



# **Will a self-organising team need a leader?**

Case: A German start-up company

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis was written in cooperation with a start-up online marketing company located in Germany. This company decided to implement a self-organising structure for the US teams starting in January 2020. The studied team was working independently until a team leader joined in January 2019. The performance of the team improved once the team leader joined the team. The purpose of the case study was to find out whether leadership would be beneficial to a self-organising team.

The research aimed to help the studied team evaluate the possibility of leadership to the new team structure. The results can be beneficial to the studied team, and the recommendations suggested can be tested as well. The data was collected through five personal interviews with the studied team. The interviews aimed to collect personal opinions of the team members excluding the team leader. The results of the interviews provided data on how a leader can lead their team once transitioning to a self-organising structure. The data was analysed with the theoretical part of the thesis that included previous studies on the topic of leadership, leadership styles, self-managing teams and leading a self-managing-teams. The results of the study showed that the majority of the respondents believed leadership could be beneficial in certain areas for the team such as directing the focus of the team to the bigger picture, and providing tools, feedback that can facilitate the work of the team. On the other hand, the results also showed that leadership can hinder a self-organising team, if a leader takes sole ownership of the decision making or the task delegation. The findings suggested further research on whether a leader is beneficial to a self-organising team, and this secondary research can be done once the self-organising structure is implemented and put to practice. Due to the time constraints of the thesis, there was not enough time to research the studied team once transitioning to a self-organising team. The aim of the second research is to further evaluate the respondents' perception of the effectiveness of leadership on a self-organising team.

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Keywords: leadership, self-organising teams

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

More and more companies are trying to find new and innovative ways to change their organisational structure for the better. Self-management or green organisations focus on culture and empowerment of the employees in order to achieve ultimate motivation. (Laloux 2016, 36).

Starting January 2020, company x will implement a self-organising structure to the US team as a test trial in order to view whether the organisational structure can have an impact on the team. It is interesting to explore the possibility of having a leader to a self-organising team and to explore the ways a leader can lead a self-organising team and how it can be of benefit to the team.

There are different types of leadership styles and methods that can be explored in order to define how a leader can lead a self-organising team. Self-organising means each team member is an equal member regarding responsibilities and roles. Each role is essential to the functionality and the continuity of the project. Leading a self-organising team might be complicated however, it can be beneficial to have a self-organising team leader. Some studies show that a unit that functions better can perform better. As Kathryn Gaines (2006), explains that the success of the organisation depends on the leader's processes such as clarifying the roles of each team members, building relationships between the members, accomplishing goals of the project, negotiating internal and external conflicts, navigating new changes, and making the final decisions.

Consequently, one can assume a leader can be beneficial to a self-organising team. This thesis will explore whether leadership is beneficial to a self-organising team. If successful leadership practices were identified, then these successful leadership practices/processes can be utilised and implemented to other self-organised organisations.

## **2 RESEARCH**

This thesis was divided into two parts that included: the theoretical part and the case study. The theoretical part was compiled with already proven theories and studies regarding leadership, self-organisation and leading a self-organising team. The second part of the research included personal interviews with the US content team to collect own opinions regarding the effectiveness of leadership and how it can be implemented to a self-organising structure. Although the studied group has not yet transformed into a fully self-organising structure, their ideas and suggestions can be tested once the self-organising structure is implemented. Personal experiences and views from the studied team were crucial in conducting thorough research as the results could be useful for the team once they transition to a self-organising structure.

### **2.1 Research objectives and questions**

The second part of the research was conducted on the US content team. Due to confidentiality reasons, the company was referred to as company x. Company x has decided to implement a self-organising structure starting in January 2020 to the US team. The team leader joined the studied team in January 2019; hence, the team was working independently before (Figure 1). After January 2019, the studied team experienced drastic growth in visibility and traffic to the main website that affected positively the performance of the project (Figure 2). The studied group was chosen for the research because the team can provide personal experiences and ideas of the effectiveness of leadership. Due to the time constraints of the thesis, there is not a possibility to examine whether the studied team implemented the results after transitioning to a self-organising team.

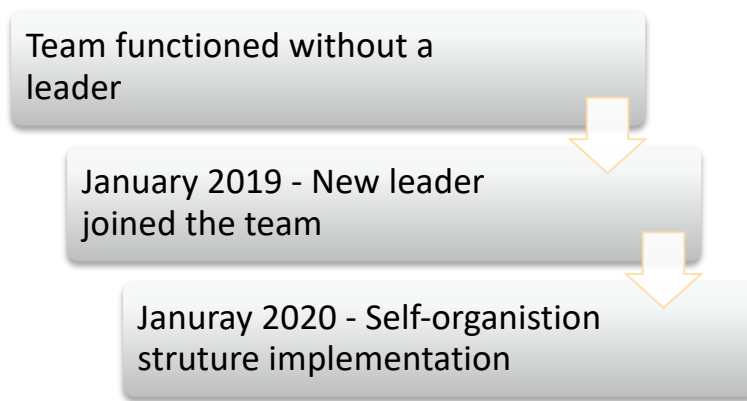


FIGURE 1. STUDIED TEAM STRUCTURE

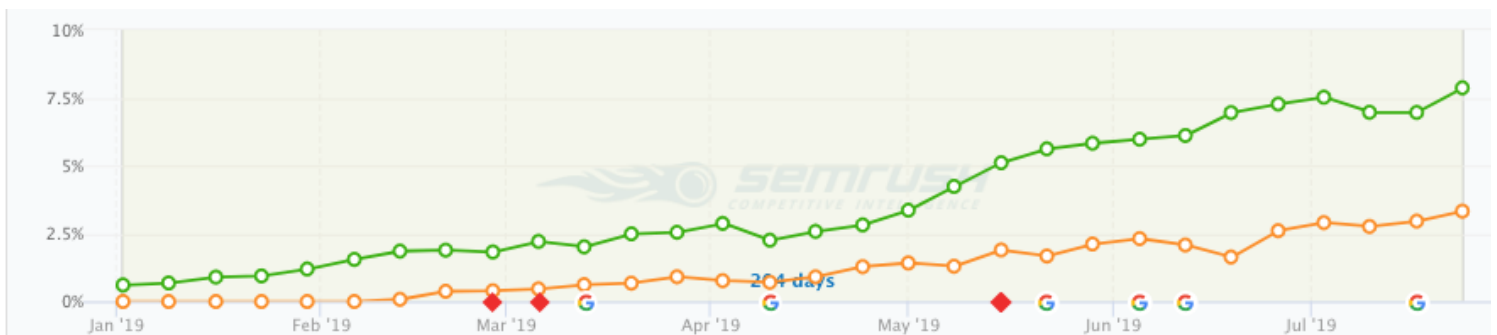


FIGURE 2. US website's visibility on Google

The figure above, Figure 2, shows the visibility trend of the studied team's leading websites. Both websites improved drastically after January 2019. In January 2019, the website visibility was less than 2.5% whereas in July 2019, one of the websites reached visibility of 7.87%, which is a big improvement.

