, multimedia, or internal or external websites.
say they will do. What is different in contemporary organisations, however, is that working environments are increasingly virtual, and trust is also reinforced by daily conversations that take place virtually. This continuous interchange is facilitated by new technologies like blogs and social networking tools, which not only reduce costs but also support the building of relationships. (Li 2010, 9, 14.)

5.3 New tools, new rules

Communication has been transformed by technology: first by email, then the internet and company intranets, virtual meetings and, most recently, social media – to the extent that information technology is becoming the standard method for people and organisations to communicate (Coghlan & Brannick 2010, 76). In the majority of organisations, this means that many discussions take place via email. This is not ideal, as email is not the best possible vehicle for carrying out conversations. In many organisations, email has become a curse instead of a blessing. It is not very efficient for a number of reasons. When many people are involved in the conversation, it is not always clear who is supposed to take action. The content of the conversation remains hidden away in the folders of the people participating the conversation, thus failing to add to the collective knowledge of the company as efficiently as it could. People joining the company or the activity later may have difficulties gaining access to all relevant information.

With the emergence of new communication technologies, leaders have lost part of the control that they used to have over the flow of information. This can be challenging because they may feel uncertain about the rules of the new game. Some leaders may even feel threatened, but the successful ones seize the opportunity and learn to utilise new technologies to influence others. (Clampitt 2010, 111.)

High-quality relationships are about consultation, collaboration and trust. If organisations can build processes, relationships and systems that are based on those three things, they are already heading toward success. (Federman 2009, 17.) But to make that change happen and move the organisation from the traditional top-down approach into the 21st century, it is the leaders that need to show the way.
There is a great temptation for corporate communicators to wait for details to be confirmed, polish the communication, weigh the choice of words, and think about the right channels and approaches for much longer than needed. In the worst case, it can make the whole organisation idle, or lead people to work on the wrong things. If the information is shared faster, it can help mitigate employees’ misconceptions, but leaders are often not very willing to share partial information. One could think of leaders as meteorologists. People watch the daily forecast without expecting an accurate forecast for whole next month, but they still watch in order to get timely, if incomplete information. The big picture emerges gradually. In the same way, leaders who maintain regular communication on points such as selected key indicators are able to deepen employees’ understanding of what a KPI actually is. (Clampitt 2010, 112.) Speed and regularity trump completeness and polish.

Social technologies embrace different means of communication, including text, images, audio, video, and various combinations of these. People may often feel confused in the face of the great many options available for contemporary communication; it may feel difficult to select the right tool for each instance. There are also people who regard social technologies as a passing fad and eschew using them, but they fail to see that these technologies are becoming an integral part of our everyday lives, regardless of the longevity of individual tools. (Jue et al. 2010, 44.)

During the past few years, intranets have been evolving from what was once a static place for sharing top-down information, mainly in the form of documents and static pages, into interactive forums where people across the globe collaborate and carry out their work. According to Juholin, action and communication take place in different forums. These forums are places for dialogue and exchange of information, and they are the glue that connects the organisation to different networks and the operational environment. (Juholin 2009, 63-64.)
Communication is no longer just about content, channels and rules. Rather, the communication forums are the core of all action, offering an alternative to traditional communication channels. While a channel involves sending a message to a receiver, forums are interactive spaces where members of the community come to discuss important – and less important – matters, thus exchanging information. Forums are characterised by their interactive nature, and the members in these forums are typically proactive and self-directive. (Juholin 2009, 72-73.)

Just like the internet, company intranets are beginning to utilise user-generated content. Intranets today are a core communication channel in organisations. There are differences in how extensively companies are utilising their intranets, but as a general rule in can be stated that they are evolving rapidly. Whereas in the past they used to be, in the worst case, dumpsters for information that no one was ever able to find and that was never updated, they are now becoming hubs of all virtual interaction and collaboration. Employees are no longer passive receivers of information; today they contribute and interact. A typical example of an application where users create content.
is Wikipedia, and more and more companies have their own wikis for collaboration and information sharing in projects, terminology definitions, or co-writing of documentation. Initially company intranets were merely a static place to communicate and store information, but today they are evolving into hubs that embrace all key activities and processes in an organisation (see the figure below).

Figure 7. Intranet maturity model (see e.g. http://www.intranet-matters.de/resources/intranet-maturity-models/)

Different organisations are at different stages in this evolution process, or some may utilise only certain features of the more knowledge-intense solutions. Modern intranets include social features, or are built up of social networking tools only. The paradox is that not everyone is apt to change their ways of working as swiftly as new technology keeps evolving. Many leaders oppose social networking tools, Facebook in particular, stating that they see no added value in sharing updates like “I just had lunch.” Paul McFedries (2009, xxii) explains how Twitter evolved from asking "What are you

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5 Wikipedia is a multilingual, web-based, free-content encyclopaedia that anyone can edit. Its name originates from the words “wiki”, which stands for a technology that is used for collaborative websites, and “encyclopaedia”. The content is created by volunteers. Wikipedia has hundreds of millions of unique visitors every month. Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About

6 Social networking refers to the use of internet-based social media programmes to connect with friends, colleagues or customers. Social networking can be done for social purposes or business purposes. Social networking tools include Facebook and LinkedIn.
doing?’ to asking ‘What’s happening now?’, which makes a huge difference, because it gives space for new questions related to sharing ideas, activities, concerns, experiences, information and videos.

Leaders in companies that are using social media more extensively claim that observing online discussions helps them keep their finger on the pulse and recognise weak signals and emerging trends. More and more organisations are also reporting drastic drops in the use of email as employees have started to use social technologies to exchange information.

Digital natives entering the corporate world may feel that their preferred ways of working contradict with the traditional organisational set-up. Federman claims that despite advances in technology, businesses struggle because they still put highly educated professionals into boxes known as ‘the organisation chart’, dating back to the industrial age, and top it off by having a number of policies telling people what they can and especially what they cannot do. (Federman 2009, 13-14.) For example, blogging has become a form of communication that everyone seems to be doing these days. Dozens of new blogs spring up on a daily basis. According to Semple, this is an opportunity that leaders and employees should seize. The power of blogging is in its style, it is not “the usual knowledge management sense as dry business stuff stored in a knowledge coffin, but lively first person narrative, revealed as it is being thought through and worked out.” (Semple 2012, 23.)

Blogs7 have potential to increase employee morale and retention. Modern leaders are expected to be available and engage with their employees. The digital age has forced leaders to accept that they need to be more transparent and communicative. But it is not just any kind of communication that is expected of good leaders. The days of command-and-control are over. Trust is one of the great themes of business in the

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7 Blogs are online diaries, consisting of discrete entries called posts, and providing commentary typically on a particular subject. Originally, blogs used to be the work of individuals but have evolved to host also multi-author blogs. Blogs are usually interactive so that visitors can leave comments. Blogging can be regarded as a form of social networking service as, in addition to producing content, bloggers also build social relations with the readers as well as other bloggers. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog)
future, and this applies both externally and internally. Employees need to know that they can trust their leaders, and to gain that trust, they need to know their leaders. Blogs are a good channel for leaders to build that trust, but lame posts on general themes will not do the trick. People expect good leaders to take a position on issues and have a potent point of view. That is the way to influence people. (Murray 2013, 29-31.)

Blogging can also be a learning experience for leaders. It makes them notice more about their surroundings, finding interesting things to write about, thinking about what they want to say and how they want people to react. Putting the essence of something into three or four paragraphs – an optimal length for a blog post – requires thinking and discipline. It is the new kind of literacy. (Semple 2012, 40-41, 45.)

Journalism has undergone drastic changes during the past few years. One of the major trends is the increased use of video content. People are getting used to viewing short video clips to get the information they need. The other side of the coin is that people are getting somewhat impatient and no longer wish to read long texts. An easy solution for organisations is to increase the use of internal videos to communicate important messages and create a sense of community as people begin to see each other’s faces.

The emergence of new channels does not mean that old channels must die. Despite email, people are still using phones – although their use has expanded from pure conversations between two people to cover a wide array of communicatory modes and methods. Wikis and other collaboration tools provide opportunities for organisations to carry out their work in new ways. (Clampitt 2010, 113.) More and more of the communication taking place in organisations is based on speed, transparency, informality and dialogue. Formal communication has suffered from decreased credibility. This shift is driven by younger generations who are used to rapid browsing and have more reliance on social networking (Murray 2013, 25).

As Gamble and Gamble put it, “Being social is fundamental to our humanness. Being virtual is on vogue. The popularity of social media and virtual spaces demonstrate this.
While you have likely used an array of social media in your private life to make connections and share with friends, using social media and leading virtual teams are now also critical leadership tools.” (Gamble & Gamble 2013, 288.)
6 Background to the empirical research

This chapter provides background information helping to provide a contextual framework for the research. The first section introduces the case organisation. This is followed by analysis of the organisation’s current levels of employee engagement, then shifting the focus to leadership communication. Finally, the impact of the new intranet will be discussed.

6.1 Company presentation

Uponor is an international company with approximately 4,100 employees and operations in almost 30 countries, mainly in Europe and North America. The company provides plumbing, heating and cooling systems for residential and commercial building markets, and its products are sold to over 100 countries. In northern Europe, Uponor also supplies municipal infrastructure solutions.

In the past, Uponor has expanded through acquisitions. The acquired companies continued their operations independently, until quite recently. In the early 2000s, the company started a major restructuring programme aiming to increase efficiency and focus on its core businesses. During the past few years, the company has streamlined its operations, restructured its global business portfolio, redesigned its key business processes, and started to operate under a single Uponor brand. The company’s strategic focus areas are growth, brand and operational excellence.

Due to Uponor’s history of operating as many separate and independent companies, the local unit cultures are still strong. This is also reflected in internal communication, where local needs often override global ones. The many languages spoken in the company bring additional challenges, especially as English language skills among employees in many countries are not of an adequate standard to ensure full comprehension of global messages written in English. Communication has not been very generously resourced; in fact, there are very few countries in which there are dedicated resources for employee communication. Furthermore, employee communication has in many places focused purely on local matters, and global messages and initiatives have received less
attention and prioritisation. Earlier attempts to initiate systematic development of leadership and manager communication have met with a lukewarm response – the need has been acknowledged, but the initiatives have lacked executive support and, as a consequence, adequate resourcing.

More recently, major development programmes have been initiated to develop leadership in the organisation, which has provided a good opportunity to look at Uponor’s leadership communication practices in a more systematic manner.

6.2 Current levels of employee engagement

Uponor’s HR differentiates employee engagement from employee satisfaction. Their view is that “engaged employees are wholeheartedly involved and enthusiastic about their work and thus will act in a way that furthers their organisation’s interests,” i.e. their actions impact the company’s productivity in a positive manner. Engagement is shown through energy, innovation, passion and a sense of purpose in the individual’s work, team and the company so that the individual is able to reach their full potential. Engaged employees are also loyal and more likely to stay in the company. Satisfaction differs from engagement in the sense that satisfied employees may be happy, but without going “above and beyond” the call of duty. (Tommila, 23 May 2014.)

Uponor’s annual employee survey, HUPO (Human Potential Index), aims to map the personnel’s motivation, work conditions and competencies. The results are used as a basis for further development of the business and HR resources. The results are also analysed by teams in what are called “HUPO discussions”, and each team develops an action plan based on their key development needs. The overall results are also addressed in recruitment and training development. In recent years, the efficacy of HUPO has been questioned by both the employees and the management. The employees feel that the concerns raised through the survey do not receive adequate attention, and the agreed actions are neither followed through nor completed. This issue has now been taken up on the Executive Committee (ExCom) agenda, and both HR and the ExCom are following up the agreed actions to ensure that they are properly implemented. In addition, the connection between various Group initiatives and the con-
cerns raised through HUPO will be emphasised at Group level. The management’s concerns are more related to the added value brought by the survey. Consequently, the survey will be developed to provide a more accurate measure of employee engagement levels.

There is no systematic toolkit for measuring employee engagement at Uponor. Employee turnover has been quite stable during recent years, approximately 5-8 per cent overall, but this has not been taken as a measure of employee engagement. In the current HUPO survey, the following are among the questions considered to measure employee engagement to some extent (Tommila, 23 May 2014):

- I am proud of the company I work for.
- Our objectives are worthwhile and motivating.
- I am encouraged and inspired to perform better.
- My work has a meaning.
- My job is a good fit for me.
- I am committed to doing what is required to help Uponor succeed.
- I speak highly of Uponor’s products and services.
- Overall, I am satisfied with Uponor as an employer.
- I would recommend Uponor to my friends and colleagues as a great place to work.

Based on the overall HUPO results, the overall satisfaction level in the Group has increased, although with considerable local variation. The reasons behind the increase have not been analysed, and the link between the results and employee engagement is not clear. There is no specific person in charge of driving employee engagement at Uponor; this task is considered to be the responsibility of every manager, in addition to HR. (Tommila, 23 May 2014.)

Uponor’s leaders and managers are regarded as playing a crucial role in the work of enhancing employee engagement. Consequently, much effort will be invested in the development of leadership and leadership culture during 2014-2015. The aim is to de-
fine what kind of leadership culture is needed in the company to support the achievement of its strategic goals, and how effective leadership can increase the engagement of the employees. The timing of this thesis is ideal as it will provide valuable insights into overall leadership development in the organisation.

6.3 Current status of leadership communication

In 2012, a communication study was carried out in the organisation in order to study its information flow and communication practices. Altogether about 117 leaders and managers across the organisation answered the survey (not all questions were compulsory). Furthermore, an in-depth interview was conducted with approximately 30 respondents.

The survey addressed questions dealing with information sharing in the organisation, and how the respondents perceived other people’s willingness to share. As the figures below show, people tend to think more positively of their own contributions as opposed to how they feel about the contributions of others. The results clearly show that despite the existence of functioning tools, people feel that information is not shared sufficiently, and when in need, people do not know where to go to find the information they require.
When asked about their use of different channels available for sharing information, the respondents listed one-on-one meetings and discussions, team meetings, Group and unit meetings and information sharing sessions as well as email as the most important. Web meetings (utilising Lync) also ranked high.
Based on these results, it is clear that online and global channels are not considered a priority, with the exception of email. This can lead to a situation where information is shared only with one’s closest colleagues, whether organisationally or geographically. Indeed the results suggest this is already true of Uponor, which brings a risk of further reinforcing existing barriers and creating new silos and blockages to information sharing.

