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LEADERSHIP PRACTICES SUPPORTING LEARNING AND COMPETENCE OF TEAMS IN A RETAIL ORGANISATION

– Case study



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LEADERSHIP PRACTICES SUPPORTING LEARNING AND COMPETENCE OF TEAMS IN A RETAIL ORGANISATION

Case study Company X

Organisations' ability to learn and support the competence of their people are essential in maintaining a successful business that keeps growing together with its staff. The purpose of this research was to study the leadership and collaboration practices in the case company to identify how they reflect the suggested prerequisites and conditions for a learning organisation. Literature on organisational learning and management of competence and knowledge were widely studied to formulate a framework for gathering primary data. The empirical research was carried out in a Finnish sales unit of an international retail organisation, focusing on department managers working in the sales function of the case company.

The aim was to find out how department managers in the case company learn and how they share and collaborate as a team. Another aim was to study how these practices are connected to the supporting of learning and competence of their teams. This research aimed to identify practices or conditions that might be supporting or hindering organisational learning and competence development among department managers according to the selected theoretical framework derived from the literature review. Qualitative measures were used to collect the primary data with semi-structured interviews that consisted of three themes: leader in the organisation, collective learning and collaboration and sharing knowledge and competence.

The research showed that sales department managers in the case company mainly learn in the flow of work and while collaborating during informal encounters that mostly focus on problem solving. Two overarching themes rising from the data as main circumstantial factors affecting learning were digital competence and the pace of change. The pace of social and technical changes combined with the hectic work circumstances in a retail organisation can be a challenging environment to incorporate meaningful learning opportunities. The study showed that the abundance of information and inadequate digital competence have a negative impact on learning and building competence. The research indicates that most efficient learning and competence development is ensured by providing plenty opportunities for collective reflection and sharing. It was found that enabling live collaboration where tacit competence and knowledge can be shared improve the collective competence.

KEYWORDS:

Organisational learning, leadership, competence management, knowledge sharing, teams

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TIIMIN OPPIMISTA JA OSAAMISTA TUKEVAT JOHTAMISKÄYTÄNTEET

Tapaustudkimus vähittäiskaupan organisaatiossa

Organisaatioiden kyky oppia ja tukea henkilöstön osaamisen kehittämistä ovat menestyksekkään ja jäsentensä mukana kasvavan yritystoiminnan kulmakiviä. Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on tutkia, missä määrin tutkimuksen kohteena olevan organisaation johtamiskäytännöt ja esihenkilöiden yhteistoiminta ovat yhteneväisiä oppivan organisaation tunnusmerkkien kanssa. Organisaation oppimista, osaamisen johtamista sekä tiedonhallintaa koskevaan kirjallisuuteen ja tutkimustyöhön perehdyttiin laajalti, jotta teoriakehitys primaaridatan keräämiseksi voitiin muodostaa. Tutkimus suoritettiin haastattelemalla myyntiosastojen esihenkilöitä Suomessa sijaitsevassa vähittäiskaupan alan myyntiyksikössä, joka on osa kansainvälistä organisaatiota.

Tavoitteena oli saada selville, kuinka osastojen esihenkilöt oppivat ja kuinka he tiiminä tekevät yhteistyötä päivittäisen työn ohella. Toisena tavoitteena oli tutkia näiden toimintojen yhteyttä oppimisen ja osaamisen tukemiseen johdettavissa tiimeissä. Tavoitteena oli myös määrittää tekijöitä, jotka mahdollisesti tukevat tai haittaavat oppimista ja osaamisen kehittämistä organisaatiossa verraten aiheesta tehtyihin tutkimuksiin. Laadullinen tutkimus toteutettiin teemahaastatteluna koostuen seuraavista teemoista: esihenkilö organisaatiossa, kollektiivinen oppiminen ja yhteistyö sekä tiedon ja osaamisen jakaminen.