The research questions are:

- How can a self-organising team function with a leader?
- How can a leader impact a self-organising team's performance?
- When does a self-organising team need a leader?

## 2.2 Company x

Company x is a German start-up online marketing company operating in the couponing industry. The company consisted of 80 employees divided into teams that represented a country or a region of the targeted audience, for example, the UK team operated on domains and sub-folders of UK publishers' websites by promoting coupon codes for online shoppers. Each team consisted of two departments; sales department and content department. In the majority of the regions, there were employees working remotely. A team leader usually coordinated the information flow between the office-based employees and the employees that work remotely to ensure that the remote employees are up to date with the progress of the project, new tasks or new tools.

## 2.3 Studied team

The studied team was the content team of the US project that consisted of six content managers and a content team leader (Figure 3). Each content manager was responsible for the creation and optimisation of the content of the project's websites. Each content manager worked alongside freelancers that created the coupons as well as the shop or campaign text of the website.

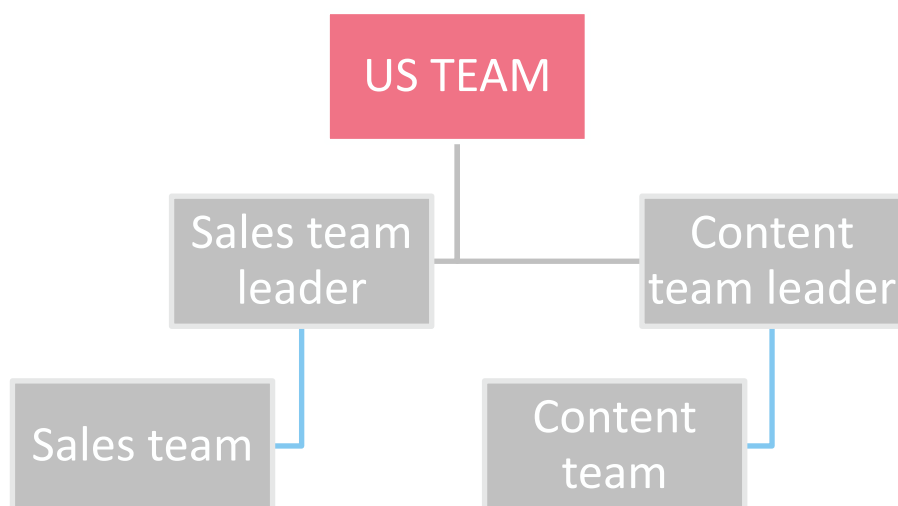


FIGURE 3. US Team structure

The studied team has various tasks which mainly include:

- Assigning work to freelancers and quality checking the content created
- Searching for top promotions and deals for assigned shops
- Optimising the shop content of assigned shops
- Creating widgets on home pages
- Creating new shops and uploading them
- Optimising meta titles and descriptions with relative semantic and business keywords
- Creating campaigns for seasonal promotions such as Black Friday or Mother's Day
- Optimising and creating shops with high revenue potential
- Searching and implementing new strategies to improve positions
- Quality checking shops and home pages for any expired coupons, broken links or spelling mistakes
- Writing articles for the main websites
- Keyword research

Team leader joined the US team in January 2019 with the hopes of improving the performance of the group. Some of the strategies and tools implemented include:

- Bubble structure:

The team leader implemented a new team structure that divided the shops between the content managers, which meant each content manager is solely responsible for specific shops plus the corresponding coupons across all websites. The decision behind the division of the shops depended on the affiliate network of the shop and the location of the sales contact. Each sales manager was located in the same time zone of the affiliate network he/she is working alongside.

- Hiring new content team members



More interviews were conducted by the team leader, as the team leader believed in the importance of adding more content managers to decrease the pressure and the workload of the office-based team. As a result, two remote content managers were hired, both of which were located in the US.

- Dividing tasks

Tasks were divided equally across all content managers regarding shop or coupon creation, campaigns, widgets etc.

- New chats on Skype

The new US team leader created an OnPage chat for the content managers to discuss daily updates or any information related to the content department. Regularly, the OnPage chat was active with updates.

- Team US weekly meeting

A weekly US team meeting was held for all US team members, including sales departments and the content department to discuss any updates and present the achievements of the week and the goals for the upcoming week.

- Daily meetings

Daily meetings were held to discuss the goals for the day, the completed tasks and to make sure the content page was up-to-date on the workings of the team.

- Monthly goal

Each month the US team lead announced monthly goals agreed by all team members, these goals were correlated with the current progress of the websites.

- New tools/strategies

Different SEO strategies and tools, such as Google Analytics, Google Search Console and SEMrush, were tested and provided by the US team leader to improve the traffic and positions of the online shops.

- Gameday

Each Friday, the content team gathered for a short break to play a game. This was to boost morale and have a break to bond with each other.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 LEADERSHIP

A leader is a person who recognises the talents and creativity of the employees and utilises them for the right tasks and projects to achieve the best results. A leader strives for the best results for themselves as well as for the organisation. Joint team orientation and effort should be towards the same goal. Leadership is a primary driver behind directing the team towards the main goal. (Amabile and Khaire 2008.)