In terms of this thesis, the most important question is that related to barriers to information sharing, and the various impacts exerted by these barriers.
As can be seen from the responses, there are several barriers with a significant impact on information sharing. In the scope of this thesis, the most relevant ones are the absence of a knowledge-sharing culture, limited understanding of the business benefits of sharing information, failure to recognise information sharing as a daily priority for all employees, difficulty in getting support and involvement from management, lack of technology and appropriate technological skills (to share information), and a tendency to ‘hoard’ information rather than share it. The relevance of these issues has been partly discussed in the previous chapters, and will be further evidenced through the empirical research discussed in the next chapters.

More recently, early in 2014, a quick poll was conducted on the intranet to establish the employees’ opinions regarding CEO communications, in particular the webcasts that take place every quarter when the quarterly results are published. The webcasts are recorded and made available through the intranet for all personnel to view. They typically
contain a summary of the quarterly results, but more emphasis is placed on discussing the market environment, internal operations and objectives, and related challenges.

The survey enquired how people felt about the content. The respondents found that the webcasts were quite balanced in terms of content and required no major changes. People were also asked if they would like to see other leaders communicating on corporate affairs, and if so, what topics should they address. The general consensus was that employees would like to see other leaders besides just the CEO sharing more information. The respondents also suggested many topics requiring more communication, the most common ones being strategy, sales and marketing related information, especially regarding Building Solutions Europe, and information related to offering and technology. These needs will be discussed later in this thesis.

The survey reinforced the impression that people appreciate all information sharing efforts, and further development of those efforts is needed.

In addition, it should be noted that the company’s global employee magazine, Zoom, was discontinued following the launch of the new intranet, to be described in Chapter 6.4. The magazine served as a channel for providing information on key strategic initiatives, various company activities and interesting and topical themes and people. All topics were presented and discussed through the people directly involved. With this approach, the target was to further reinforce a feeling of belonging and togetherness. There were several factors behind the decision to discontinue Zoom. As the new intranet was considered a key communication channel for years to come, it was important to ensure sufficient resources for it. Further, it conveyed the important message that the top management’s trust in the new tool was so great that the printed magazine could be discontinued.

6.4 Impact of the new intranet

The new Uponor intranet, Uponoria, was launched at the end of 2013. It opened a vast array of new possibilities as the former intranet had been somewhat outdated. In addition to its technical limitations, there was no senior management support, as the intranet was not considered a strategic tool. The renewal was long pending, awaiting fund-
ing while other, more business-critical projects had been prioritised. This had led to a situation in which no one wanted to put much effort into developing the old intranet and its content, as it was due to become obsolete in the not-so-distant future anyway. The content was lacking the strategic perspectives that would guide the organisation to focus on the most compelling issues. At their best, intranets have potential to play a strategic role guiding the organisation to do the right things, and an operative role that guides the organisation to do the things right. The old Uponor intranet lacked these, as it offered no means of either following up strategy implementation progress, or of ensuring that people get the information they need regarding the strategic initiatives related to their own work.

In addition, the old Uponor intranet consisted of the Group intranet and several local mini-intranets. Some Group-level information was pushed to the local intranets, including news and information related to Group functions. Much of the function-specific information was hidden in the local intranets, sometimes available in local languages only. This structure did not support efforts to increase teamwork across organisational and country borders. Rather, it reinforced existing silos and created inefficiencies.

In any web-based application, it is crucial to have up-to-date information. But web tools are no longer just about access to information. People need to share their knowledge online, they need to collaborate, create, learn and innovate. One person can be a member in several different teams and communities, and play a different role in each. This, of course, poses additional challenges for organisational communication and the communication tools and methods that are used within the organisation. (See e.g. Juholin 2009.)

A major weakness in the old Uponor intranet was the fact that it did not offer any forums where employees could share their knowledge and interact. It was solely a platform to share static – and in many cases outdated – information. Embedding new technologies and tools proved to be very difficult.
When the planning of the new intranet started, it was important to consider its role in the overall organisational context. The objectives of the future Uponor intranet were listed to be as follows:

- Support strategy implementation;
- Provide easy access to critical sources of information;
- Enable collaboration;
- Encourage discussion, sharing and exploration;
- Create cost efficiency and synergies;
- Enhance internal communication.

As the list indicates, the future intranet was envisaged as something much more than just a channel for internal communication. In order to fulfil this role, the intranet should be connected with strategic objectives as well as user needs, overcoming all potential barriers of usability and accessibility. It should enable dialogue and interactivity and combine push and pull approaches and offer targeted information. In addition, it should also have dedicated workspaces for teams, support virtual networking and utilise features such as alerts, RSS feeds, videos, wikis, blogging, and so forth. The solution needs to be future-proof so that it can evolve and expand in a cost-efficient manner.

When the long-awaited new intranet was launched, the technical barriers to effective and efficient communication were removed. People were given more opportunities to communicate about matters of importance, and more informal channels such as blogs were introduced as well.

6.5 Results of the intranet user survey

The most recent feedback was collected through an intranet user survey that was carried out in May 2014. Altogether 344 people submitted their responses, with 82 percent of respondents stating that they use Uponoria daily or weekly, giving an average rating of 3.34 (on a scale from 1 = low to 5 = high) for the overall user experience. A
total of 83 per cent read global news regularly or semi-regularly, and 68 per cent read blog posts. Overall, 78 per cent feel that Uponoria has improved the information flow in the company.

One question enquired whether the respondents had read the ExCom blog. The majority of respondents had read many or some posts. As there are several ways to access the ExCom blog, in some cases people may not have not realised that they are actually reading the ExCom blog post. The result is rather good, as the ExCom blog has not been widely advertised in the company.

Another relevant question in terms of this thesis is the use of interactive features such as liking and commenting. The majority of respondents had not used such features.
The availability of videos on the Uponor intranet has been very limited. Traditionally, only selected intranet editors were able to add content to the intranet, and the use of modern technologies was not supported by the intranet tool. With the new intranet, the use of video is enabled for all people producing content, but thus far video usage has been very limited. According to the results, most people would like to see more videos. By the same token, the number of people not interested in seeing more videos was rather high, too.

![Figure 13. Desire to see more videos](image)

The reasons for the rather high number of people who were not interested in seeing more videos were no revealed by the survey. They may be related to technical limitations or the user’s accustomed ways of working and receiving information.
7 Conducting the research: methodology and data

This chapter discusses the methodology and research methods applied in this thesis. The chosen approach will be described and justified. The data collection methods, i.e. thematic interviews and qualitative survey, will be presented. The aim of the empirical research was to find out how employee engagement and leadership communication were perceived among selected key stakeholders in the case organisation, and how leadership communication should be developed to enhance employee engagement. The focus was on online environments.

7.1 Qualitative approach

As their main distinction, research methods can be categorised into qualitative and quantitative approaches. Leadership communication and employee engagement are themes where quantitative methods can provide the useful corpus to work with but qualitative methods are needed to gain deeper academic insight into the topic. This thesis utilises qualitative methods in order to ensure that the data collected yielded insights of sufficient depth.

The methodological setting was as follows:
The theoretical framework of this thesis highlighted three different areas of importance in modern organisations. First, it covers key aspects of employee engagement and its significance in modern organisations. Second, it examines characteristics of good leadership communication. Third, it analyses the impact of social technologies. These three areas formed the theoretical framework and provided the basis for the empirical research. To provide a context for the results and analysis in the empirical part, the research also utilised existing materials such as different survey results. These existing materials are referred to as background material, and are presented in more detail in Chapter 6.

The empirical research can also be illustrated as a continuum, where different theories on employee engagement, leadership and leadership communication along with the impact of social technologies and their use in organisations, are used to analyse and interpret the empirical material:
With this approach, different theories are used as a framework for interpretation, helping the researcher to interpret the material and the underlying drivers. This approach was applicable to the analysis phase of the empirical research, where the interview and survey materials were analysed against a combination of theories on employee engagement, leadership and leadership communication, and social technologies. Walliman (2011, 160) also states that the more the researcher reads, the more they understand about consensus, conflict and uncertainty.

The research was action-oriented, with the focus on practical issues. It aimed at describing the current state of affairs but also to bring about change and, consequently, create a new reality. It also aimed at developing solutions to real problems in cooperation with other organisational players. In these respects, it resembled action research. (See e.g. Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012, 183; Shani and Pasmore in Coghlan & Brannick 2010, 4; Coghlan & Brannick 2010, 4-5.) According to Wiio (2009, 56-57), communication is very much dependent on the situation and circumstances, and many observations apply only to certain type of workplace.

The above characteristics applied to this research. The focus was on action, and the idea was to resolve and further develop activities in the organisation in cooperation with the organisational actors themselves. There were a number of continually evolving factors impacting the research, so having an approach where research and develop-
ment proceed in parallel seemed most appropriate. Taking things out of context would bring different results, and it would be difficult to repeat the research with identical results, as the circumstances often change rather quickly.

Chapter 6 of this thesis, *Background to the empirical research* provided a context in which the empirical research was carried out. According to Coghlan and Brannick, it is important to establish the necessary relationships with the key stakeholders involved in or impacted by the project (Coghlan & Brannick 2010, 8). The key stakeholders will be introduced in Chapter 7.2, *Data gathering methods*. In this case, close relationships already existed with key stakeholders due to the researcher’s position in the case organisation.

Leadership communication is typically impacted by so many factors that it would be hard to investigate it in isolation – it is born in and moulded by the organisation and the people. In this case, these other factors include the new intranet and its further development, overall leadership development in the company, and efforts related to employee engagement. As there are so many overlapping and interlinked activities going on, it would have been very difficult the separate one single action that would, at the same time, represent a wide enough theme for research. It can be safely stated, though, that this study utilises methodology that is close to action research as it is aiming for changing the status quo and developing something new. It is furthermore being carried out in cooperation with organisational players who will be impacted by the outcome of the research.

In this case study, the researcher was an insider. According to Coghlan and Brannick, this is a benefit, giving the researcher a good understanding of the informal structures and cultures of the organisation, but it can also be a disadvantage as it may be difficult for the researcher to stand back and make a neutral assessment and critique. For example, when interviewing, an internal researcher can easily assume too much. (Coghlan & Brannick 2010, 114-115.) This dilemma applied to this research project as well, and it will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.1, *Reliability, validity and ethical considerations*. 
7.2 Data gathering methods

In analysing employee engagement and leadership communication, the researcher needed to consider the sensitive nature of the research. Leaders may feel threatened and become defensive of their leadership and communication styles, and employees may feel reluctant to reveal their real opinions and feelings. The choice of research methods therefore required careful consideration.

For the research to be successful, it was important to collect data that was relevant and represents the whole population as representatively as possible, while at the same time taking into account constrains such as time and effort. This thesis employed a non-random theoretical sampling method where the information is sourced from a sample that the researcher believes to know most about the subject. (Walliman 2011, 184-189.)

There were two main stakeholder groups in this thesis: the members of the Executive Committee (ExCom), and selected key persons across the organisation. The gathering of data took place in two phases. In the first phase, the ExCom members were asked to contribute through individual interviews focusing on employee engagement and leadership communication. The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured thematic interview approach. These interviews were then transcribed and analysed. In the second phase, the selected key persons were asked to contribute through a qualitative web survey. This phase focused on the leadership communication aspects only. The feedback gathered in the second phase was also mirrored against the ExCom feedback in order to find similarities and gaps and identify areas needing improvement. The different phases of the empirical research will be described below.

For the sake of clarity in reporting, the ExCom contributors are referred to as interviewees or leaders, and the key person survey contributors are referred to as respondents or key persons.

Step 1: ExCom interviews

The Executive Committee (ExCom) at Uponor is responsible for the creation and implementation of the strategy as well as operational issues and day-to-day management
related to each member’s area of responsibility. The ExCom consists of seven people representing the key functions of the organisation: the CEO, CFO, and Executive Vice Presidents (EVP) for Human Resources and the EVPs responsible for the business segments. The seven members represent four different nationalities and the gender ratio is five male and two female members. In the reporting of the findings, no separation based on the gender is made to ensure anonymity.

Qualitative research is not about generalisations but more an attempt to describe an event or understand an activity. The research interview can be defined as a purposeful discussion between two or more people which aims at collecting valid and reliable data related to the research question and objectives. Hence, it is important that the people who provide information know as much as possible about the object of the study. As the intention was to gain in-depth and rich insights from the organisation’s leaders, semi-structured theme interviews were used as the main data collection method. Interviews are a good method in qualitative research because of their flexibility. The interviewer can repeat questions, clarify questions if needed, and initiate further discussion with the interviewee. The order can usually be changed as needed. In a theme interview, the themes are defined prior to the interview, but the questions are not fixed. The themes are covered in the interview, but the extent may vary. The emphasis is on how people interpret and make sense of things, and the objective is to find meaningful answers related to the topic under research. To ensure the success of the interview, it is usually a good practice to allow the interviewees to see the questions, or at least the themes, in advance to enable them to prepare. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 73-77, 85; see also Saunders et al., 372-375.)

All ExCom members received individual emails requesting them to contribute to the research through an individual interview. The email (sent on 20 January 2014) contained a brief introduction to the purpose of the interviews. The questions were included in the email in order to make it easier for the respondents to focus on the theme and start preparing. The time of each interview was limited to approximately 30 minutes. This was important to mention to make it easier for the busy leaders to find time in their calendars.
All seven ExCom members were willing to contribute to the research. After receipt of a positive response from the leader, an interview time was booked. The interviews were conducted in English (4) and Finnish (3), as per the respondent’s preference. They were carried out either as a face-to-face meeting or virtually via Lync. In both cases, the interviews were recorded and duly transcribed. The interviews that were carried out in Finnish were then translated into English. The analysis is based on the English material.

The ExCom interviews covered two different themes: employee engagement, and leadership communication and its current status and development in the organisation. In addition, the interviewees were asked about their own preferences regarding the use of online tools. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the research, the methods and the schedule were covered, and the interviewees were able to ask questions if needed.

Question 1 was about employee engagement: In your opinion, how would you describe employee engagement? Assisting questions were then formulated to help the interviewee focus on the theme: What is it, how does it show, what is its impact on business and culture, and how do you think it can be developed? The purpose of this question was to establish the leaders’ views on employee engagement. While this study does not focus on employee engagement as such but rather on how high-quality leadership communication could enhance employee engagement, it is important to understand the basic principles and drivers underlying employee engagement.

Question 2 dealt with leadership communication: How would you define leadership communication and its current status in our company? Again, assisting questions shed further light on the topic: What does it entail, where are we good at, and how does it potentially impact employee engagement? Question 2 aimed at gaining insights into the leaders’ views on leadership communication and its importance. This was a key question in terms of building the basis of leadership communication from the leaders’ own perspective. The where are we good at part also provided a good basis for comparison with the feedback from the key
person survey. Linking leadership communication to employee engagement in the final assisting question gave leaders an opportunity to express their priorities in this context.