Tutkimus osoitti, että organisaation esihenkilöt oppivat pääosin työn ohessa sekä läheisessä yhteistyössä, yleensä ongelmanratkaisuun perustuvissa epämuodollisissa tilanteissa. Merkittävimmät oppimiseen vaikuttavat tekijät ovat digitaalinen osaaminen ja muutosvauhti. Nopeasti tapahtuvat yhteiskunnalliset ja tekniset muutokset yhdistettynä hektiseen kaupan alan työympäristöön luovat haasteelliset olosuhteet merkittävien oppimiskokemusten sisällyttämiselle työpäivään. Tutkimus osoitti, että informaation yltäkylläisyys ja puutteellinen digitaalinen osaaminen vaikuttavat negatiivisesti oppimiseen ja osaamisen kehittymiseen. Tutkimuksen mukaan oppiminen sekä osaamisen kehittyminen on tehokkainta silloin, kun työssä on runsaasti mahdollisuuksia kollektiiviseen reflektointiin ja kokemusten jakamiseen. Tutkimus osoitti myös, että organisaation kollektiivista osaamista voidaan kehittää mahdollistamalla läheinen yhteistyö, joka tukee hiljaisen, kokemusperäisen tiedon ja osaamisen jakamista.

ASIASANAT:

organisaation oppiminen, johtajuus, osaamisen johtaminen, tietämyksen jakaminen, tiimit

CONTENT

1. INTRODUCTION	6
1.1 Background and motivation	6
1.2 Research purpose and objectives	7
1.3 The Case Company	8
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	9
2.1. Learning in an Organisation	9
2.1.1. Key Concepts and Theories	10
2.1.2. Collaborative Learning in Teams	13
2.1.3. Learning in the Flow of Work	15
2.2. The Role of Leadership	16
2.2.1. Supporting Learning in an Organisation	17
2.2.2. Competence Management	19
2.2.3 Knowledge Management	20
2.4 Assessing Organizational Learning: The Theoretical Framework	21
2.5. Summary of Theoretical Framework	23
3. METHODOLOGY	25
3.1 Research approach	25
3.2 Data collection	25
3.3 Data analysis	27
4.FINDINGS	28
4.1 Summary of the results	28
4.2 Summary of theme 1: Learning in the organisation	29
4.3 Summary of theme 2: Leader in the organisation	32
4.4 Summary of theme 3: Collective learning and collaboration of leaders	34
4.4 Summary of theme 4: Knowledge management and sharing	36
5.CONCLUSIONS	39
REFERENCES	43

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Appendix 2. Interview guide and questions in Finnish

FIGURES

Figure 1. Interview themes (Hervanto 2020).....	26
Figure 2. Revised themes after the interviews (Hervanto 2020).....	27
Figure 3. Summary of learning in the organisation (Hervanto 2020).....	30
Figure 4.. Summary of Leader in the organisation (Hervanto 2020)	32
Figure 5. Summary of collective learning and collaboration (Hervanto 2020).....	34
Figure 6. Summary of knowledge management and sharing (2020).....	37

1. INTRODUCTION

Maintaining a competitive advantage can arguably be one of the core objectives of successful business management. The increasing complexity of the world people live in, and humans' ability to develop new technological innovations and solutions is drastically affecting the way we live and work. The environment in which daily actions are operated is rapidly and constantly changing, hence making adaptation, flexibility and the ability to learn some of the essential characteristics to possess in a turbulent setting. These principles also form the fundamentals of a *learning organisation*, a framework for a company aspiring to enhance its learning.

1.1 Background and motivation

Adapting to the altering environment requires more than just individual competence and learning capabilities; learning collectively and team learning can be seen as fundamental elements of a learning organisation (Senge 1990; Sydänmaanlakka, 2012). This proposition works as the default for conducting this research.

The researcher has worked in the case company for several years, and the initial interest to conduct a research within the company lied on employee development. During an internship period with the company's global competence development team the researcher's focus was sharpened towards leaders being the key players in implementing a shared vision and supporting learning. It became intriguing for the researcher to explore how leaders could foster a prolific environment for learning by their own example and how a conducive environment for learning could be created and maintained in retail environment, where work contains dealing with customers and reacting quickly to altering situations.

This aroused an interest for a research about learning organisation theories and studies to identify whether the leadership and management practices in the case company would reflect the suggested prerequisites and conditions for a learning organisation in the literature, and thus foster a culture of learning in the flow of work.

A company operating in retail industry is likely to face different challenges when aspiring to be a learning organisation. The work itself is more strictly bound to a certain place and time, working hours are often irregular and individuals may have less control over their workflow during the day. This challenge interested the researcher, but searching the literature showed the availability of previous studies very limited on the specific area.

The motivation for this study originates from the researcher's perception of learning as a concept with intrinsic value, and from professional aspirations. The author aims to deepen the understanding of competence development and knowledge management. Furthermore, this study intends to provide insights and possible suggestions for improvement to support collective learning and knowledge management in the case company.