Tracy (2014) explains that leaders are made not born. Meaning leadership is not a natural skill, but anyone that is given the right tools can be a leader. Leaders have the vision of the goal of the team and strive to achieve it by guiding the team in the right direction. All team members work towards achieving a common goal. Leading a team is not an easy role; leaders have a great responsibility in motivating the team by challenging them with tasks and a project that is higher than their work capacity to elevate the employees' learning and to encourage new experiences. (Tracy 2014.)

Meaning and purpose are fundamental aspects to a human being, and it is essential that the leader, as well as the employees, find meaning in the work they are doing (Tracy 2014). Employees like to believe they are useful when contributing to the team. The work of the employees becomes significant when all team members align with the same core values of the team and often, employees take responsibility for the work they do because it represents them. Work significance means finding value in the project aside from day-to-day work. As Tracy (2014) emphasises that organisations should not look for employees that simply complete the tasks that are given to them without understanding the meaning behind it, because the organisation would miss out on the opportunity to explore the employee's creative and critical thinking.

Bradt and Davis (2014, 85-87) claim that building a relationship through trust and communication is in the core of leadership. Leaders should allow themselves to be approachable and patient, so the team members can feel comfortable in the

working environment and build transparent relationships. The behaviours and attitude of the leader impact a followers' behaviour. A leader needs to create clear values that are understood by all team members to build a sustainable and prosperous foundation, not to mention the office or workplace environment with the leader has an impact on the followers. Leadership can have a positive impact on a team, but with power and control and free time on their hands, management/leadership can also hinder a team's autonomy. (Laloux 2016, 67-70)

### **3.1.1 LEADERSHIP THEORIES**

Leaders can lead in different leadership styles. It is the responsibility of the individual to find the best leadership style that utilises every skill and attribute of the leader. Therefore, the best way to utilise one's skill and attribute is by knowing ourselves and being able to recognise our strength and weaknesses. Good leaders are aware of their skills and choose a leadership style that fits best to them. (Glanz 2002, 180-181.)

### **3.1.2 Situational leadership**

The idea of situational leadership is that there is no one way to lead the team. Instead, leaders need to continually adapt to the needs of the team members under contextual conditions in that way the leader facilitates processes to accomplish the goals. Situational leadership is based on assessing the development of team members. There are three learnable skills involved in enacting situational leadership. These skills include setting clear goals, diagnosing followers' relative development related to assigned goals, and matching leadership styles to followers' developmental level. (Dugan 2017, 129-131.)

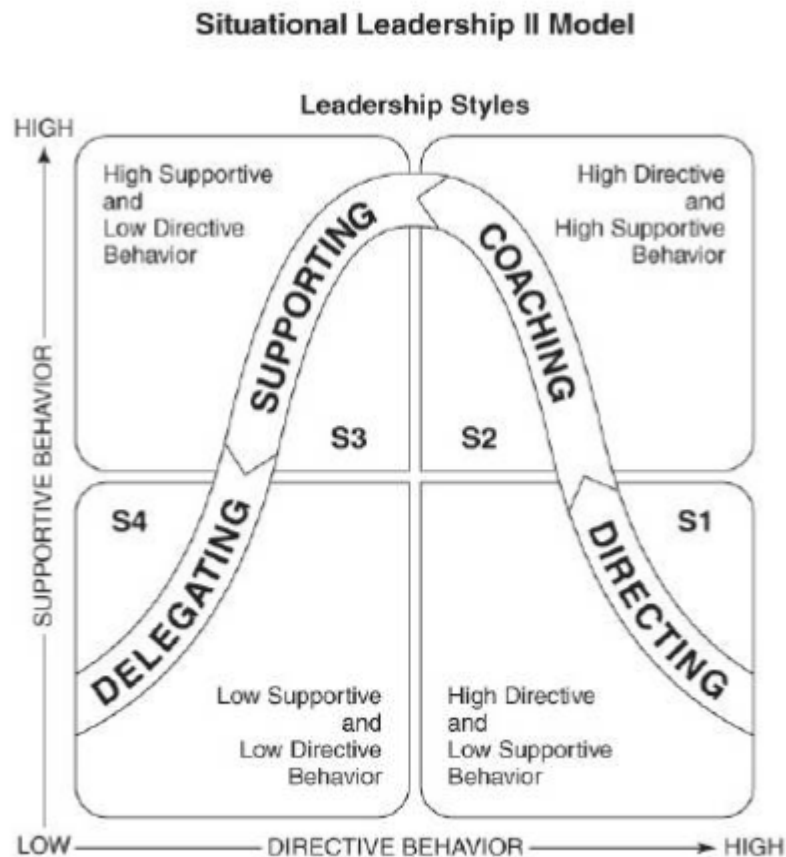


FIGURE 4. Situational leadership model (Dugan 2017, 132).

Dugan (2017, 133) explains in Figure 4, the different development level of leadership, which include:

The Enthusiastic Beginner (D1): An employee has low competence level but strong commitment and high motivation for learning.

The Disillusioned Learner (D2): An employee with low competence and commitment level, their motivation is relatively low which causes frustration to tasks and projects due to their difficulty. However, the knowledge and skill level begin to grow.

The Capable but Cautious Contributor (D3): An employee with relatively high competence and commitment to perform a task; however, they lack the confidence that leads them to take fewer risks that cause a lack of motivation.

The Self-Reliant Achiever (D4): An employee with a required set of knowledge and skills along with ambition and self-confidence about the task.

Dugan (2017, 133) explains the four leadership styles align with followers' development levels which include:

Directing (S1): The leader is highly directive and provides a low support level on introducing the task and instructions. This type of leadership is structured for continuous feedback and monitoring.

Coaching (S2): The leader is highly directive and supportive; they provide clear instructions with support and motivation for the employee to be more engaged in the project and for decision making.

Supporting (S3): The leader is less directive and highly supportive. The leader is less engaged in decision making, but instead, he/she is in a facilitator role using the knowledge and skills of the team members to accomplish goals.

Delegating (S4): The leader is not directing or supporting the team; they are in control of decision making to achieve success.