Question 3 expanded on the theme of leadership communication with a future-oriented perspective: *In your opinion, how should we develop leadership communication?* The purpose of this question was to find out the leaders’ opinions on how leadership communication should be developed. It also provided good material for analysing the views of the ExCom against those of the selected key persons in the organisation.

The final question, Question 4, was more about the interviewees’ personal preferences: *How would you see yourself communicating in online (internal) environments? Which methods/channels do you feel most comfortable with, and which not (please elaborate)?* This question was important because of two main issues: there is a general trend in organisations toward more transparent and timely communication, and there have been quite a few changes in the communication channels used by the case organisation. Furthermore, it seems that general appreciation for open communication in the company is rising to the extent that it is likely to trigger action. Considering this, it is important to understand the leaders’ willingness and capabilities to communicate in new ways so that it can be taken into account in communications planning.

**Step 2: Key person qualitative survey**

This target group consisted of people who need to rely on the information they receive from the ExCom, and communicate that information further in their organisations to trigger action. The target group consisted of vice presidents responsible for different functions, and HR and communication professionals who often do not have immediate access to information but who in many cases are the persons responsible for ensuring that the information flows smoothly to the people who need it in order to be more successful in their jobs. The chosen group was not exhaustive; however, the people were selected to reflect the organisation as representatively as possible, while also striving to achieve a good mix in terms of other factors, including different sites, nationalities, gender, and so forth.
The reason for including feedback from the key person survey in this thesis was to
form a more comprehensive picture of the overall situation. In some cases, their feed-
back merely served to further reinforce existing information; in others, however, their
comments questioned the status quo, expressing a genuine push for change.

The survey was a web survey that consisted of open questions only. Although online
surveys and questionnaires are typically better suited for quantitative research, the rea-
son for this approach was that having a questionnaire instead of interviews catered for
a much larger target group. Having a greater number of responses helped to overcome
the question of biased responses in terms of the functions represented, gender, sex,
and so forth. Carrying out interviews and transcribing them is a time-consuming effort,
and this method would have meant a drastic drop in the number of contributors in the
second phase. The survey approach was selected even at the risk of losing some of the
richness of responses. Walliman claims that online surveys can be used to cost-
effectively reach a great number of respondents regardless of their physical location.
He also states that they also bring about enhanced anonymity which, in turn, can en-
courage people to be more frank and honest in their responses, and be more willing to
respond in the first place. (Walliman 2011, 197.)

According to Saunders et al., special attention should be paid to the formulation of
survey questions, as it is usually not possible to get back to the respondents to collect
additional information or ask for clarifications (Saunders et al., 423). There can be po-
tential issues with the quality of the responses, which may impact the reliability and
validity of the data. To prevent this potential risk from materialising, careful considera-
tion was used in the formulation of the questions. The non-random sampling method
ensured that the responses would add value to the research.

Much thought was also put into the structure of the survey. As the target was to get
qualitative data, the survey consisted of open-ended questions only. Furthermore, the
number of questions was limited to three. The decision to have so few questions
emerged from the simple fact that people are usually more likely to respond if the
questionnaire is not too long. Also, having only three questions meant that the ques-
tions were rather broad by nature, which gave people more room to express their opinions and ideas, and even air frustrations if needed.

A total of 35 people were asked to contribute to the survey. They were invited to participate via email, sent on 28 May 2014. The aim was to cover a comprehensive sample of key persons in the organisation. The invitees were not able to see the names of the other invitees. In the invitation, the research was briefly introduced, and the link to the survey was provided. The survey was open during two consecutive weeks in late May and early June. One reminder email was sent on 4 June 2014. The survey data was collected using an online survey tool, Digium Enterprise. The survey was conducted in English, which is the company’s official language.

As mentioned earlier, a qualitative approach was selected to allow richer and sufficiently in-depth responses. The method seemed well-chosen, as the response rate was 66 per cent, with 23 responses provided. This can be considered an excellent response rate for an online survey.

The questions focused on leadership communication. Employee engagement aspects were deliberately left out of this part of the research. Narrowing the focus to a more specific and concrete theme seemed appropriate for the inquiry, and this approach proved well-chosen.

The first question enquired about the respondents’ feelings about how well the company’s leaders are communicating about important issues: *Do you feel that our leaders (Excom, leaders of various functions) are doing a good job in communicating matters (e.g. strategy, key activities, progress, challenges) related to their own area of responsibility to the wider Uponor audiences? Please elaborate and give examples if possible.* This question specifically aimed at finding out how well information about key issues is shared across the organisation. It also gave people a chance to give positive feedback on the things they felt had been done well.
The second question aimed at mapping the challenges of leadership communication. People were also asked to suggest ways to overcome these challenges: *What are the biggest challenges in leadership communication in Uponor, and how could we overcome those?* This question also gave people an opportunity to vent their frustrations.

The third and final question focused on digital communication and its development: *How should our leadership communication through virtual channels (e.g. intranet, videos) be developed?* This question welcomed any development ideas that could then be embedded in overall leadership communications planning.

The findings of the empirical research will be discussed in the following chapter.
8 Findings of the empirical research

The chapter presents the results of the empirical research. The results of the Excom interviews will be analysed and mirrored against the key person qualitative survey results as relevant. Both results will be discussed together. It should be noted, though, that the ExCom interviews included the theme of employee engagement as well as the leaders’ considerations regarding their personal preferences related to various communication channels. The key person survey focused purely on aspects related to leadership communication. The findings of both the ExCom interviews and the key person survey have been put together and grouped into various themes. In the reporting, the ExCom members are referred to as leaders or interviewees, and the key persons as respondents or key persons.

8.1 Engaged employees go the extra mile

All leaders felt that it was difficult to define employee engagement despite the fact that no scientific definition was required, just a hands-on working definition. They mostly listed aspects related to behavioural energy, i.e. how engagement is visible to others.

It is the employees’ desire and urge to, on one hand, to identify themselves with the company’s targets and success, and it is of course closely related to leadership because the target comes from somewhere. (Leader)

I would think it’s active versus passive. It’s enthusiasm; you see the extraordinary results, those sorts of things, activities. Passion. (Leader)

Only one leader clearly mentioned the psychic energy aspect. Psychic energy refers to a situation where the employee achieves a state of “flow” and gains great satisfaction from their work.

For me employee engagement means that when a person comes to work in the morning he feels positive energy in anticipation of what lies ahead. I can be confident that he has all the tools in place to ensure success. […] It shows when the person comes to work in the morning with a smile on his face, and leaves work feeling more energetic
than when coming in the morning, or at least equally energetic. Maybe it is overly optimis-
tic to think that we would absorb a lot of energy from here… (Leader)

This aspect was vaguely touched upon by all other leaders who mentioned the im-
portance of having employees who have their hearts and minds in the success of the
enterprise, or referring to “those that have fun,” or saying that it is the “feeling that
counts.” The context in which most leaders discussed these points, however, was more
related to the behavioural aspects than the psychic energy aspects of engagement. To
roughly generalise: when people enjoy their work, they are more productive, just as in
the following statement where feeling and inspiration parallel with devotion, not count-
ing the hours spent at work, and the ability to make things happen:

…it does not matter how many hours you work, it is more about the devotion, that if
hours don’t count but the feeling does count… that you work with a genuine inspira-
tion and you make things go forward. (Leader)

So it’s the overall good feeling. And a desire to do a bit more for the company and for
the workplace community than what is the minimum requirement. (Leader)

It was also very common among leaders to reflect on the meaning of engagement
through negation, i.e. what employee engagement is not. The behavioural aspect ap-
proach was described in comments such as the following:

Then there’s this other stereotype of the unengaged, maybe standard, not-going-the-
extra-mile people, I mean they kind of raise problems, ‘this doesn’t work’, ‘here I face
that problem’, ‘here the company does not provide what I needed’ blah blah blah… so
this is kind of the symptoms of being engaged or not engaged. (Leader)

Another leader described the same thing through the psychic energy aspect:

…but at least it should not happen that a person thinks every morning when he wakes
up that damn it, I need to go to work again and then during a day thinking several times
that what on earth am I doing here, and everything is boring and the overall way of
thinking is really negative and then when he leaves the office he thinks that thank God
I can leave now. (Leader)
It was common to all leaders to emphasise the endogenous factors and disregard the external factors such as salary, work conditions, etc. It can safely be assumed that the leaders did not consider these insignificant as such, but rather that they took those for granted. One leader contemplated on the salary aspect as a driver of employee engagement, and another leader mentioned the possibility to impact one’s own destiny and improve one’s skills.

Let’s take salary for example, for some people it can be extremely important and a rather big part of engagement while for others it is not a significant thing at all, it’s more like a hygiene factor. On a certain level, but after that it does not engage people much more. (Leader)

Possibilities to influence your own destiny as an individual so that you are in a position where you are given the tools that enable to perform but you have certain space to develop and to think and to create that increase engagement. […] That you are improving your skills, knowledge, competencies, on a certain area. So that you are doing well, that you are excelling on something… (Leader)

Undoubtedly, demographics also play a significant role. What motivates people in their 50s does not motivate Gen X or Gen Y. Even styles of communicating can have an impact, as younger generations require communication that is more transparent, timely and informal, whereas leaders that grew up with much more formal communication have difficulties adapting to the new style. This generation gap was addressed by several leaders, albeit in different contexts.

And what is difficult is the fact that people are so different. What motivates somebody is not important to somebody else. (Leader)

…then there is also the thing that different generations are different. And I sometimes wonder… how to engage them, I mean they are so different, and I’m afraid that I might be doing something totally wrong or focus on wrong things because I don’t understand them. (Leader)
Bridging the gap requires the organisation to find ways to balance different styles and expectations, and to address different ways of communicating and consuming media. A good approach would be to introduce more open communication and social technologies gradually so that leaders have time to learn and adapt. If a particular leader is not a keen writer, using video presentations and interviews could prove a good solution. There are alternatives, and not everybody must do everything.

All leaders agreed that engagement does have an impact on business, and that it would be important to make people feel engaged. The impact on business has been discussed in Chapter 3.

And it’s not hard to believe that if you come to work in the morning raring to go and you think that “yes, what a wonderful day, what can I do,” so you probably do wiser things better and more efficiently than in the case if you come to work with a sour face so it is common sense to understand that of course they have a correlation. (Leader)

They feel that it’s fun to do their job, they get positive feedback from customers, and the customers enjoy doing business with them. It is a positive spiral. And consequently the results are satisfactory to say the least. (Leader)

I think if the majority of people are engaged, have fun, are passionate, you can see that across all functions, in the simple word success. An engaged sales guy sells better, customers feel that. The engaged, motivated production team maybe does less failures, has less scrap. At the end you have less sick leaves, have less burnouts, people address things in a positive manner. (Leader)

One leader mentioned that engagement alone does not bring about business success but there also needs to be a clear understanding of the task and the goal.

On business, of course, if you are proud of what you are doing and everybody from a communication point of view has been given a clear clarity of what the task is and the goal is, then of course also this shows in business results in the end. So there it connects to leadership and communication, and in the end it gives engagement and proudness of what you are doing. (Leader)
Alignment with the business strategy and goals was mentioned as a key factor by all the interviewed leaders, so it is safe to assume that there is a consensus on this matter among leaders.

The potential to overcome and solve problems was also seen as one of the key characteristics of engaged employees.

…it is kind of a sense of belonging with the employer or the company, and it is most visible in situations where things did not go as planned. So it means that you are engaged to the work even if there are difficulties… that you are more motivated to go through the difficulties. (Leader)

The potential to overcome problems requires employees to be self-directive. That, in turn, requires an understanding of the bigger picture. If an employee has a very narrow view of the business, it does not necessarily prevent them from solving the problem but it may mean that the solution is not fully aligned with the company’s strategic direction and goals. Therefore, the better and broader understanding the employees have, the better decisions they are likely to take in their daily work.

Leaders were pondering on the culture-versus-engagement issue and were not sure which comes first. It was referred to as the proverbial chicken-and-egg situation. Nonetheless, they all felt that there should be a culture that supports engagement.

In my opinion that is even more a question of which comes first, that this kind of strong company culture makes people more engaged and then again if there are engaged people then it reinforces the culture. (Leader)

Or if you don’t have a culture where you get yourself satisfied of being included then it is difficult to get engaged with the company.” (Leader)

According to Gamble and Gamble, organisational culture is indeed a chicken-and-egg dilemma. The organisation’s culture is about the organisation’s expectations of itself, its history, values, heroes, rites and rituals – it describes the company’s inner reality. All employees are miniature reflections of the organisation’s culture. The way they interact,
how they value things, and what they do and do not do, have a major impact. Similarly, what the leaders think and what they communicate also shape the culture, and this evolved culture then further impacts the behaviours and actions of the organisation’s members. Communication is the factor that enables organisations to perform or enact their cultures. It is easier for employees to understand their roles and expectations if the leaders communicate a strong culture. In the opposite case, employee values will be unclear. (Gamble & Gamble 2013, 73-74.) The impact of leadership behaviours and communication was also reflected in the following comment:

I think the facilitation of tools and the teaching on how to use the modern tools in communication is relevant. That is one part of… probably the easiest part. Then I think that the… this detecting which type of behaviours we do want to have, what is the culture of our company and which type of behaviours we do not want to have and also sending the right messages by behaviours, those still have to be developed, probably through discussions, through example from leaders, but still there we have to do a lot if we want to be coherent with the… to get more engagement. (Leader)

I think this is up to a certain extent also a question of how the top management behaves, what standards they set, how they act and do, what examples they show and give. (Leader)

I think the senior leadership needs to not just mouth the words but live the mission. […] The other view is that you have to live what you’re speaking. So if customers are the most important thing then senior management needs to behave that way. We need to treat the customers that way. Maybe that’s too simplistic, I’m not sure. (Leader)

There is evidence that the majority of employees’ workplace engagement can be explained by the leaders’ behaviour, and that personal and organisational characteristics explain less than one per cent of employees’ engagement in their workplace (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 25-26). It is therefore crucial for leaders to be aware of the supporting behaviours, and that they are consistent in their actions.

The aspect of giving more than is actually required, going the extra mile, was mentioned by most of the leaders.
And a desire to do a bit more for the company and for the workplace community than what is the minimum requirement. (Leader)

…they go the extra mile, they don’t worry about even going two rounds more. (Leader)

Engagement is very much type of willingness to do, to contribute, to do things, to overcome what is expected, go the extra mile. (Leader)

There seemed to be great unanimity among the ExCom members on this issue, as “going the extra mile” was considered one of the key characteristics of engaged employees by most interviewees. One leader also vaguely touched upon on the topic of work-life balance:

…it can't be a 24-hour thing, although I criticised that from-eight-to-four thing but it is somehow an easier way to see it. (Leader)

As discussed in Chapter 3, people need time for psychological detachment. If people are continuously overloaded and do not have a chance to detach, they gradually lose their capacity to engage.