1.2 Research purpose and objectives

The general purpose of this research is to explore how leaders currently learn and collaborate in a retail environment, and how they are working independently and collectively to support learning and competence of their teams. The aim is to find out how department managers in the case company perceive the opportunities for learning, sharing best practices with their peers regarding team leading, and how it affects their ability to support the learning and competence of their teams. This research aims to identify prevalent practices, conditions and attitudes that might be supporting or hindering organisational learning and competence development among department managers according to the selected theoretical framework derived from the literature review.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the optimal conditions for supporting learning in the organisation?
- How do sales department managers learn and collaborate with each other in the case company?
- What are the current leadership actions of sales department managers to support learning and competence?
- What are the possible barriers or challenges experienced by leaders in supporting learning and competence?

The objective of this research is to gather data from Company X to form a description of prevalent leadership practices and revise its correlation with assumed prerequisites for a learning organisation and the ability to support learning and competence in teams. Hypotheses for preconditions were synthesised from literature review of relevant theories and studies about organisational learning. The findings are used to assess the forms of learning and collaboration among leaders in the case company. Suggestions are made aiming to improve leaders' ability and possibility to support learning and competence management of teams in the case company.

1.3 The Case Company

The case company is a sales unit of an international retail organization with over 70 years of history in the industry and units spreading in 30 different countries. Company X is located in Finland, where it has been operating for over 13 years. The core function of the company is selling consumer products, with supportive functions such as customer service, logistics and business navigation. This research is focused on department managers working in the sales function of the case company.

The organisation has a strong culture and values, which are disclosed openly in their external communication. The organisation communicates to build their culture on fellowship, positivity and a can-do-attitude, with a constant thrive to do things better while having a positive impact to society.

In their external communication the organization states to be a workplace offering versatile career and learning opportunities and encouraging their staff to try different roles in the organisation. Development and growth of staff is seen important, and leaders strive to support employees in their career development.

The researcher has been working in the case company for several years in different roles and positions, and therefore has been able to witness the elements and practices mentioned in Company X's external communication. The researcher can confirm the presence of the same values and principles in the company's internal communication, and further in this report we will see how it is represented in the research data as well.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of the literature review conducted for this study and answers the first research question by presenting some of the main theories and previous studies that will be used to formulate research design and draw conclusions. The perpetual transformation to our ways of working derives mainly from the incomprehensibly accelerated advancements in technology. The following phrase by De Geus *“The ability to learn faster than competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage”* (De Geus 1988) describes the ethos behind a many business strategy today. The literature review attempts to present what are the main elements of a learning organisation viewed for this study and concluding the selected framework for assessing learning in the case organisation. First, the prerequisites for an optimal organisational learning environment will be discussed, and what it means for the individuals and teams in an organisation and for developing competence. Then, the role of leadership for this study will be conceptualized and presenting an overview of key areas for a supportive leadership for learning. Finally, competence management and knowledge sharing will also be discussed as essential elements in supporting learning.

2.1.Learning in an Organisation

All organisations learn at some level, and all organisations can be seen as learning systems (Nevis, DiBella et al. 1995). There are several ways a learning organisation has been described in the literature, but it seems a unanimous, specific definition has not been established (Maula 2006). Generally, a learning organisation is described as an organisation that is able to quickly learn and use new knowledge to adapt to changes (e.g., Senge 1990; Garvin 1993; Sydänmaanlakka 2012) Hence, the first sentence of this paragraph could also be: all organisations learn, but not all organisations adapt.

In the reviewed literature a difference between learning organisation and organisational learning is often made. Learning organisation can be viewed as a description of structural elements enabling learning processes (Maula 2006) and a portrayal of an organisation supporting learning and development (Viitala 2008), while organisational learning would address the actual learning process (Maula 2006; Viitala 2008) and offers a more concrete aspect to the processes of acquiring, utilising and managing competence

(Sydänmaanlakka 2012). This study will mainly focus on the supporting and developing organisational learning and competence through management activities. Therefore, learning organisation theories will provide an understanding of what optimal conditions can be in a company. Structural elements of the case company will not be the main point of focus in this study.