A situational leader identifies the type of employee to implement the best choice of leadership style that is best suited for the employee's level of development. Situational leadership indicates that a follower could improve their work skills and commitment when he/she is adequately supported. A leader, therefore, transforms into the leadership role that is best fitted for the followers depending on their level of development. Situational leaders must treat their followers as individuals. The development of knowledge and commitment of the follower relays on the relationship between the leader and follower. It is crucial to mention that a follower's development level reflects the type of leadership is related to an individual task. Therefore, employees with multiple tasks will encounter a situation in which the leader is reacting differently to the same employee depending on the task (Tracy 2014).

### 3.1.3 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on people, and it has been the most common leadership style (Conger 1989). What differentiates transformational or charismatic leadership from transactional leadership is the way leaders motivate employees with their behaviour and attitude. Transactional leaders can affect their follower's knowledge and skill; they can teach them more and guide them to the right direction for the success of the project, whereas charismatic leaders have affected their follower's emotions and self-esteem. Followers are motivated by their feelings when they feel supported, acknowledged or inspired (Earley & Erez 1993, 173).

Transactional leaders are usually assigned or elected to be leaders however, charismatic leaders are chosen by the followers as being the best fit for the position due to their personality. Followers of charismatic leaders believe the leader, elected by them, has skills, knowledge and attitude beyond any other member of the team. A charismatic leader is expected to inspire, motivate and support their followers because they depend on their follower's satisfaction in staying in the leadership role. Transactional leaders are driven by power and hierarchy, knowledge and experience, rules and traditions. (Earley & Erez 1993, 173.)

The idea of transformation can be applied to personal life as well, for example, transformational relationship or communities and even political systems. To recognise transformation, there needs to be a change in the relationship, community or organisational team. A charismatic leader aims to be able to lead the followers to the road of success and goal accomplishments. (Leadershipchallenge.com, 2019). Hacker and Roberts (2003, 172) explain that transformational leader has an important role in building a growth environment that would allow both the leader and followers to boost their and others moral and motivation.

### 3.2 Leading a team

The five leadership practices by Kouzes and Posner (2011), help a leader identify himself to what type of leader he is, leaders should recognise the source of their motivation, whether they want to show followers how to be successful or if they are motivated to helping followers in gaining more skill and experience.

The five leadership practices by Kouzes & Posner (2011) include:

**MODEL the way:** The leaders create a set of guidelines and principles for the team to follow to achieve the goal. The leaders become an example for the team to follow; they develop standards for excellence by being a role model by work ethic or skill. These leaders know the way to success and how to achieve it, as a result they motivate and challenge the followers' skills to achieve success.

**INSPIRE a shared vision:** An idea inspires a leader, and this idea motivates them to believe their idea is significant and can make a difference and as a result, they inspire their team to the same vision. These leaders are passionate about new and creative ideas that can come to life and transform the work structure or the project to a new level of improvement. These leaders allow their followers to create future possibilities for themselves.

**CHALLENGE the process:** Leaders are determined in improving the status quo by finding a new and innovative solution. Leaders are continually searching for new ideas and experiments to test, and therefore they have experience with failures, and they perceive failure as a learning experience.

**ENABLE others to act:** Leaders focus on providing all necessary needs for the team as well as maintaining excellent and transparent communication between the group. This leader enables the employees to improve themselves. The team feels capable and powerful due to respectful and honest relationships.

**ENCOURAGE the heart:** Leaders recognise the hard work of the employees and therefore celebrate accomplishments to motivate the team. Leaders create a supportive environment for the employees as well as personal employee motivation.



Oshrove (2017) explains that a leader can help their employees find value and meaning to their work through:

Appreciation: A leader acknowledges good work and by taking the time to thank an employee for their hard work or creative input.

Approval: Praising employees even for small achievements.

Admiration: Complimenting employees on other areas aside from work, for example, their humour or their smile.

Attention: Paying attention to make sure that an employee is not ignored, knowing their name and acknowledging their presence in the workplace.

A successful team is capable of satisfying employees as well as external partners or clients. Members of a successful team are satisfied and find meaning in their work, as well as satisfy internal and external clients and they continuously learn and grow their skills in order to achieve future goals. (Bondarouk, Bos-Nehles, Renkema, Meijerink & De Leede 2018, 15.)

## 4 SELF ORGANISING TEAMS

Bondarouk, Bos-Nehles, Renkema, Meijerink and De Leede (2018, 15) state that a self-organising team have main predicators which include: group tasks that can be divided between a group, group characteristics, and group behaviour that create a supportive environment for all team members.

An organisation can be classified into two basic categories: self-organisation and external organisation. The flow of instructions defines the structure of the organisation as to whether it is external or internal. An organisation with external instructions outside the system are called external-organisations, and an organisation that has internal instructions inside the system are called the self-organising organisation. (Zhang 2013, 2.) The significant difference between the two types of organisations is whether the organisational instructions/forces come from outside the system or from inside the system. Self-organising is a relatively a new concept. Many companies are currently implementing some self-organising practices; for example, some companies offer the opportunity for the employees the time they would like to start their workday. The self-organised structure provides a lot of freedom for the members while demanding trust from management and accountability and responsibility from all team members. Therefore, it is challenging to implement a self-organising structure completely, and teams should be prepared before applying a self-managing structure.

Surdek (2019) mentions that a self-organising team should have a certain level of decision authority as well as a common goal that the team is working to achieve. Lastly, the team has the ownership for the work, and the power to decide for themselves without micromanagement. It is essential to understand what a self-organising team means, otherwise the team will have their personal view about how the team should function, which would lead to a disaster.

#### 4.1 Leading a self-organising team

Osherove (2017) explains that a self-organising leader can lead a team through three types of leadership styles: challenge leadership, command and control leadership, and facilitating leadership.

The maturity of the team affects the involvement of the leader's decision making if the team struggles in finding a structure to follow, then the leader should intervene and propose a structure. Another factor is the ability of the team to make a group decision and whether they can find common ground in decisions. A leader can be of great help if the team struggles to please each team member. The self-organising misconception is that a self-organising team can function on their own, and there is no need for any leadership and boundaries. However, the leader has an essential role in making sure the group stays in the limits agreed on by the team and company and regained their focus. (Surdek 2019.)