The factors contributing to the development of employee engagement were also discussed by the ExCom members. Being proud of one’s job and contributing to the bigger entity were mentioned by one leader:

Employee engagement is several things. In the end, what I think is that when people are proud of the jobs that they are doing, then you have engaged people. And how do you get people feel proud of what they are doing is also in a way giving people the feeling that what they do is important and also that they can influence it somehow. So in that way it comes back to the leadership topic, how you lead people so that they can feel empowered, engaged and that way also proud of what they are doing. (Leader)

The importance of being part of something bigger was also acknowledged by one key person. This is an aspect that is mentioned in all literature regarding employee engagement.
Getting people aligned, getting on the same page, laying out the strategic messages in a way employees can relate to and understand. Trying to capture our employees’ hearts and minds, not just their time from 8-4 pm, I.e making them feel that they are part of an organization that delivers something valuable - not only to the customer, but to the society as a whole. Yes, we need to make money and keep our shareholders happy, but we also need to make people in the organization feel they are part of something bigger than themselves, something with a purpose. (Key person)

The importance of feeling a sense of belonging and sense of purpose were also mentioned by the leaders. Sometimes this means belonging to a smaller group, but in most cases the leaders were referring to a sense of belonging to the entire company.

I think you get real engagement if you are able to create that “we” feeling, it is not “us” and “them”, it’s just we as Uponor, we Uponorians doing something, it’s not the Swedes or the Finns or the Germans, it’s us. And call that also alignment, one common agenda, but if we as a company really manage to be on the same page and run into the same direction, all of us, then I think again this triggers engagement. (Leader)

And also the sense of belonging to a group is part of engagement, even so that you don’t think of the entire, big company but a certain community, that you feel strongly that you are part of that group. (Leader)

…what we’re doing is bigger than the individual, bigger than the sum of the individuals. (Leader)

Having a sense of purpose, so what you are doing is impacting something else than just financials and just yourself. That you are doing something that is valid for colleagues, customers, community. (Leader)

These are important aspects. A sense of belonging can be enhanced with small actions such as asking employees to share their ideas. People feel respected, valued, and connected. But if an employee’s ideas are ignored, they may become indifferent and begin to show distrust toward their leaders. (Haudan 2008, 21-22.) Listening can be identified as one of the key elements of successful communication. Kouzes and Posner (2012, 20) state that innovation comes from listening rather than telling. It was therefore sur-
prising that only one leader mentioned this in connection with leadership communication:

And also that the communication is not one-directional, the purpose of leadership communication is, in my opinion, also that the leader absorbs messages from the organisation and then takes those forward to his own forum, be it the ExCom of whatever forum, where it can... It is the same for the leaders as for anybody else that why we have one mouth but two ears and two eyes. It is because we should see and hear more than we talk. And then if we consider that people are different and so forth so to make people engaged you need to listen and understand what they are thinking and seeking. (Leader)

Good leadership is also about the ability to ask the right questions – questions that make people think about the actions they are taking and the reasons behind them. Active listening creates discussions and enables creative thinking. Asking and listening can also provide leaders with information that they may have missed otherwise. Answers to questions such as “What have we missed?” or “What else should we be thinking about?” can be critical for the organisation’s success. (Gamble & Gamble 2013, 67.) None of the leaders in this study mentioned the importance of asking questions. The importance of asking questions was raised by a couple of key persons, however:

All too often managers: 1. Fail to see all challenge facing us all; that even when we do nothing about it 'communication' does not stop - it never stops 2. See no need to consult those affected by their decisions; they depend instead on their own 'insight' into the minds and heart of others. (Key person)

The importance of giving answers to employees’ questions was raised by one leader:

That sometimes you could not answer the questions but we listed the questions and then we reported back in the next meeting. Everybody was able to see what questions were asked and then answered them. And I think that is an important part to catch that cycle, to make it two-way. If it is only one-way in a way that you hear a question but you do not answer, you leave it, then you kind of lose the ability to that kind... of little bit of that kind of communication. (Leader)
Making this kind of effort to try to find answers is a good approach. Good leadership does not, however, mean that the leaders should always have all the answers. It is acceptable to admit that there are not answers to all questions, or that some things cannot be discussed openly because a listed company must follow certain regulations of, for example. Binney, Williams & Wilke (2012, 11) state that: “Leadership is not about knowing the answer; it is the capacity to release the collective intelligence and insight of groups and organisations.”

The same leader that mentioned listening also felt that people are welcome to openly express their opinions and views at Uponor. This is good news, as the chance to openly share opinions and concerns is key to good leadership.

We have an open atmosphere, we can – this is my own impression – in this organisation we can, everyone can express their opinion. And we have opportunities for that. We spend a lot of time in all kinds of meetings and we are sitting at the same table. So people from different levels of the organisation, I sit with the ExCom and then with my own organisation and then we have cross-functional teams at least to some extent so… And my feeling about them is that we really can talk in them which I think is very important … (Leader)

However, one point that can be questioned is whether the questions and concerns from all parts of the organisation reach the top management or whether they are filtered on the way up. According to Clampitt, the law of gravity does not always apply to information flow in organisations. The information that the leaders hold does not always filter down, and “some information, such as major success stories held in the lower echelons, shows exceptional buoyancy in reaching the top, almost like defying the laws of gravity.” He also claims that leaders could fall into an information trap as they spend so much time processing information that is already available, thinking that they possess all the information they need and do not bother to ask insightful questions. (Clampitt 2010, 137, 140.)
Leadership and communication go hand in hand

Leadership can be seen as a social process which results from “interactions between and within individuals and groups.” Effective leaders do not focus purely on the work but they also need to connect with the people around them. (Binney, Williams & Wilke 2012, 4.) Connecting happens via communication.

Good communication starts from the understanding that leadership is all about communication. They cannot be separated.

That’s the thing that what is leadership if it does not include leadership communication. It is through the different elements of communication that is making the leadership visible. (Leader)

There was consensus on the basic elements of leadership communication among the ExCom members:

…to tell what this is all about and why we exist, why we are good, why do we succeed, what are our common objectives, so that there are things that the employee can engage to. And then it is up to the employee to decide whether he wants to engage or not. (Leader)

The majority of interviewees also mentioned that communication is not just about words. All actions that the leaders are taking – or not taking – carry a message.

Everything is communication. You cannot not communicate, you always communicate even when you are not saying anything, or not moving. (Leader)

It is key that the messages and the actions are aligned; otherwise people will feel that the leaders are just giving lip service, which decreases their credibility.

If you expand communication to not only what is verbally spoken but also behaviours because to me that’s all communication, then I think yes, it is probably the biggest single impact on engagement. Again there needs to be that consistency between words and
actions. And I’m not saying it doesn’t exist, I’m saying that in some areas there’s an opportunity for improvement. (Leader)

… It can be also that the leader is doing not enough communication but sometimes it’s more discrepancies between what we are officially communicating and what the people really are perceiving that is happening. (Leader)

… if the leader is not engaged himself then he cannot get the people to engage either, they don’t engage themselves automatically. It has to show that you are fully engaged in that thing too. Enthusiasm. (Leader)

To be a leader, the leader needs followers. The leader should give the followers a clear direction and make them feel needed. How that leader communicates has a significant impact in mobilising the followers. This is not an easy task, because people are different. One leader mentioned the followership aspect of leadership:

…people try to find the gaps, the proofs of truth on what the leader is really planning for, and if he merits to be somebody to follow… (Leader)

Robert E. Kelley (in Gamble & Gamble) has categorised followers into five different groups: alienated followers, conformists, pragmatists, passive followers, and exemplary followers. It is important to understand the differences in the way they behave and perceive messages. Furthermore, the way leaders perceive their followers also impacts their leadership style. An authoritarian leadership style is typical for leaders who consider their followers to be incapable or incompetent. Having a good understanding of followership enables leaders to modify their leadership styles according to the followers’ needs, and communicate expectations clearly. (Gamble & Gamble 2013, 43-50.)

Compelling content is a key element in good leadership communication, but this is not enough on its own. Leaders need to be able to convey their messages in a manner that catches the audience’s attention and ignites action. In this light, it was very surprising that none of the leaders mentioned the significance of powerful stories. Only one leader touched upon the topic, but even in this case it was not related specifically to leadership communication but rather to capturing people in action:
…and it would have been exactly the kind of thing that having a couple of video clips and a short story about these people thinking about the future the company and so forth. (Leader)

Successes also make great stories that people will remember and can relate to. They also help build a sense of togetherness and pride in the company. A couple of leaders mentioned that successes and achievements are not celebrated.

…it really bothers me a lot that we don’t utilise, that we don’t build the kind of feeling of proudness inside the company. That when there are good things and achievements somewhere in the organisation and we don’t even tell about them. And if we think about the modern tools, the intranet and others, and how easy it is, you don’t need to send email to over three hundred people or post a letter but you can just go and do it. Is it so that in our organisation we don’t understand that if we do something great in Italy so it could be that people in Finland would be interested and it would make them more engaged when they hear about that great thing in Italy? For me personally these things, whenever and wherever I hear about them, that we have been somehow locally recognised or we have received big orders or prizes or whatever so I always feel as if I have been involved in getting the deal or making the things happen, even though I am far away. So in my opinion it does have a strong impact on engagement. (Leader)

Every leader should show that they appreciate people’s contributions. One way to do this is by creating a culture of celebrating achievements. This in turn will enhance the feeling of togetherness. (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 24.)

Good communicators also pay attention to their communication styles. It should start with authenticity.

I think a good leader communicates authentic, straight, honest, and also is not escaping the inconvenient truth. So be yourself when you communicate. And I think good leaders do that. (Leader)

…it needs to be specific enough to make sense but general enough that is doesn’t become sort of dictatorial sort of marching orders, nobody’s looking for marching orders,
they’re looking really to frame what we’re trying to do and then you left people filling those gaps. (Leader)

In modern organisations, effective communication is no longer about telling people what to do and how to do it. It is about dialogue and interaction. Having active dialogue is even more difficult in online environments. There are ways to activate it, but this requires time and resources. Online environments are a good place for leaders to get closer to the wider audience and activate dialogue.

I think that we have done very good improvements by opening the type of two-directional communication because before the communications was very much one direction, top-down, but we have at least put the tools in place to open the communication for that to happen. (Leader)

It is important to note, however, that the tool is not the solution. In the initial phases people are not likely to make a very active contribution. Having a new way of working requires people to get used to it and see that the leaders are committed to it. It requires a sustained effort from the leaders, as well as their example and encouragement. Eventually, things will start to liven up and the communication culture will evolve. A lack of a viable communication culture was raised by some respondents.

At least what I can see, there hasn't been a very strong communication culture at Uponor so far. (Key person)

This has an impact of how communications is handled in practice. If communications is said to be important but fails to receive adequate support from the management – if the management does not lead by its own example – or if there are insufficient resources for carrying it out successfully, there is a clear discrepancy between the talk and the walk. It is also a strategic choice, as communication impacts so many areas of business and the company’s operations.

There seems to be a difference of opinion between the ExCom and the rest of the employees regarding communication and how open it is perceived to be. This may relate to the fact that while the leaders have easier access to information and a generally wider
view of operations, they assume that other people also know more than they actually do. Many ExCom members also mentioned that they are striving for open and transparent communication, but it seems that ‘open communication’ refers more to how the leaders share information with personnel.

I believe that we strive to openly and honestly tell about things, good and bad, and we try to recognise and acknowledge successes. (Leader)

As much as there’s room for improvement, I think we do a better job than most, at least in my working experience. It’s on our radar, it’s an issue, and again part of…. We always have room for improvement, but I think Uponor does a really good job relative to other companies, especially in our segment, in the markets that we operate. (Leader)

Publicly listed companies often withdraw behind the shroud of regulations that they need to follow. While such regulations indeed limit communication, it should be noted that there is still a wide range of topics that can be raised and shared. (Juholin 2009, 68.) However, there are restrictions that need to be taken into account, and this was considered to be an obstacle by many leaders.

One thing that I think is a bit problematic is this stock exchange thing, that we are a listed company. I think that our communication would be so much easier, and better in a way, if we could always really talk about things. […] So the leadership communication would be much easier in a different kind of organisation, you could always talk about the things that are at hand, that are significant. (Leader)

Many respondents shared their concern about the information being abundantly available on the top levels of the organisation, but less so on the lower levels.

Leaders should realise that we all need to know where this company should be headed, it’s not enough if top and middle management know. (Key person)

Another issue is the cascading down of information. While we see a lot of information from top management to middle management, it seems that often the information flow ends there. The question is if those managers don’t see the necessity or if they are not capable to convey the messages to their staff. (Key person)
Communicating or not communicating about matters is an act of power, but while social technologies are making inroads into all walks of life, leaders find themselves in a completely new situation. They no longer possess all the information, and the speed at which information flows can be a real challenge, as false information spreads just as easily. Leaders that advocate open and transparent communication should be ready to commit to it and take action. Hence, it would be good if executive teams would have ambition and some sort of blueprint for their communication. For example, it could become a regular practice for the executive team to communicate key matters after each of their meetings. This way, key messages would be transmitted in a similar format across the organisation. It would also help increase the timeliness of communication. Executive team communication is often criticised because it happens with a long delay, or is neglected altogether. (Juholin 2009, 192-193, 196.) There is strategic will to activate communication within the Uponor ExCom:

But we have talked about for example having a kind of summary of the things that have been discussed in the ExCom and that could be shared. So these kinds of things that would bring more transparency. (Leader)

It is not just the top management that should be active in communication. All leaders should be sensitive to the need for communication. After every meeting and every decision, they should ask themselves whether the matter merits being communicated, and if yes, to whom, when, and how. (Juholin 2009, 188.) An even better approach would be to ask if there is any reason not to communicate the matter.

The importance of regularity in communication was also brought up by one key person:

We should really think about this and find ways how our managers could (and would like to) enhance their messaging. The blogs and the possibility to be interactive will help naturally, because the information should start to flow by itself. I think there is a very thin line between functioning and not functioning internal communications. Further, I think that something that becomes a routine would be helpful for both the manager
and the employee, so that it would be easy to follow up with the developments once you develop a routine. (Key person)

Generally, ExCom communications was considered to be on rather a good level. People appreciated recent developments.

Leadership communication will never ever be adequate and strong enough - employees will always want more, but I think ExCom and our senior leaders are doing a pretty good job, i.e trying to spread the key messages with regular frequency. With the latest developments in our intranet new channels for communication have been opened, which I believe are appreciated. (Key person)

I think we are definitively improving, even though there is still a big room for communicate better, but I guess communication is a continuous improvement exercise. (Key person)

8.3 Masters of silo building

To be effective in their work roles, people need to have a wider understanding of the company’s operations. Typically, knowing more leads to better decisions than knowing less. It also increases speed.

… you need to be able to communicate that big picture, otherwise organisations really easily start building silos or hide in their boxes and so… so that the people understand also the big picture, why we are here, in what kind of environment are we competing, what things are important considering that environment, so these are all important elements to communicate to that we can get people to do the things we want. (Leader)

In some parts of the organisation knowledge has become power. Information is not openly shared – to the extent that it has a direct impact on people’s daily tasks.

The problem is that the lack of communication directly impacts most departments, there are ‘select groups’ who are privy to the information but it is not shared, the rest of the business have absolutely no idea. […] The above example, I believe, is down to power struggles/ego battles within the [local management] as they are not all working together, they do not even appear to be working in the same direction! (Key person)
There was still – just like at the time of the 2012 survey – a general feeling of gaps in information sharing between functions. Many people raised their concerns about the fact that information is shared within functions but not among the wider Uponor community, which prevents people from forming an overall view of where the business is going and what the challenges are. Despite the top management’s awareness of the importance of communicating the big picture to avoid silo building, the tendency to create organisational silos was mentioned by a few respondents. According to Clampitt, people are defenders by nature. They build boundaries in their private lives, and they build boundaries in organisations to separate different functions. Adding to the mix cross-functional teams and matrix organisations, cultural and national borders make organisations very complex places for efficient communication. In addition, the language barrier always adds complexity, as speakers of different languages view the world differently. Also employees in different functions may have difficulties understanding each other. Silo thinking can lead organisations to have unnecessary turf battles over resources, power and what not, and it is the leaders’ responsibility to bring the troops together and redirect their energy into something more productive. (Clampitt 2010, 177, 180, 189-190.)

Overall I think we are the master in creating silos. Once silos are broken down by reorganisation, we manage well to build new ones. This is happening mostly on operational level and therefore our leaders need to be more active in preventing the silo-building. Again unity in top-down communication is key. (Key person)

The biggest challenge is the organisation structure. We tend to communicate "to our own people", there are clear silos even between the functions within segments - not to mention the segments themselves. (Key person)

If people are concerned with their own narrow function issues only, they are not likely to utilise opportunities to meet larger organisational goals. One function or department may benefit but the organisation as a whole loses. Information hoarding, delays, and partial truths can also be connected with such a narrow mindset. Clearly, it makes people to focus on the wrong things. (Clampitt 2010, 179; see also Juholin 2009, 71.) Some
people had noticed that even the most basic information such as organisational structures is not shared.

At the same time there are still some "black holes". For example the new offering organisation. The re-organisation has taken place more than a year ago and still there is no clarity on roles, functions and responsibilities, not to mention interfaces. There are not even org charts in Uponoria. For such a vital part of the organisation that is supposed to drive innovation and keep us ahead of competition, there must be transparency and clarity. (Key person)

Considering that the ExCom was concerned about creating an “us” feeling, this is a problem that needs to be addressed. The solution is a combination of many things, leadership communication being one of the factors contributing to the overall solution. The top management communication has focused very much on the CEO, while the other ExCom members have not been very active in communicating matters related to their areas of responsibility through company-wide channels. The reasons for this problem were not within the scope of this thesis, nor did they surface during the research. The CEO communicates regularly in connection with the quarterly results, and it has become an established practice. The recently launched ExCom blog is the first step in an attempt to create broader communication by all ExCom members.

The CEO communications is active but it is rather broad and looking at the big picture. The other ExCom members do communicate within their own organisations but, clearly, not much general info to the wider Uponor audience is transmitted from them. (Key person)

Communication is reasonable. CEO videos and newsletters are good, containing actual topics and explaining plans. Quarterly communication calls give an overview of activities. Info about other functions’ plans and situations is missing. (Key person)

Excom communication to the wider audience is not so visible, to me only via blogs. (Key person)

This was also mentioned by one of the leaders:
…we should probably extend that to more people than the CEO because if we speak about leadership it is not about one person, it is a group of people in the organisation that has to also show publicly which are their commitments, which are their ideas.

(Leader)

Enhanced visibility of leaders was something requested by many of the key persons.

It's a little difficult for more visibility when we are a global company; however, I think when our Excom members and leaders of various functions visit other regions, we should use this opportunity to give them more visibility to other regions and share news from their area. (Key person)

Enabling access to leaders among a wider group of people is one of the targets of the new intranet. Through blogging, they become more “human” and accessible also for people who are not directly involved with the ExCom. New technologies also allow for other leaders to communicate more openly and effectively about the matters relating to their area of responsibility.

And then I believe there still something that could be done in connecting with employees, being out there and interacting with the people. Many still see our ExCom as a bit remote, somebody they have only met very briefly, if at all. Luckily we have very accessible ExCom members, who do not try to distance themselves from their employees, and thus relatively short power distance. The dilemma is how achieve open book management (that should be our standard) while of course keeping corporate confidential information, confidential. There are often times things which cannot be openly shared, but employees seek answers/explanations. (Key person)

A number of steps are already being taken. The CEO publishes a CEO letter every time the quarterly results are published. The letter is available on the intranet for anyone to read. There is also a results video that people can view. The video discusses not only the results but the operating environment in general, successes and challenges, and focus areas in the near term. More recently, blogging has been enabled on the intranet and anyone wishing to start blogging is free to do so. The ExCom, in spite of their lack of prior experience, readily seized the opportunity.
I think we are doing surprisingly lot of that formal communication – but not even closely enough. For example those quarterly letters by [CEO] are a very good thing, and then of course these things that we have initiated now, these blogs and other things, so they are a good step forward. What I would like to see much much more is that our top management and also others would be much more visible out there on the field. (Leader)

It is clear that being physically present is the best option for rich communication to take place. Given the size of the company and its geographical dispersal in dozens of countries, and the busy schedules of the leaders, this is impossible. In such cases, online channels can provide support in communicating key messages and keeping the important discussions going.

Not all leaders understand the importance of effective communication. What, why and how people communicate makes a huge difference to the organisation’s performance and to the success of its leaders. Great leaders do not withhold information but make sure that information flows throughout the organisation. They share, listen and draw people into conversations. (Hawkins 2013, x-xi.) While it is not realistic to expect all leaders and managers to attend formal communication training programmes, smaller efforts can also make a significant impact. Reinforcing positive behaviours can help a more positive pro-communication culture to evolve. Positive feedback can be given by anyone, and senior management could also take a more active role in encouraging good communication behaviours in their employees.

But back to the question, make our people aware, our leaders aware, coach them, help them, show them as often as possible the mirror, give them the feedback this “hey this was good, this was not good,” and not just let’s say Excom, I think this is a leadership topic as such, everybody having a leadership position in this company should help facilitate that, show them the mirror and coaching. (Key person)

One major obstacle is the lack of time, “busyness as usual” (Hawkins 2013, xi): people simply do not have time to share knowledge. But it is not just about sharing knowledge. When people are very busy, working long hours and “going the extra mile”
all the time, following up on important activities in other parts of the organisation is not very high on their agenda.

If employees are very busy with their own work all the time, there is no time to follow e.g. what happens in Uponoria. Communication is an important part of everyone's work, and there should be enough time to practice that on all levels. (Key person)

It also became evident that there is great variation in the way communication is handled in different locations:

The biggest challenge in [location] is getting [local management] to work together and to communicate effectively. Without this [location] will never reach its full potential. I feel an injection of younger, fresher blood is required. The [local management] seem quite old fashioned and reluctant to move out of their comfort zone, they also seem oblivious to how the employees really feel. Both leadership and communication need to be massively improved before I can accurately comment on the biggest challenges in 'leadership communication' in [location]. (Key person)

One leader discussed the same thing from the employee engagement perspective.

This is such a big organisation that if there is something... if we do something on the Group level so... there are different people, different cultures, we have different business situations in different countries, so the engagement is very much a local thing. I mean it is very much about what an individual leader or manager does or does not do. (Leader)

The key point can be found in the last sentence – “it is very much about what an individual leader or manager does or does not do.” Increasing understanding on all management levels of the importance of effective information sharing is the key to improvement. Making things happen not just in theory but also in practice would require their inclusion in people’s personal objectives. Leaving things up to people’s goodwill is not likely to bring results any time soon.
Aiming for perfection while the world passes by

All leaders agreed that alignment with the company’s vision and objectives is key to success. This is in fact one of the key elements of any successful business, and one of the key challenges of leadership communication.

I feel that you have to understand and agree with the company’s objectives and desire, that they are relevant. (Leader)

And then the other thing that I think is important is to have the right kind of commitment, so that the employee understands, or his understanding of the company’s objectives and ways of working is the same as the company’s. So they are aligned, they are on the same page. (Leader)

Another thing which I think is fundamental is one agenda: to have aligned targets, to have a common understanding; so back to the question how it can be developed, we need to have a very very clear, committed, communicated, documented, common agenda, and that for me includes the… what we currently work on, this vision, mission, strategy and ambition, brand, whatever. As long as this is not aligned and understood, it is very difficult to get engagement from everybody. (Leader)

According to Haudan, “a meaningful strategy captures a sense of purpose, of doing something together that is worth the effort.” This can hardly be achieved with a dry PowerPoint presentation packed with high-flown statements and management jargon. When people truly understand the strategy and the challenges, they become engaged. Many people working in major organisations have faced the gap between the desire to get everybody on the same map, working toward common goals, and the reality of getting the organisation’s act together toward common goals. Some organisations struggle already in getting their strategy formulated, and that is usually the easiest part. The real challenge comes with the execution of the strategy. Haudan claims that leaders do not spend enough time planning the execution of the strategy, and they do not ensure that their employees are on board. People do not understand the strategy, and do not see how their roles are linked to it. Leaders also fail to outline how the strategy will be executed, or how people connect to each other in the effort. People miss the opportunity to contribute to something that has a purpose. According to Haudan, “success, com-
petitiveness, and vitality were not determined by the laser-sharpness of the vision and the strategy of the ‘brightest few’ in the company, but by the learning, understanding, and execution speed of the ‘slowest many.’” (Haudan 2008, xiii-xiv, 7, 22-24.)

Concerns about insufficient communication related to strategy were expressed by most ExCom members.

One is the communication of strategy and vision. […] …first and foremost we need to ensure that people have an understanding of where this company wants to go, what is my role in that overall picture, and what is expected from me. (Leader)

…starting from the understanding of what the company wants to do and then deciding whether I want to go to the same direction with the company, and if yes so then part of the commitment is already done.” (Leader)

To find a common understanding on the way forward is of course the first thing that needs to be in place so that you can identify yourself with it and commit to it and work for achieving it. (Leader)

Then communication from a leadership point of view has to be in a way guided towards a strategic direction, and whatever ambitions that you are having, and that required a little more thinking and planning of what the communication should be, you know, long term, so this is how it is going to be, supporting the strategic activities, sort of way forward. And that is where we are at this stage, to develop that part. (Leader)

Sometimes there can be too much thinking and too much planning. Although there was a consensus among ExCom members on the importance of strategy communication, leaders admitted that it is an area where they have not been excelling.

I feel somewhat guilty about this matter as an Excom member, but I think we don’t have a clear strategy that we would have communicated. I am sure that if I walk around in the office or any other place and ask people to tell me what the Uponor strategy is so I wonder if I get any response. I don’t know if it is somehow typical of us that we tend to be a bit slow and aim for something perfect and at the same time the world passes by. Even if it had been totally wrong, and even if there had been all kinds of faults in the communication but if we had done it then and started to live by it, we would be
better off now instead of us still thinking of what would be the perfect expression or is that word included or not included. (Leader)

In principle it starts, in my opinion, from communicating the strategy and there we have been really lousy. So considering that, I think we have succeeded disproportionately well. (Leader)

The shortcomings of strategy sharing were also among the concerns most commonly expressed by the key persons. It is clearly an area that needs improvement.

I think that there is lot what need to be improved in this area. ExCom has done the job quite well but the leaders maybe not that well or that is my opinion. I don't know how widely e.g. strategy is communicated by managers/leaders to their teams. (Key person)

At least in local level, in production sites, there is not so much leader communication about strategies or challenges. (Key person)

There is indeed a process for strategy communication within the company. The process utilises the cascading model, where information is cascaded from one organisational level to the next through leaders and managers. However, it is clear that the process has not been followed in practice. The management has now initiated a new strategy sharing process that should improve the situation. The respondents also acknowledged that progress has been made in this area.

The new strategy presentation which is communicated and implemented both through the video from [CEO] and local work sessions is a big step forward and a good example how a common commitment from ExCom can energise the organisation. I heard comments from colleagues like "wow, finally we have transparency in what the company is aiming at". (Key person)

However, it seems clear that there are still challenges to be faced in sharing information throughout the organisation.

Strategy communication has been lacking, but now we are really improving there as the whole company. Still the challenge is to get it to all levels of organisation to ensure that they understand the linkage between the strategy and their own targets. (Key person)
There are, in principle, two different approaches to sharing strategy. There is the more linear and mechanistic approach, the cascading model, and then the model based on dialogue, where reciprocity, discussions and mutual respect play a key role. In the former model, the approved strategy is cascaded to people through leaders and managers. Problems arise when middle management who have not been involved in the formulation of the strategy are asked to transmit the information further so that people will understand the strategy and its implications and commit to its fulfilment. Clearly, this is not an ideal process. Problems multiply if communications professionals are not included in the process early on but are considered “PowerPoint polishers”, placing the final touches to already fixed content. A more contemporary approach is strategy dialogue, where many or all employees are included in strategy formulation, or at least they have opportunities to thoroughly discuss the strategy and understand the drivers and the strategic intentions. It is a much more arduous process but one that drastically enhances the employees’ understanding of what the company is trying to achieve. (See e.g. Hämäläinen & Maula 2004.) The latter approach was suggested by Communications already years ago but was rejected; hence strategy communication has been based on the cascading model, which has not been working as planned due to insufficient resources available for implementation and prioritisation of other activities. The dialogue-based approach has now been partially introduced in Uponor, with a number of strategy-sharing sessions around the organisation offering people opportunities to discuss the strategy.