Osherove (2017) explains that a leader of a self-organising team can *challenge* the team and the people around them to solve their problems, instead of solving everyone's problems for them. Leaders allow the team members to require new skills by challenging them and therefore addressing their issues by coaching them on how to solve problems. If the team has no time to learn new skills and is under upcoming deadlines, then a leader directs the team to the path. Once the team knows how to do their work and are on the right track, then the leader should step aside and allow the team to lead their work. Each leadership style is suited for a specific situational structure. For example, if a team is still learning new skills, then challenging leadership is the best fit for the team, as it allows team members to grow and become leaders (Osherove 2017).

Bonabeauk (1999, 23) explains that self-organisation usually requires:

1. Strong nonlinear and dynamic interactions, even though they do not necessarily relate to the positive or negative feedback
2. A balance between development and exploration
3. Complex and diverse interactions

New skills can be developed through coaching as coaching leadership helps the team members generate new skills and as a result add value for team and for the project. As Osherove (2017) explains, to grow people at work means to help them acquire new skills and for them to learn skills, you must test them.

Command and control are sometimes a good idea because there are times when a team leader must be able to direct their team down a path where the team has no time to learn the skills needed to deal with the current circumstances. A leader can help a team to function and perform at their best by guiding them through leadership strategies to accomplish the team's goal. A self-organising team should be able to evaluate the situation and come up with an appropriate solution that all team members agree on (Osherove, 2017).

Osherove (2017) mentions there are three types of leadership; command and control leadership, facilitating leadership and coaching leadership. One may view these types of leadership as time-bound leadership. Depending on the time and state of the team, whether a deadline is coming up, or a new member joins the team. Therefore, in the beginning, when the team is being built and many tasks are ahead, a leader is forced to delegate tasks to the right people and take decisions for the whole team to "survive." One may view this situation as life or death of the project. Therefore, there is no room for team members to take any risks and explore different skills. However, when the team is stable, and work becomes a familiar routine to the team members, then the team is able to have the focus and time to explore new skills and roles then the leader can be a coach and help the team become more independent. Laloux (2016, 67-68) explains that a controlling leader often gives little room for followers to learn, takes ownership over decisions that might even go against the majority vote of the team. Therefore, instead, a team needs a leader that allows them to have enough room to learn and make mistakes.

Laloux (2016, 67-68) explains that a leader for a self-organising team needs to monitor the current situation and deadlines of the group and take the appropriate action. If there is enough time for the team to challenge themselves, then the leader should allow the team to solve the problem, and when time is critical, then a leader steps in to guide the team for the right path. Depending on the team

dynamic, the leader can decide on which leadership style to use that best fit the current dynamic of the team whether it would be a leader, facilitator or a coach. Leaders should not be afraid of trying new ideas and losing control, instead, they should allow the team to lead. A coach can build a motivating environment for the employees that can allow them to take risks and learn new things. One of the ways leaders can de-motivate employees is by setting unrealistic goals for the team that adds pressure to them in order to be motivated to achieve these goals as well as be held accountable if the goals were not reached (Laloux 2016, 67-70).

Coaches should not develop superior authority and assign tasks and projects even though he/she believes it is the right choice. Team members like to believe they are solely in control of their tasks which allows them to take pride in their work. Also, there should be room for mistakes and failures because that is the good way for an employee to learn for future projects. The fear of not reaching the results add pressure to the team members. Leadership is the core of stability to the team; the team members need to feel comfortable in making mistakes and learning from them without the fear of consequences from their leader. The reason behind tasks and duties should be apparent to employees, to guarantee full understanding of one's work. It is valuable for employees to know the value of their work and to gain critical thinking (Laloux 2016, 67-80).

## **4.2 Challenges**

Conflicts between team members can be solved through a common mediator. Challenges that might arise in a self-organising team depends on the strengths and weaknesses of the group. If team members are not transparent with each other, then problems will arise concerning missing information and misunderstandings. Each team faces challenges, and for a self-organising team members are responsible in solving problems and crises internally. Team member needs to be transparent, honest and communicative and motivated to brainstorm ideas as well as volunteer for tasks and roles that are for the benefit of the team and project (Laloux 2016, 112-114).

## 5 RESEARCH METHODS

There are two types of research methods, qualitative research and quantitative research. Qualitative research as Surdek (2019) explains is a study of natural social life therefore the findings of a qualitative research in non-quantitative such as interview transcripts, personal observation, photographs and video recording. The research methods of a qualitative research documents humans experiences in a natural social action. Surdek (2019) also mentions that the aim of a qualitative research varies and multiple, the aim of the research also depends on the purpose of the project, unlike the findings of a quantitative research that is collected and presented in numerical data that is analysed through mathematical methods.

The research methods are defined by the research's objectives. The research objectives aim to explore whether leadership is beneficial to a self-organising team. Therefore, qualitative research method was chosen to collect personal opinions and experiences from the studied group. As the writer of this thesis is currently a member of the studied team, the scheduled interviews were comfortable and secure which allowed the team member to share their honest opinions. All the data that was collected was from personal interviews conducted with the studied team that consisted of five content managers. Two of the content managers were located in the US, which resulted via a Skype interview. The interviews with the in-office employees were conducted outside working hours and office space to make sure the members felt comfortable sharing their views.

## 5.1 Interviews

Interviews can be defined as social encounters between two or more people that share their opinions/views of the world or memories of past experiences, personal feelings and thoughts (Seale 2011, 16).

The case study aimed to research the effectiveness of leadership to a self-organising team by collecting data from the studied team members regarding their experience after the joining of the new team leader. The results indicated which leadership practices were effective. Personal interviews provided more detailed answers, as the interviewees explained their opinions with personal examples and most importantly, in their own words. Open questions led to multiple unpredicted possibilities that were not considered in the theoretical part of the thesis, it influenced the research result into exploring new information. In order to ensure complete transparency and openness concerning this sensitive topic, the names of the team members were replaced with aliases. The answers were unpredictable; therefore, more questions were asked for the team members to elaborate.

Going to the interviews, there were a specific set of questions that needed to be answered which were:

- How can a self-organising team function with a leader?
- How can a leader impact on a self-organising team's performance?
- When does a self-organising team need a leader?

## 5.2 Studied team interviews

### TEAM MEMBER 1: Joe

#### 1. How can a self-organising team function with a leader?

By having boundaries.

- Can you give an example?

For example, the team leader would let us know what the team's focus for the week or day, however, they do not tell you what to do to achieve it, that's for the team to figure out.

The leader can also collect information from other teams in the company and report back to the team, like new tools or SEO strategies that haven't been considered.

#### 2. Can a leader have a positive impact on a self-organising team's performance?

I think so, I mean a leader could impact the team's performance in a positive way by providing feedback without making it a formal feedback. He/she should also facilitate in ensuring there's transparency within the team.

- Are there any leadership strategies/practices that have helped the team currently to perform well, that can be considered to be implemented also when the team transitions to a self-organising team?

Giving credits or acknowledging someone's effort and hard work. Also, standing up for their team in front of other departments and mediating where there are disagreements.



### 3. When does a self-organising team need a leader?

A leader would be needed if too many ideas arise and despite numerous discussions, a consensus could not be reached. While everyone would and should always share their knowledge with the rest of the team, it would take a leader to show different ways something could be done. Or to hint the possibilities, not to make the decision how it should be done.

#### TEAM MEMBER 2: Ash

##### 1. How can a self-organising team function with a leader?

Encourage the team. Everyone will be choosing what positions they will be doing but the leader can suggest or hint at what people should choose. While this should not be the final choice, I think the leader can spot strengths and areas to grow where the team or individuals may not.

##### 2. Can a leader have a positive impact on a self-organising team's performance?

The leader can help to make it work by allowing it to work. The leader is one of the key people in making it work. Without fully surrendering to the process, the trust, the uncomfortable and whatnot, it cannot work. Therefore, the leader should follow the team's decisions and allowing them to learn from their decisions and experiences.

- Are there any leadership strategies/practices that have helped the team currently to perform well, that can be considered to be implemented also when the team transitions to a self-organising team?

One strategy that was helpful was having this one unified voice for the team. If there were issues or conflicts within the team, there was one person who could gather information and relay it to the rest of the team.

Since we will be self-organised, this exact strategy will not be directly in effect. Instead of one specific person being in charge of everything, each team member

will be in charge of their own tasks. While this might hinder the process a bit in the beginning without having a clear direction of “who is in charge,” in the long run, this new structure will empower the team more, resulting in more confident members. I also think this will help with the team respecting each other more when all team members are equal.

### **3. When does a self-organising team need a leader?**

The leader will be best used to bring people together. This means the leader can be the one connecting all the dots. It might be difficult for a group of 10 people to see the bigger picture at all moments, but the leader will be in the background to make the connections. However, once the team can make those connections themselves, it will not be necessary anymore.

#### **TEAM MEMBER 3: Billie**

### **1. How can a self-organising team function with a leader?**

A self-organising team can function with a leader by everyone in the team being able to utilise and trust in the leader’s skills when it comes to looking at the big picture, coordinating with everyone to make sure that the milestones and the overall end goal are accomplished, and sharing knowledge so that everyone can be productive and efficient at tackling the task at hand. Depending on the project, the team should be able to choose a leader that they think fits best with that project. I mean different people will then be in charge of different projects based on what they can contribute to the team and project. With any given project, everyone needs to accept and respect that this person is the best person to be the leader for that specific project. Then, everyone can proceed on supporting and taking up whatever role they will be best at for that specific project given their own set of skills and talent, which can be decided by the team as a whole or can be decided by the leader of the project.

I liked when our team leader joined, and suddenly anyone from any external source who had a question went directly to the team leader and the team leader informed us as a result, the communication flow from external people was smooth

and transparent to all team members. Once transitioning to a new structure, it would be helpful to assign ourselves specific roles. Therefore, the communication flow would be similar almost, for example, UK region would ask a question related to sales and revenue then the leader can inform the person responsible.

- How can a leader lead a self-organising team?

To lead a self-organising team, the leader should then be able to trust that each member of the team that he or she will execute his or her roles and take actions that are in line with the strategy that the team and the leader agreed upon. Trust is key! If you do not trust your team members, you are either going to micromanage your team members or you are going to try to take up all of the tasks in fear that others will fail, in which neither option is efficient and constructive to others' professional growth.

By knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each individual, so that they can oversee, delegate urgent tasks when necessary, and intervene when needed (like when a project needs extra hands). Leaders need to be great listeners and have great communication skills to avoid unnecessary confusion or setbacks.

**2. How can a leader impact a self-organising team's performance?**

Each role is important and impacts the results regardless if you are a leader or a team member and regardless if you are in a self-organising team or in a hierarchical structure. A leader can impact the motivation of other team members by their attitude and behaviour for example, positive and encouraging attitude versus micromanaging behaviour that can be counterproductive. A leader can impact how organised the team is by setting an example of what good organisation is like for example: setting milestone deadlines. A leader can impact the communication style of the team, for example: direct in-person, one-on-one conversations or through emails or through assigned tasks on a platform. A leader can impact how the strategy is formed and how the strategy is executed for example brainstorming sessions with the team, setting up how many milestones there are, choosing different deadlines for different milestones, setting feedback or update sessions, etc. A leader can impact individual professional growth of team members with feedback and sharing knowledge.

### **3. When does a self-organising team need a leader?**

Each project should have a leader or multiple leaders. There should be at least one person who is in charge of seeing a project through and someone who will be helping guide the team towards accomplishing the project goals. Since there are often multiple projects going on at once, it is helpful that at least one individual is designated as the leader in order to ensure that the project is not forgotten and that the tasks are done.

#### **TEAM MEMBER 4: Jamie**

### **1. How can a self-organising team function with a leader?**

A leader can help provide the self-organising team with alignment with other teams or business units in the company. A single leader can collect information from multiple departments to ensure that each independent team understands the company's goals and objectives. The leader can also provide motivation and insights for the team from other colleagues who they make not interact with frequently.

### **2. How can a leader impact a self-organising team's performance?**

A leader can improve the self-organising team's performance by providing them with timely information and changes from the company and/or leadership team. Leaders can also act as an advocate for the team to push for particular needs or desires that the team has. For example, the leader can request more budget, new tools, or better workflows that will allow the team to succeed at a high level.