Recent efforts on communicating the strategy have been very well received by the organization, in fact, they are helping on motivating and aligning people, but now is crucial to keep that level of interaction, and don’t slow down, stating clearly that it is not a one time effort but a cultural behavior. (Key person)

Especially when trying to reach out for the masses, online channels can prove a useful addition to traditional face-to-face approaches. Kicking off the process with a top management video message, enabling online discussions and Q&As, following up and publishing information on local face-to-face sessions on the intranet, keeping topics alive by publishing news, articles, blog posts, quick polls, asking questions to trigger
discussion, etc. – these all help bring strategy to life in the daily work of employees. Strategy sharing should be a constant process. When asked if the leaders were doing a good job at communicating matters related to their respective areas of responsibility to a wider Uponor audience, people felt that there has been a major improvement in the past months. However, they also stated that there still is a lot of margin for improving it further, as the broader overview is often missing.

The biggest challenge is to have a clear communication around how we are proceeding compared to fulfilling our strategy, normally there is alot of info how we are fulfilling the goals function by function but the overall progress is normaly lost. We have financial targets which is valid and "easy" to track but the supporting initiatives/activities to meet those overall financial targets is sort of missing. (Key person)

The biggest challenge now is to communicate the right things on time (be up-to-date) and that on a continuously basis. And also to find a balanced/good mix of information from all functions and areas, to get a holistic view. (Key person)

The respondents also felt that the link to strategy should be clearer in all communication, and not just the part that falls under the umbrella of strategy communication.

The topics and information need to be elaborated conceptually and put into a strategic context. There needs to be more top-down implementation to avoid misinterpretation. At the same time our middle management needs to be enabled in a better way, both in terms of skills and support materials. (Key person)

8.5 One and done does not bring results

Top executives are often taken by surprise by the amount of repetition that is needed to ensure that people remember, understand and absorb messages. This aspect was discussed by one leader.

When you’re dealing with individuals or a small group of people you can say things once and assume it’s being understood but the larger that group the more opportunity there is for our message to get misconstrued. […] It needs to be communicated and communicated and reminded and communicated before it’s actually internalised by the
larger mass of people. That was a bit of a learning for me. I thought I can say things once and be done with it but that is not the case. (Leader)

I don’t think we’re necessarily very good at keeping our messages as simple as they could be and as frequent in our messaging. So in other words, we tend to think like “one and done”. (Leader)

The lack of sufficient repetition was also mentioned by key persons.

It seems that some managers do not put communications in a very high position in their role as a manager, and they may think that once the news is in the intranet, everyone knows it and acts accordingly. (Key person)

The need to keep repeating key messages time and again, in different situations and through different channels and using different methods clearly is an area needing improvement. First, there needs to be clarity; the key messages need to come out strong and clear. Second, the key messages need to be repeated so that people will remember them, understand them, internalise them, and finally take action. But it is not just about the repetition. It is equally important that the messages are clear so that people will understand and internalise them.

With this in mind it is very important to have clear strategy and also strong leaders - focused on achieving the common goals. I do not feel that this has been achieved. Many presentations have been made, probably too many, but the key messages have not been made clear enough. There appears to be a theory that once someone has seen the presentation they will automatically do this. In reality this is not the case and we need to ensure that we all lead by example in our daily work and communicate at every opportunity. (Key person)

Some respondents shared their concerns about the complexity of messages.

The biggest mistake in my opinion is that we communicate too complex and comprehensive messages. I understand that Excom who has been discussing these topics for weeks/month do not find the messages complex or comprehensive but for us "normal" employees it becomes difficult to digest. (Key person)
This is a valid point. It is easy to forget that not everybody has the same level of knowledge as those who have been working on the issue for several weeks or months. They are not aware of the background and how things have evolved. It is like the classic example of a long train where the people in the first carriage have a good understanding of where the train is going, but the people in the last carriage do not have a clue – in the worst case, they may be travelling through a long, dark tunnel with no lights on. Wiio (2009, 12, 53) offers a simple rule: the communicator must think about the receiver and craft the message accordingly – communicating in the same way regardless of the situation or the intended receiver will lead to a probable failure.

It is also so that the communication for most of us is not done in our native language. Thus, I would try to "Keep It Simple!". If you take a look at some of the group PowerPoint slides that present e.g. our strategy it takes you hours before you fully understand the content. Further, a lot of our messages are based on very theoretical assumptions (or school book examples) that in my opinion do not always work so well in real life. The reason for this is that some people in Excom do not have experience from working in other companies besides Uponor. (Key person)

The most effective communication happens in peoples mother tongue. E.g. if communication to Finnish sites is only carried out in Finnish and English one will miss one target employee group - people with Swedish as their mother tongue. This can lead to less engagement for this group and eventually even that people choose to leave the company because they feel left out of the company culture. (Key person)

The language question was raised by a couple of other respondents, too. The official company language is English, but not everyone in the organisation possesses adequate language skills. At the same time, thin resources do not allow for more extensive use of translations. Furthermore, the need to translate documents into several languages would in many cases delay the process too much, thus endangering the delivery of timely information. Key corporate-level activities that are driven by corporate communicators are translated into local languages as deemed necessary. For other activities, it remains the responsibility of local communicators to use their judgement in identifying the materials that need to be translated, and ensuring that the translations are done and localised as necessary. Native English speakers were more extreme in their opinions about the use of proper English, suggesting materials should be proofread by native
English speakers, while non-native English speakers were much more permissive. Increased use of proofreading may increase clarity in the texts but it would be important to note that it is not always pure language skills that help make communication clearer and simpler – an understanding of what constitutes good communication is needed, too. Hence, it ultimately boils down to communication skills rather than language skills. Furthermore, the need to proofread and edit materials would slow things down and even create inefficiencies if not resourced sufficiently.

The fact that there are no dedicated people responsible for employee communications in most Uponor locations creates gaps and inefficiencies. This aspect was discussed by a couple of respondents, as reflected in the comment below:

We need to have proper resources in place, otherwise internal communication will always be low in the priority lists of the over-worked employees who are supposed to take care of internal communication as well, in addition to e.g. HR or marketing communications. - Internal communications about group-wide initiatives should be driven and managed centrally. Now it's difficult to get communicators to support with some issues [...] and [they] are getting their priorities from local mgmt. (Key person)

The respondents also felt that these scarce resources are not used effectively, as the leaders do not make use of the communications expertise that resides in-house.

We as communicators have an intuitive sense of what is newsworthy and value to the general employee population. [...] but other leaders in our organization sometimes forget or neglect to include communications until very late in the process. [...] …involving communications will help improve results and increase employee engagement. [...] …not – or under – utilizing the talent of employees; wasted potential for improvement results when people doing the work are not consulted for ideas on improving the methods of work. (Key person)

As the above respondent indicated, having communications expertise in crafting communications plans and content would usually improve their quality and make it easier for people to understand and absorb. Overlooking the skills and knowledge of communications experts also erodes their engagement as they do not feel valued and able
to use their full potential. It is also very likely that knowledge of new channels and methods is better among communication professionals than among leaders.

8.6 More control! Too much control!

Leaders also understand the impact of the tone of voice, choice of wording, and selection of channels and methods.

So it is crucially important and especially the fact that if I think of myself as a leader and I have a message that I want to convey or I want something to happen so the way how I formulate the message and what is the channel that is used to transmit the message and do I go there and talk the thing through in an informal matter or do I have everything on paper that I distribute or do I use slides or do I have an innovative multimedia show or do I send an email or – all these play a critical role and have an impact and they are part of the communication, the selection of the channel, the selection of tone, is it the right level, is the right way of speech. We can destroy excellent messages simply by doing wrong choices at some stage. […] Maybe we put too little resources to communication planning as part of leading and leadership culture. (Leader)

Different views were expressed related to controlling the content of messages. This is, in fact, one of the key questions related to change in the communication culture: are leaders ready to let go of control and enable a more democratic and open discussion on various issues? If they are, are the employees ready to accept the responsibility for fully contributing and bringing issues to the leaders’ attention? Can this happen so that people are not blamed if they are the messengers of unpleasant information?

I am a firm believer of this more open communication […] because this is not rare, this is how we will communicate, how we are in fact communicating these days… so to close the eyes to that is I think like living in another reality. But I also know that some of my colleagues probably, for them this is too much. (Leader)

The members of the ExCom seem to represent two different schools: those who want to increase control to ensure homogeneity of the messages, and those who want to decrease control to enhance more open sharing of information. Many leaders talk
about aligning the messages, which is indeed important, but there is a fine line between sufficient alignment and too much control.

And the second area of topics is the… and that’s I think where we can do a lot is really to agree on a message, for a clear message, align our targets, make them available and do that alignment whenever possible. Everybody should have kind of a… to make it easy… a set a slides which everybody has understood fully, and can present it six o’clock in the morning after waking up… and then goes back again to vision, mission, strategy, elevator speech, brand, what are we, who are we, why are we… that I would not leave to individuals… that really needs to be type of… hmm, brainwash is negative but that needs to be teached and people need to understand that. And that again helps in a… to do good leadership communication, if the leaders are aligned, have a clear message… that is already x percent of good communication. (Leader)

We have to bring more the leaders together to have a more homogeneous setup of things that we have worked and do communicate, and what type of things we do not work on or we do not have to communicate, which type of culture we do want to develop in the company and which type of culture or attitudes to work. I think that there we still have to do a lot. (Leader)

If the leaders want to have more open communication, they must be ready to give up part of the control and accept that all messages cannot be controlled and that there can be some discrepancies sometimes. One leader also discussed the crucial aspect of content. Content is king, and if there is an abundance of irrelevant or superficial information, it does not help to drive the actions in the desired direction to support the company’s strategy. In fact, it may decrease the credibility of the channel (e.g. blogs) and, more importantly, the credibility of the leaders.

I think we still have perhaps a mentality of…. If I would say something to improve, that we had to have very much control on what is said and written and that perhaps is not facilitating that messages are flowing in the organisation. Not only top-down but also bottom-up. So there is a certain fear of, or I perceive it as a fear of “uncontrolling” the communication if we open the topics too much, the discussion, the contents of the blogs, and these types of things. The problem that could happen if we… if it is really like that, people start to lose interest in these communication tools because they are only touching superficial things and not really the things that are concerning the people in
the organisation. So that we have to be a bit careful that it is not losing some of the tools that we are now putting in place, not losing the interest because of having too much control. (Leader)

Even if increasing control is a controversial thing, it would make sense to ensure some sort of alignment in leadership communication. Agreeing on key themes for the coming months along with some top-level key messages, and ensuring that the timing of different activities do not overlap would be good starting points for more effective communication. Regular communication activities should be extended to other ExCom members as well, in addition to the CEO. This aspect was discussed by one interviewee, but based on some other comments it can be assumed that this is a general feeling among the ExCom members. This same issue was discussed by one key person as well. Bringing sufficient depth and relevance to a global communication plan would require more transparency from the ExCom toward communications people, and enhanced cooperation. Insufficient resourcing and lack of dedicated communication professionals focusing on employee communication has posed additional challenges in achieving the desired level. This is aspect point that should be taken into account in any communication activities requiring local support in the creation or implementation phases.

We first need an overall global communication strategy and communication plan that outlines what we want to share; our objectives and intended results; the audience, when to share and the communication tools (that include both traditional print and online/virtual capabilities). (Key person)

Uponor’s global communication plans and strategies have suffered from a lack of visibility to key global initiatives. One of the reasons is that as Communications is not present in the ExCom meetings, the Communications function lacks the overall picture and has no immediate access to relevant information. The responsibility for implementing different initiatives is spread across the organisation, and in many cases the plans do not include communications planning on a global scale. Much relevant information has vanished into the depths of the organisational units, not reaching all relevant audiences.
One leader mentioned that it may not always be clear to the receiver what the key message is that the leader wants to communicate. Sometimes too much information is packed in the same message, the choice of words does not support strong delivery of the message, or there are other reasons why the key message is not coming across.

When we communicate we don’t always start with what is two or three key things that when my speech is long over or my message like blog or email is long over, what are the two things that I want the audience to leave with. (Leader)

Kouzes and Posner suggest that all leaders should have a theme, and that they should start to think about the prominent message, the recurring theme, and what they want people to envision. (Kouzes & Posner 2012, 106.) This would help to bring consistency, repeatability and emotion into their messages.

I don’t think we’re always up to simplicity when it can be simple. I get that there are complex things and complex thoughts that need to be expressed but for some reason we tend to opt for making things more complex than they need to be. (Leader)

The use of storytelling methods could also help to tackle this dilemma, as storytelling techniques typically require leaders to simplify the message.

8.7 Making the road by walking

Many leaders felt that communication in online environments puts them outside of their comfort zone. Nevertheless, they all expressed that despite these feelings of discomfort, it is something that needs to be developed further.

Communication in a virtual environment is so much more difficult but it is also so that even if it is difficult it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t put any efforts there. In an organisation like ours it is crucial, we can achieve so much… But I think that we are still in the initial phase with it but with the new intranet we have got more tools. (Leader)

General statement, things you have a certain routine, you feel more comfortable with than those where you don’t have a routine. Personally I don’t think that’s a big issue.
It’s more that we simply do it, that we overcome that hurdle of doing it, whether we feel now perfectly doing it or not… (Leader)

…a stream of whatever type of video […] is something which is always as better than not communicating, not as good as being personally present. So I’m having here a position simply to try it, let’s try it, at least my generation, we need to test it. There is no preference to do just that, or never that… all channels available, we should try. (Leader)

Many leaders mentioned the new intranet as a major leap forward. It provides the needed platform for future development.

I think we have lots of opportunities for communication in a sense that we have Uponoria, we have blogs, we have CEO messages we have just general emails to our people, et cetera. I think we have the infrastructure. (Leader)

Blogging, which the ExCom initiated enthusiastically even though most of them had no prior experience, raised many comments. The leaders have found it a good yet challenging channel. Considering the positive feedback that the ExCom blog has received, it is definitely a good way to repeat key messages and even initiate some small-scale discussions. So far, readers have not been very active commenting on the ExCom post, although some posts have received several comments.

And, also here bridging the discussion to online, also our Excom blog… even if it is something you need to get used to, but people read it, and you get feedback, and this is also for me a positive example, also the topics taken up by the colleagues. It is an easy way to access many people, it’s always just a kind of plan B; always a personal contact is better but when that is not possible then this is better than nothing. (Leader)

I’m by no means an expert of social media and I’m not an active consumer or user but for the younger generations […] So these tweets and that sort of things… Well we have taken the first steps with blogging and now we need to see how we can put videos into Uponoria. (Leader)

But I’m a little bit behind in that part. And I think many other people may be too. But I don’t know. And I think that you know that I make a comment to somebody who has posted something, lower in the organisation, I would assume that this would give some
proudness feeling, recognise that this is good that supports it. So that is in a way a way of using the system to support the engagement and proudness. (Leader)

Many interviewees mentioned that they like writing blogs. The good aspects were the fact that blog posts can in principle be about any topic, even outside the company, which can then be linked to the desired aspect of business. In addition, the interviewees liked the fact that they can go through the text and ensure it is logical and conveys the message in the way the writer wants.