### **3. When does a self-organising team need a leader?**

A leader would be ideal in a situation where the self-organising team must function and cooperate with other teams or people in other disciplines. For example, the content team must coordinate with the sales team to provide data on performance and vice versa for data regarding client requests from sales. It is helpful

to have a leader who can oversee this communication to fill in any missing pieces since each team is not working in the other's tasks on a daily basis. A good leader will be able to promote synergy between multiple teams, not just among a single team.

### **TEAM MEMBER 5: Sam**

#### **1. How can a self-organising team function with a leader?**

Since everyone will be a leader within a group, each person will need to adjust accordingly. We are all assigned to a role or a particular set of responsibilities. Our company's and team's success require us to be a leader or an expert of our assigned role. It will be an important factor for each team member to understand everyone's role as well as their own. Depends on the project or the decision we need to make, everyone requires adjusting by leading or following. The team leader is responsible to keep track of each member's progress and performance as well as providing support for the team members. The change should be positive as long as the team leader has the ability to resolve any issue and roadblock arises.

The role of a leader is to create a goal(s), execute them, inspire, and develop others' potential. Since everyone is a leader in a self-organising team, it means we are responsible for every team member's success as well as our own. Firstly, we need to ensure there is open communication where we understand our goal(s), our roles and the tasks we need to achieve toward our goal(s). Secondly, we also need to understand our strengths and weaknesses in order to develop our own skills as well as others. By being transparent, then we are inspiring trust with each other.

#### **2. How can a leader impact a self-organising team's performance?**

Each person (leader) will make a huge impact in a self-organising team's performance. There is a mutual understanding of which decisions need to be made and what actions will need to be taken. Everyone is holding each other accountable

for any execution and decision that is made. Everyone's voice is supposed to be heard by each member of the team.

### **3. When does a self-organising team need a leader?**

It is not a matter of 'when' because leadership is an on-going process. With different personality, working style, and expertise, some leaders may be more vocal than others in some areas. That's why we need to know each other's strengths and weaknesses to ensure the ecosystem is running properly based on our needs and situation.

For example, if there is a conflict between two team members, then you would want someone who is unbiased and fair to lead the resolution of the conflict. Or if we have data discrepancy, then we should have one or two leaders to take the lead into resolving any data discrepancy issues. That way, we can increase productivity by reducing the number of cooks in the kitchen.

## 6 DISCUSSION

### Can a self-organising team function with a leader?

Team member Joe believed boundaries are fundamental for the proper function of a self-managing team with a leader. Setting boundaries means the leader does not delegate work but instead, the main role of the leaders is to remind the team of the main goal, to provide tools necessary for the goal and to facilitate the work for the team. In that way, the team will need to plan out their work to achieve the goal that is most convenient to them. This type of leadership can be considered as delegating leadership as Tracy (2014) mentions that a coach does not tell the team what to do, instead, he/she allows the team to take decisions on their own. As this might be a fundamental key for a self-managing team, once the team starts transitioning to a the new structure, it can be challenging. To avoid “chaos” while the team adjusts to a new structure, the leader can be a facilitator and help the team in learning new skills.

Encouragement was mentioned in the responses as a way for the team to function with a leader since the leader can spot weaknesses and strengths within the team. The leader has more experience and knowledge with achieving goals and leading projects, and it was evident that some team members acknowledged this advantage in a leader and would like to utilise it.

Trust has been mentioned by the team member Jamiue as an essential factor for the team, especially the trust of the leader toward his/her team. Team members like to feel capable of their work, and they require trust from their leaders for the best intentions for the project and their role. Command-and-control leadership is difficult to implement to a self-organising team, as the team felt they acquired skills and experience to manage their tasks and demand trust and ownership of their projects. Jamie explained that all team members would become their own leaders in the new self-managing team. The team members can start exploring what type of leader they can be, and one of the ways to find out, is by going through the five leadership practices by Kouzes and Posner (2011) and understand what motivates each team member, to become the best leader for their role. It is expected from a leader to allow team members to choose their tasks,

which would require trust from the team leader and less command leadership and more facilitatory leadership. Team members enjoy the motivation given by the team leader as he/she can see the strengths and weaknesses that can be pointed out, while also enjoying the freedom of choosing the tasks they would like to perform.

The majority of the responses claimed that a self-organising team may need a leader when the team is stuck, for example, when the team has too many ideas. Too many opinions can distract the team from the bigger picture, and a leader can direct the team's ideas and suggestions to the right direction, however, the leader should allow the team to make the final decision. As Tracy (2014) stated, a leader is useful in coordinating the team towards the bigger picture.

The answers from the studied team showed that leadership is valuable in various areas such as providing feedback, shifting the focus of the team to the bigger picture and contributing with helpful resources and tools to facilitate the work of the team while allowing the team to make the final decisions without inputting instructions. One can assume that transformational leadership might be best fit for a self-organising team, as this type of leadership creates change in an organisation/team and most specifically positive change. As (Hacker & Roberts 2003, 172) explain that a leader has the influence to transform an organisation while enabling team members to develop leadership skills and abilities to lead their projects.

#### Can a leader have a positive impact on a self-organising team's performance?

It can be hard to have an accurate answer to this question as the team has not transformed into a self-managing team yet. However, it is interesting to collect the team's opinion regarding the impact of leadership for the new structure. Some of the respondents mentioned the fact that a team leader is a big help in representing the team to other regions and being the 'voice' of the team, which can facilitate information flow. However, it is essential to remember that the studied team is relatively a new project and all team members have less than two years of experience at the company which may explain discomfort in approaching other departments in the company such as the product team or the IT team.



Osherove (2016) mentions that a leader can lead a self-organising team through challenging the team in learning new skills. Consequently, the team leader could challenge the team to have a better relationship with other departments in the company or to tackle tasks and questions from other departments which would help the team members gain more confidence and experience.

A note that has been mentioned by a few respondents is feedback. Feedback can be a crucial key element for team members to recognise strengths and weakness in themselves and their work in which they have not acknowledged yet. Osherove (2016) explains that employees find value and meaning in their work through appreciation, approval, admiration and attention. As a result, feedback can be a way a leader can acknowledge a team member's effort and hard work that allow the team member to feel valued and vital. Bondarouk, Bos-Nehles, Renkema, Meijerink & De Leede (2018, 15) assure that successful teams contain team members that are satisfied with their role and are happy to contribute to the project.

The interviewee Ash explained the importance of the team leader to surrender to the self-organising structure. The team needs to be prepared for a self-managing structure. However, the team leader might also need to adapt to this new structure and might be challenged in uncomfortable situations.

Team member Billie pointed out that leaders can have a great impact on the team. The leader's attitude, behaviour and communication skills can have a positive or a negative impact on the team. A leader should be role model and able to communicate in the best way at any given situation, whether an email or a face-to-face meeting is more suitable. Leaders are considered overpowering, and in any organisation, leaders have more benefits and more power. Therefore, using the wrong behaviour or tone can bring an intense atmosphere to the team.

When does a self-organising team need a leader?

The majority of team members mentioned that a leader could be useful to help the team find solutions and decide on ideas when there are too many ideas floating around discussions. However, the leader does not impose their opinion for them to be followed. It can be difficult to be put to practice as the team follow the instructions and decisions of the leader, and it can be difficult for a new self-managing team not to follow the suggestions of a leader or to dismiss their opinions. A self-organising leader and the team need to differentiate between command and control leadership and facilitating leadership to ensure that the team are not following the recommendations and suggestions of the leader out of habit.

## 7 Conclusion

Each team aims to be successful, and as Bondarouk, Bos-Nehles, Renkema, Meijerink and De Leede (2018, 15) mentions that team members of a successful team need to be satisfied in their role to find value and meaning. A leader can guide the team in learning new skills and tools however, a leader can never ensure that the employees find meaning in their work because each individual should reflect on whether they are happy or not.

Tools implemented such as new Skype chats, bubble structure, dividing tasks might have helped with the performance of the studied team, but it can also be believed that these tools and strategies are beneficial and can stay in motion. Therefore, this is no need for more tools from the leader, unless the new self-structured team decides otherwise.

The three major themes that emerged from my analysis are: that the team believes they can function with a leader as well as without a leader, a leader can have a positive as well as a negative influence on the team's performance, and a self-organising team does not need a full-time leader.

After discussing and analysing the interviews, the conclusion of the three main research questions are as follows:

- How can a self-organising team function with a leader?

The team seems ready to transition to a self-organising team and seem to be prepared to make decisions and take control of their working day without commands or delegation from a leader. However, some responses show that the team has not yet fully grasped the idea of a self-managing team. As Surdek (2019) mentioned in his article, if the team has not prepared itself beforehand how to be a self-managing team, then it can be disastrous. The team enjoys the comfort of leadership to be the voice of the group; however, to be self-organised, the team should gain confidence and ownership to build relationships with other departments and teams in the company. Also, to ensure smooth transitions perhaps the team should first go through facilitating leadership, then to coaching

supporting leadership in order for the team to settle smoothly in the new team structure.

- How can a leader impact a self-organising team's performance?

A leader can ensure that all team members are acknowledged and appreciated by providing them feedback which would result in them feeling valued for their hard work and contribution to the team.

- When does a self-organising team need a leader?

When the team loses focus on the bigger picture, the leader can intervene and help redirect the focus of the team to the bigger picture. However, once the team can work through the challenges and maintain their focus on the bigger picture, perhaps leadership will not be needed anymore.

Leaders can be beneficial to a self-organising team and primarily through the transition from the old structure to the new structure. The fact that the structure improved drastically, proves that a leader can have a positive impact on the team, and these leadership strategies and processes can be implemented to a self-organising team structure. All team members agree that a leader can be useful to a self-organising team.

Qualitative research offers depth and complexity. Therefore, we cannot assume what can happen, as well as whether the team will choose to implement a leader to a self-organising structure or not. The team members believe that a leader does have a positive impact and can help improve the performance of the team. The leader can still be a leader in a self-organising group, however through set boundaries. As explained, a leader in a self-organising team can be a facilitator or a coach. The studied group agreed that a leader could have a positive impact on the performance of the team; nevertheless, they believe they can achieve it with less leadership interference.

Qualitative research leads to new and unexplored ideas as well as open-end results. The studied team has provided valuable information regarding the effectiveness of leadership to a self-organising team. These results can be useful for the team members to know before the big transition in January 2020. It is not predicted how the team structure or workflow would change, but the studied group can start considering how they can benefit from leadership.

To answer the main question, *Will a self-organising team need a leader?* It can be believed that there are multiple reasons why a self-organising team might need a leader. Leaders can be a great tool to create structure and clear direction to a self-organising team or when a team lacks experience, skills or confidence in decision making or delegating tasks. Each team has its strength and weaknesses and a leader might help with the specific needs of the team.

## 8 Recommendation

The team should understand what self-organising means, as Surdek (2019) mentioned in his article, if the team does not understand the concept of self-organisation then each member will work by his own beliefs on what should be done which can lead to a disaster. A recommendation to the team would be to understand the concept of self-organised team and try to approach other companies that have implemented a self-organising structure to receive more practical examples and tips.

It can be believed that a leader can help the team members in becoming their own leaders by motivating and guiding and coaching them, however, the studied team would need to be open for leadership guidance. The studied team seems to have found some areas where they view the leader to be useful to the new structure while still fearful of leadership authority over decision making, the delegation of tasks and boundaries. The studied team can practice transparency and share their thoughts and fears..

The team leader should adjust to the new team structure and challenge themselves as well for the new structure to work. A leader is a key element that is helping a self-organising team structure to work. Meaning the leader can be useful in the process of transitioning from the old structure to a self-organising structure. As many team members might be stressed and confused with their roles and workflow change, the leader can help in directing the focus of the team and allowing a smooth transition by setting examples or tips.

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## **APPENDICES**

### Appendix 1. Interview questions

- How can a self-organising team function with a leader?
- How can a leader impact a self-organising team's performance?
- When does a self-organising team need a leader?