I like writing blogs, I find them very very challenging to write but I like writing them. I guess that the point of the blog is that the subject can be really anything, obviously you have to have some kind of relevance to the business or something but I think, I like to tie mine to something that is happening or some points about what we are trying to accomplish. (Leader)

I like to write. It has always been very easy for me to produce text and I actually like the idea that I can write the message because then I can think through the logic and ensure that in terms of the language it is what I want. (Leader)

The challenging part was the fact that the target audience can potentially be the entire personnel. This makes it more difficult to target messages at specific target groups. Whether the messages should always be about topics for everybody is a debatable point. Not everybody reads them anyway. Trying to put all texts into a mould to suit everybody may water down the message, making it too generic and even boring.

In principle I have nothing against these blogs or other things, quite the opposite, there is this small thing which will probably go away once I get used to it but it is the fact the you don’t know the exact target group, so you have the entire Uponor as the target group, and in a way potentially also any external so that in my opinion makes is slightly more difficult because you cannot target your message to somebody so it should be so neutral that it can suit anybody and then you often compromise the depth of the message, I cannot discuss the thing that I think is the most important because that or that group of employees will not like it. (Leader)
…so for me, it bothers a bit even when writing that what is it that really interests the reader, and then I understand that I can never write texts that would interest and inspire everybody. (Leader)

Social networking applications were spontaneously mentioned by two leaders, and the opinions of their usefulness varied markedly among the interviewees.

Then also another thing that I think we should perhaps considerably improve which is sometimes considered of a risk in organisation, that is to try to channel the kind of informal communication, or not so much precooked communication, that could be one video, presentation, that is prepared but type of more spontaneous, blogging, and these types of tools, Yammer, and any other tool similar to type of Twitter or some other tools, externals that companies could also use internally. And where there could be more dialogue established with the organisation and with the people. (Leader)

It is very difficult for me to even try to understand what I could put there. If you think of Facebook for example so I have never understood it as a channel, I think it is absolutely crazy that someone writes that I woke up and went to have a cup of coffee. I really cannot understand what the point there is. And then if you try to think about it in the work context so what do I have during the day that I could put there – I cannot think of anything. Well, I could write there that we chatted now for half an hour about leadership communication but what added value does it give to anybody? So maybe I don’t believe in that. But I can be easily persuaded if someone can justify the added value. But my scepticism is coming from the fact that I cannot find any added value there. (Leader)

Spontaneity and brevity were emphasised by some leaders. Brevity is also a benefit when people travel and need to access information from hotels and airport lounges, often in a hurry while on the go.

My view is that you should make a short topic because some people like to read a lot of things but actually we should not take time from the organisation with long writings. We should focus on our message and make some easier thing to read. (Leader)
As indicated by many interviewees, these channels lack, from the sender’s point of view, personal cues and instant feedback. This seems to be one of the major shortcomings, especially in asynchronous virtual communication.

And it is exactly about being in the same room so that you can see the gestures, and when you enter a room where there is a group of people so it is quite easy to see the group dynamics. But then in these virtual things it is lacking completely so even if you were in a Lync call so even there it is a bit difficult to understand what is… (Leader)

And when you make them so they are not interactive. I hope they will be in the long run. And whether it’s a blog post that hopefully triggers some comments and dialogue, a webcast or something else that then triggers some feedback… but when you make them so if you compare that to a live situation where you are presenting something in front of a live audience and you can discuss and get instant feedback whereas in these cases you kind of shout in the canyon and then you get the echo response a lot later. So they are not very appreciative communication situations. […] So these are more like you are presenting into a black box and the echo comes with a delay… It’s like Caesar saying that the dice have been thrown but we don’t know the numbers yet… So analysing the impact of communication and measuring it is a lot harder. (Leader)

And for me it’s an add-on, it not replacing the old, traditional face to face communication but it’s supporting. It’s a very nice way to reach a broad audience. But it’s limited because the feedback is never immediate, and never can really customise the message to an individual, it’s the broad kind of communication you can do this way. But as said a nice add-on. (Leader)

Videos were not particularly popular among the interviewees, or rather, they like watching them, but not appearing in them themselves. Still, everyone agreed that videos are a powerful means of communication that should be utilised more.

It’s just the thing that I don’t like it when it’s being recorded. I don’t know… there is no rational reason why not. Maybe it is just that I don’t like watching my own face. (Leader)

Personally, when I’m the receiver of a message, I really like images and video because I have… Well there also just like in writing some people are better and some people are not so good but I think that we are utilising video very little. (Leader)
…But it doesn’t matter if it is not easy, we should still develop it. And we probably should have, we should probably try to scope, to define when and what kind of things we do and how we do it. It should be part of a plan that we do this and this there and there and we do it evenly, we need to make a plan of how to do it. (Leader)

…the younger generations see that maybe completely different, it would be wrong to kind of deny certain ways of communicating. If that is meeting some of our people’s way of communicating, then we should do it. All the social media platforms are unexplored for me, and to certain extent unexplored for the company… I think there are unexplored… we are not systematically present in those social media platforms, a lot of things we need to address. It’s maybe not about leadership communication, but it’s about communication in general.” (Leader)

There was also a clear message from one key person about in-house capabilities regarding the use of modern communication technologies:

Training for those who are not comfortable with today's technology but have good knowledge to share. (Key person)

People would like to see more interactivity and enhanced use of online channels.

The biggest challenges are not because our leaders don't want to communicate; it's more about geographical locations, accessibility and time. We could overcome these with global virtual meetings; rather than posting a video; let's set it up as a meeting invite and make it live. Would that be pull rather than push? Post and hope someone views it? (Key person)

The option of having open online meetings was discussed with IT, as it was a method that the communications professionals wanted to introduce and add to the mix of alternative channels in the leaders’ toolbox. Limitations on the number of participants that could participate in such a meeting was mentioned as an issue, although one could ask whether that should preclude this option altogether. Rather, there could be an open meeting that would accommodate as many participants as possible, and the rest could access the recording afterwards through the intranet.
The respondents also requested fewer videos featuring executive monologues:

Short viral videos with Excom and employees working and communicating together, not just the Excom and Management team sitting in the 'high-tower'. (Key person)

Although people have not been very active in giving immediate feedback, they have embraced the new ways that Uponor’s leaders are employing to communicate and appreciate the effort. Still, some room for improvement remains.

Through our new intranet Uponoria we do have great new opportunities for our leaders to communicate in a quick and informative way to a broad audience. I personally like in general the video communication (e.g. [CEO]’s strategy talk). It gives the feeling that he is close to us Uponorians, like sitting one office away. Also following leader blogs is quite interesting, so you can inform yourself about different things ongoing in HR or Supply Chain. I feel that they are doing a good job in communication matters over Uponoria and via virtual communication channels. (Key person)

More than one channel should be used to communicate. It is a mixture of all senses which will be successful. the message must be clear - it should be simple and it should be reinforced in all our daily work by all management levels - not just Ex Com. (Key person)

Quite simply, communication through virtual channels need to be increased as much as possible and as soon and as fast as possible!! The web casts by [CEO] are great, but why only once a quarter, let’s have them every month or every 2 months, and let’s see some real emotions, some passion, some belief and some inspiration and motivation! (Key person)

Let’s have Lync recordings made available of meetings, for example the offering and markets meeting by region etc. Virtual channels offer us the opportunity to have instant realtime discussions and conversations which are completely transparent for all to see. Virtual channels also offer much greater accessibility to conversation/discussion with more senior levels of staff, which, without virtual channels would otherwise be impossible! They are also an excellent way to train employees, I am sure with all the resources we have as a group we could put together training seminars and complete programs for employees to learn/train/qualify on internal Uponor courses. The possibilities are endless, but like everything virtual channels need stakeholder engagement, stakeholder buy
in and stakeholder approval. They then need budget and resource. Virtual channels can be used to address employees, engage with employees, have 2 way discussion with employees, reduce emails etc. We need to do more than we currently are, we have the technology we just need to use it. If employees do not understand virtual channels then we have to teach them. Again, the belief in these 'new' channels will come from the top, senior managers across the business need to understand, believe in and champion virtual channels. (Key person)

The essence of this research was in fact captured by one key person:

The use of the virtual channels is certainly a big improvement. The new intranet is really excellent and enables information and communication a lot. Also the use of videos or maybe also more animated presentations (for example animated PPT with voice-over) contributes a lot to a better understanding. So we should definitely increase the use of virtual channels. Nevertheless face-to-face communication remains vital for implementation. To know and be aware of what's going on is one thing. But creating relevance and commitment and thus bringing-to-life is even more crucial. Every function and even every person has to understand how it/he/she needs to act and can contribute to achieve the higher goals. That needs "translation" of the topics into an operational context, getting people on board and inspired. (Key person)

To summarise the findings, the only sustainable way to develop and implement leadership communication is to make the road by walking, one step at a time. Many steps have already been taken, but there is still a long way ahead. The overall attitudes both among the ExCom and the key persons are positive. People are open to new ideas and in many cases ready to step out of their comfort zones. There is a common consensus regarding key challenges, such as strategy communication. Lack of resources may hinder the introduction and especially the more widespread and systematic utilisation of new approaches.

The findings will be discussed and conclusions drawn in the following chapters.
9 Results

The objectives defined at the beginning of this research project were to explore the significance of leadership communication and its impact on employee engagement. Special focus was given to virtual communications and social technologies, which have witnessed rapid proliferation in the workaday world and all walks of life. The aim was to review key theories related to employee engagement and leadership communication, and understand how good leadership communication can be transferred to online environments. These theoretical aspects were then mirrored against the current status of the case organisation. A framework was then constructed for developing leadership communication in the case organisation.

The research question was: How can leadership communication be improved in an online environment to enhance employee engagement? This key question was supplemented by further assisting questions to yield deeper insights into the topic. These assisting questions are discussed below.

The first assisting question was about the elements of employee engagement and its importance to organisations: What elements constitute employee engagement and why is it important to organisations? This question was approached through a literature review on employee engagement. Engagement can be divided into psychic energy, i.e. people putting more energy into the task at hand and spending less energy focusing on something else, and behavioural energy, i.e. how engagement is visible to others. There are several drivers related to employee engagement. Greater fit with work roles, variety in activities and skills, autonomy, increasing job challenges, and feedback all play a role in enhancing employee engagement. A sense of belonging and sense of purpose are also important aspects. Furthermore, employees need to understand the big picture and how their contributions impact it. Many studies across the world indicate that only a small number of employees are truly engaged in their work. There is indeed clear evidence that engagement and superior financial performance are interrelated – the impact on business has been widely demonstrated, as manifest for example in increased job satisfaction, increased job performance, increased total return to shareholders,
increased sales, decreased employee turnover and intention to leave, decreased intention to search for alternative employers, and decreased absenteeism. The facts that employees are more inclined to create value for the organisation, more consistent in their actions, and less likely to leave the company, all contribute to lowering the company’s risk profile. Current research indicates that there is no single solution to enhancing engagement. Among the basic prerequisites are good line management, two-way communication, cooperation, employee wellbeing, and focus on development. Engagement is heavily impacted by the interaction between employees and their immediate and senior managers.

The second question was related to good leadership communication and its impact on employee engagement: What is good leadership communication and how does it impact employee engagement? The topic was approached through various theoretical sources. It was clear that while the drivers of employee engagement vary somewhat depending on the source, leadership is typically always a key contributing factor. How leadership materialises to employees is in most cases through communication. Creating a common purpose, connecting, articulating inspiring visions – all these prove somewhat challenging in reality. The importance of communication is in many cases acknowledged, but the reality speaks another truth when good intentions are not implemented due to a number of reasons, including lack of understanding, pressure to carry out tasks that create immediate, visible results, lack of vigour and lack of resources. In today’s world, leaders must be able to inspire and motivate their employees. If the leaders really want to ignite action, they need to give reasons. Management jargon and excessively general content do not help to motivate. Leaders can significantly enhance employee engagement through effective communication. To increase employee engagement, people need to know what they are expected to do and why, and what the impact of their contribution is. Companies often miss opportunities to become more cooperative, engaged and productive workplaces because their management practices alienate employees. Lack of positive communication programmes can systemically undermine organisational performance, and lacking connections between senior managers and the workforce is a key obstacle to employee engagement.
The third question concerned the transition to online environments, and the impact of that transition on leadership communication: *How does the transition to online environments impact leadership communication and what possibilities and challenges does it create?* Leaders of today often lead in organisations where physical distances pose additional challenges, and in operating environments where the only constant is continuous change. Furthermore, they need to provide transparency and communicate through a variety of channels, using a variety of methods and styles. Leaders need to adopt a new mindset, master new skills, and be comfortable sharing their personal perspectives and feelings to develop closer relationships with their employees. Social technologies are gaining ground in organisations but leaders are still struggling to utilise them in their daily communication. With the emergence of new communication technologies, leaders have lost part of the control that they used to have over the flow of information. Some leaders may be feel threatened, but the new technologies also provide opportunities to provide information in a more transparent and timely manner, making it possible for leaders to engage in discussions with their employees in ways that were not possible before.

Finally, the fourth question specifically concerned the case organisation: *What is the current status of leadership communication in the case organisation and how can it be developed using virtual tools so that it enhances employee engagement?* The current status of leadership communication in the case organisation was studied, and a framework was created for its development using virtual tools. The research revealed that in-house attitudes towards leadership communication and utilisation of new technology were positive. However, there were some impediments hindering effective communication, such as lack of a coherent communication culture, organisational silos, and lack of speed in areas such as strategy sharing. There was no consistent plan for leadership communication in online environments. Skill levels varied, but the leaders were in most cases willing to try out and learn new ways to communicate.

In the light of the above, the empirical research carried out for this thesis can be regarded as having duly covered the original research question, i.e. how leadership
communication can be developed in online environments to enhance employee engagement.
10 Discussion and conclusions

This chapter concludes the research project. The findings of the empirical research will be discussed, conclusions will be drawn, and recommendations will be made. The reliability and validity of this research will also be discussed, and the process will be reviewed. The suggestions resulting from the research are rather high-level and may be regarded advisory, providing guidelines for the further development of communication practices in the organisation.

The views of ExCom and the interviewed key persons were aligned on most key issues. The key drivers of employee engagement – a sense of belonging, sense of purpose and understanding of the big picture – were emphasised by a number of people.

There was general interest among different organisational players in developing leadership communication. Different issues were emphasised by different people, but the general consensus was that progress has been made, albeit that further development is still needed.

Lacking connections between senior managers and the workforce is a key obstacle to employee engagement. It is therefore important to establish such connections. Leadership is born from the interaction between leaders and their followers. The top-level communication was considered to be very much CEO-focused, and people requested that the communication should be expanded to other leaders as well. There is, indeed, a clear need to extend the top-level communication as the other leaders have been basically invisible in global channels, except for the recently established ExCom blog, and the discontinued Zoom magazine. In most cases, the leaders themselves have not been active initiators in company-wide communication, and as the Communications function does not have visibility to key activities, there is a clear gap in how the communication should be implemented. The division of responsibilities between the leaders and their subordinates, and Group Communications should be clarified. Furthermore, the leaders should ensure that a proper communication plan is in place for any key initiatives they initiate and lead, and that all communication activities are adequately re-
sourced. It would also make sense to establish a regular communication practice for ExCom members and other selected key people in the organisation.

The leaders felt that leadership communication was on a generally good level and that they strive to share things openly and transparently. The key persons expressed a different view on this. They stated that there is no real communication culture of open sharing of information and knowledge within Uponor. Many key persons also raised the issue of silos, which are causing inefficiencies in the organisation. People felt that information was shared within separate functions, but other people in need of that information were often disregarded. Clearly, information and knowledge is not evenly shared. In some cases it may be caused by a lack of understanding of what the leadership role entails, but in some other cases it may also be a symptom of power struggles in the organisation. Prioritisation of other activities can also be one of the reasons behind the shortage of sharing.

Regarding development needs, the need to develop strategy sharing was highlighted both by the leaders and by key persons. Strategy-sharing activities are already being developed, but it should be ensured that key strategic messages and initiatives are discussed and reiterated also in online environments. So far, strategy sharing on the intranet has been limited to static information and a strategy kick-off presentation by the CEO. Strategic topics should be visible throughout the year, and they should be brought to life through presentations, blog posts, news items, discussions and other material available on the intranet. It would be a good idea to involve more people in discussions to help the strategy process to become more dialogic also online.

The intranet is the only global channel to reach personnel across country and organisational borders. Having the new intranet in place does not automatically mean that information is shared more effectively – people need to take action to share the information. It is important that the leaders lead by their own example, and that they create pressure for others to start sharing, too.
There is a general consensus among all stakeholders regarding the need to be open to change and ready to update practices. Leaders have demonstrated their willingness and ability to step out of their comfort zone and try new ways of communicating. A good approach is to pave the road to the future by walking it, i.e. introducing and trying out one thing at a time. That way the burden will not grow too heavy for anyone. Some people shared their concerns that online communication would replace face-to-face communication. This indicates that there may be some ambiguity regarding the role and characteristics of different communication channels and methods. A communication guide for managers is available within the organisation, clarifying the role of managers as communicators and describing the suitability of different channels for different kinds of communication. It might be a good idea to revisit the guide to reflect the recent developments in the organisation, and then promote the guide, as its existence clearly is not common knowledge among leaders and other key persons.

The tone of communication, selection of channels and methods, repetition and targeting of messages was mentioned by several leaders. Overall, the focus seemed to be on the channels, methods and tools, and compelling content did not receive much attention. Furthermore, the benefits of effective use of narratives did not surface. This was surprising, and this point merits further attention in the future. Previously, Zoom magazine was a good channel for sharing successes and highlighting challenges through stories that were crafted by professional writers. Currently, the leaders are expected to operate in an online environment, and have more responsibility for ensuring that things are communicated to company-wide audiences.

Some people raised the issue of insufficient resourcing of communication initiatives. As already indicated, roles and responsibilities regarding leadership communication could be clearer. This does not apply to employee-superior communication only but also to the division of responsibilities between Group Communications, the ExCom, vice presidents and other senior managers, and local communication and HR professionals. This responsibility should be expanded to a wider group of leaders to ensure timely and open sharing of information on key initiatives and progress in strategy implementation. Systematic communication about successes and achievements should be
initiated. Communication should also be part of the personal targets of the key leaders; otherwise they will never be prioritised and fully implemented.

The research proved that leaders understand the link between employee engagement and effective leadership communication. In future, leadership communication should be developed with particular attention to enhancing employee engagement. In many cases, it is the small things that can make a difference.

Taking into account the results of the empirical research, the following SWOT analysis was conducted for leadership communication in the organisation:

![SWOT Analysis Diagram](image)

Figure 16. SWOT analysis

With the opportunities offered by the new intranet and live and recorded Lync sessions, it is safe to state that the infrastructure for high-quality leadership communication is in place. The leaders are willing to develop and try out new things. There are many initiatives ongoing, and communication is already among the focus areas of overall leadership development efforts.
The interesting thing is that despite an overall willingness to communicate and share, Uponor lacks an open and coherent communication culture, and there is a persistent tendency to build silos that prevent information sharing. The lack of an open communication culture leads to other deficiencies in communication. As communication is a low priority, other activities are prioritised. Communication is typically not included in people's personal targets, except in the case of dedicated communication professionals. Even the instructions given to project managers devote little attention to effective communication. Furthermore, the different silos across the organisation make people focus on their own narrow issues. One function may benefit, but as the opportunities to meet larger organisational goals are not utilised, the organisation as a whole loses. Silo thinking also increases information hoarding, delays and partial truths, and may make people focus on the wrong things. Finally, a major weakness is resourcing, as people are so busy with their pressing daily tasks that they do not have time to share information. Clarity in roles and responsibilities and the overall prioritisation of communication may help to allocate more time to information sharing, and would eventually have a positive impact on the communication culture as well.

Clearly, the constant evolution of online channels provides opportunities to enhance leadership communication. There are many ideas in the pipeline that, if properly implemented, will improve leadership communication further. The interactivity of online environments is new to the organisation, which offers plenty of opportunities to further expand the scope of interactivity and dialogue within the organisation. The use of narratives in the organisation is based on each individual leader's ability to tell good stories; there is no systematic approach in utilising storytelling. Hence, even a small improvement in this respect could potentially bring good results.

The threat exists that if leaders do not receive much response or feedback for their efforts, they lose interest and reduce their communication. The same thing may happen when the novelty wears off. Furthermore, if the leaders do not manage to break down organisational silos, the communication will not be as effective as it would otherwise be. Finally, it may be that the status quo will not change after all – that communication
is prioritised in theory but that prioritisation does not get translated into practice and communication continues to be downplayed.

As a general rule, aspects impacting employee engagement should be taken into account in all leadership communication. These include creating a sense of purpose and sense of belonging, ensuring that people understand the big picture, and providing a link to strategy.

Utilising Juholin’s model of familiarising and estranging communication (see page 30-31 in this thesis), the following framework was created for developing leadership communication within the case organisation:

Table 2. Framework for leadership communication

| Mutual trust                      | - Establish frequent communication in online environments to demonstrate that the leaders are committed to open and timely communication.  
|                                  | - Show respect for different opinions and acknowledge that everyone has the right to disagree.  
|                                  | - Involve leaders and non-leaders in discussions (e.g. in videos).  
|                                  | - Listen and ask questions (quick polls, surveys, ask for ideas).  
|                                  | - Do not blame people for mistakes.  
| Polyphony, diversity             | - Extend leadership communication to the entire ExCom and also other key persons to ensure a more diverse view of things (videos, blogs).  
|                                  | - Enable discussions and seek ways to activate other forms of dialogue and interaction in an online environment. Ensure that leaders also like and comment on things.  
|                                  | - Show respect for different opinions and acknowledge that everyone has the right to disagree.  
|                                  | - Involve leaders and non-leaders in discussions (e.g. in videos).  
|                                  | - Listen and ask questions.  
|                                  | - Utilise different channels and methods to cater for different needs.  
| Understanding of the big picture | - Clarify roles and responsibilities between various organisational players (incl. ExCom, Group Communications, HR, key persons, communications professionals across the organisation) to ensure open
and timely sharing of information.
- Ensure that individual activities are linked to strategy and other key activities to make it easier for people to understand the big picture (in online environments, utilise links, etc.)
- Regularly report on progress in key activities and initiatives (project blogs; videos and blog posts by leaders etc.).
- Share success stories and use practical examples from around the organisation.

| Involvement | - Involve people by listening and asking questions.
  | - Ask people to suggest themes and topics that they want to learn more about, and arrange appropriate leaders to share information on the requested topic (e.g. a monthly presentation via Lync, live session and/or recorded videos).
  | - Create ways for people to participate in initiatives and activities (submitting images, discussing online, voting, commenting).
  | - Acknowledge behaviours that support involvement.
  | - Welcome and accept feedback and differing opinions. |

| Availability of relevant information and knowledge | - Clarify roles and responsibilities between various organisational players (incl. ExCom, Group Communications, HR, key persons, communications professionals across the organisation) to ensure open and timely sharing of information. If possible, include communication in people's individual targets, especially in big projects and other major initiatives impacting larger audiences.
  | - Ensure that communication plans for different activities are created as appropriate, and that global channels are utilised frequently.
  | - Create a top-level communication plan addressing the key themes requiring communication.
  | - Make leaders lead by example, i.e. sharing information on the intranet and through other online channels.
  | - Ensure that the basic facts are available on the intranet (e.g. slide sets, reports etc.) and that they are supported by other communication activities (e.g. blogs, videos, recorded Lync presentations, discussions, polls and surveys etc.). |

| Opportunities to participate | - Create ways for people to contribute and participate (polls, surveys, commenting, discussions).
  | - Have leaders give presentations through open Lync sessions, available to anyone interested in the topic.
  | - Have leaders encourage other people's information sharing efforts (e.g. |
Multiple communication forums

- Utilise a wide array of communication channels and methods.
- Understand that some of the methods and channels are new, and that there is a learning curve. No one is perfect.
- Investigate new avenues for communicating about key initiatives (e.g. gamification for key strategic themes etc.)

Good communication skills

- Use different styles according to the need: telling, informing, persuading, discussing, problem solving, facilitating
- Utilise storytelling and practical examples.
- Identify key areas of improvement and related development initiatives (e.g. formal training, guidelines and instructions, hands-on training)

Communication is everyone’s duty

- Make leaders lead by example: regular, timely and open sharing of information and encouragement (and pressure) for others to do the same.
- Investigate ways to include information sharing in selected people’s objectives.
- Acknowledge people that have done a good job at sharing information.

10.1 Reliability, validity, and ethical considerations

The reliability and validity of this study is directly related to the reliability and validity attributable to the data gathering and analysis techniques used by researcher. Since the researcher is also a member of the organisation under investigation, and since the research was carried out in cooperation with other organisational players, these issues merit careful consideration.

Due to the small number of ExCom interviewees, seven in total, special attention was paid to ensuring the anonymity of their responses. The interviews were held in either English or Finnish, based on the interviewee’s own preference. No original Finnish extracts are presented in this thesis. To protect the interviewees’ anonymity, the interviews that were conducted and duly transcribed in Finnish were then translated into English by the researcher. Consequently, some English words and expressions may not
be exactly the same as the interviewee would have used. However, special attention was paid to the validity of the translations insofar as to ensure that the meanings would not change during the translation process. The process of transcribing interviews and then translating the transcriptions into another language is a demanding task that requires a great deal of effort from the researcher. (See e.g. Ruusuvuori, Nikander & Hyvärinen 2010, 432-442.) The anonymity of the ExCom interviewees was also guarded in the way they are referred to, i.e. all quotes are interspersed without any signal of where the same speaker continues. All interviewees are referred to as Leaders. In addition, no separation based on gender was made in the way the leaders are referred to.

The key person survey was anonymous, i.e. no background information of any kind was requested. The respondents answered the three questions of the survey and submitted their responses. It was impossible to trace or identify any individuals based on their responses unless they themselves provided information that indicated something about their position or role in the organisation. Where this was true, all such references were removed during the editing process to ensure their anonymity in the thesis. Furthermore, any references to individuals, teams, or functions that may reveal the respondent’s identity were removed or rendered unidentifiable. If the respondent’s anonymity was not jeopardised, the organisational information or function names were left intact.

All ExCom members felt positive about the research project and were willing to discuss the themes openly. The interviews produced a wealth of material to be analysed. The fact that all members (7/7) contributed helped avoid the question of biased material. The response rate for the key person survey was 66 per cent, which can be considered excellent for an online survey, especially as the survey consisted of open questions only. The quality, depth and richness of the responses provided by key persons were a positive surprise. The respondents had really thought about the issues and were willing to allocate time to express their views.

Action-oriented qualitative research is a well-suited approach for researchers who play a dual role, i.e. holding a functional role in the organisation in which they are carrying
out the research project. There are, however, some stumbling blocks that should be avoided. It may be difficult for the researcher to take a neutral position. This relates to all aspects of the research – selection of methods and interviewees/respondents, data analysis and processing of materials, and conclusions. While knowledge of the organisation and its operations and practices is usually of great benefit, it may be tempting for the researcher to make assumptions and draw conclusions based on their own prior experiences. Furthermore, being a professional in a particular field may also have an impact on the way the research is carried out.

The above stumbling blocks were avoided through thorough analysis of related literature. The interviews and surveys drew support from the theory review. Furthermore, the key person survey helped to provide an overview of the current status of the organisation without the researcher having to make assumptions which could have created a biased picture of the situation.

Considering the above, relevant aspects related to reliability, validity and ethicality were duly taken into account in planning and conducting the research.

This research project by no means purports to be a complete review of leadership communication. The focus was selectively on online leadership communication and on aspects that impact employee engagement. Leadership communication between individual employees and their superiors were outside the scope of this study.

10.2 Recommendations for future research

This research covered only a fraction of themes that would deserve more thorough analysis. In terms of communication development, it would be interesting to incorporate another viewpoint and initiate a research project for developing leadership communication on a person-to-person level. This thesis focused more on the corporate-wide aspects of leadership communication, but the individual approach clearly also needs development.
Silos were mentioned by many contributors. It has been a problem for several years, as also indicated by the earlier studies presented in the background material. The existence of silos has an impact on many important aspects of organisational life, including communication, strategy implementation, employee engagement, leadership, culture, and so forth. If the company’s management wishes to dig deeper into this issue, a social network analysis could bring interesting results. It could focus on specific aspects such as strategy sharing or other key knowledge-sharing efforts related to corporate-level activities and initiatives.

Since narratives were an aspect that gained practically no attention, some research could be put into developing powerful storytelling practices in the organisation to further enhance leadership communication.

Further research could also be initiated on local variations in communication and employee engagement to identify the exact key factors that create the greatest correlation. That would, of course, require that the engagement metrics are in place first.
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