Organisational learning definitions are mostly viewed as processes linked with acquiring knowledge and enhancing performance (Garvin 1993). Yet, the emphasis of each theory varies being either on the behavioural, organisational structure or knowledge processing aspect. Argyris has defined organisational learning as a process of detecting and correcting error and referred the process of correcting errors while maintaining the same policies and objectives as single loop learning. Double loop learning occurs when prevalent conditions are being examined and questioned to solve an issue. (Argyris 1977) This premise for learning also appears as a central element in the work of Senge, who is widely referred to when defining the characteristics of a learning organization. The characterisation of Senge is recognised as pioneering work to describe the essential elements in becoming a learning organisation. Learning in an organisation according to Senge means there is continuous questioning of current experience in order to proceed new knowledge that is relevant to the organisation's core purpose and accessible to all (Senge, Ross et al. 1998). In a learning organisation, learning is enabled for everyone and the organisation is constantly transforming itself (Maula 2006). Evidently, for this type of change to happen, what is learned should become part of the organisational culture (Turmiensky, Hare 1998) provided that the culture is flexible and free of barriers hindering learning. In other words, the infrastructure should be favourable for learning. The structural elements will be examined in the next section.

2.1.1. Key Concepts and Theories

Senge describes a learning organisation as a place “where people continually expand their capacity [...] where new ways of thinking are nurtured and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge 1990, pg. 3). Senge's work presents five disciplines that work as developmental paths to enhance learning in an organisation: *systems thinking*, *personal mastery*, *mental models*, *shared vision* and *team learning*. Senge emphasises the importance of *systems thinking*, which refers to the ability to see interrelations and patterns, and how we all contribute to systems which we

simultaneously experience and create. Interdependencies are everywhere, and applying systems thinking can help dealing with the increasing complexity of daily living and working, giving room for innovation and development that is hindered by the inner belief that things are merely happening to us. *Personal mastery* ensures the engagement of an individual to learning and having a personal vision to stay committed. Personal mastery also permits the comprehension of systems around us, preventing to fall in a reactive mindset (Senge 1990) Mental models refer to the underlying assumptions that we should be aware of, and critically evaluate how they are affecting our understanding of things. A *shared vision* is needed to have a clear picture of the pursued objectives and connecting them to the individual to foster commitment. According to Senge, *team learning* is vital in a learning organisation, offering a perspective wider than of an individual, which is fundamental for organisational learning.

According to Sydänmaanlakka (2012), a learning organisation learns from its experiences, having the ability to continuously adapt, and renew itself according to the demands of the environment. Sydänmaanlakka discusses about an *intelligent organisation*, whose principal resource is competence, referred to as the result of learning, and complements Senge's list of learning abilities in an organisation with strategical learning, feedback, utilisation of information systems and sharing knowledge. The concepts and the framework of this theory is derived from studying literature, empirical findings and practical application. An intelligent organisation represents an ideal organisation of the future, where efficiency becomes from working intelligently with clearly defined processes for managing performance, competence and knowledge with a comprehensive utilisation of information technology (Sydänmaanlakka, 2012).

Garvin states that people in a learning organisation are able to create, acquire and transfer knowledge, and acclimate themselves to unpredictable circumstances more swiftly than competitors (Garvin, Edmondson et al. 2008). Garvin has presented critique towards the learning organisation scholars by pointing out the lack of an applicable framework for action (Garvin 1993) and impressing the deficiency of not having tools for department managers to assess their team's learning (Garvin, Edmondson et al. 2008). Garvin outlines three broad factors, or building blocks, derived from previous research on organisational learning, that can be used to assess learning in an organisation: a supportive *learning environment*, concrete *learning processes* and *leadership that reinforces learning*. However, Garvin's framework does not seem to address the daily

collaboration and learning in the flow of work, which might not necessarily be a constant structural process, especially in a busy retail environment of the case company.

According to Marsick and Watkins, most of the valuable learning in organisations happens informally and unstructured ways (Watkins, Marsick 2003). The notion of the spontaneous, work-derived nature of organisational learning generated an exhaustive research to demonstrate the supposition. Research consisted of examining the literature and inspecting instances of improving organisational learning in action which resulted to six prerequisites for a transformational culture. Their research continued with further case studies, concluding to the Dimensions of a Learning Organisation Questionnaire (DLOQ), that was established in the 1990s and since been used in various organisational studies (Marsick 2013). The final seven dimensions formulated from the multi-stage research are: create continuous learning opportunities, promote inquiry and dialogue, encourage collaboration and team learning, create systems to capture and share learning, empower people toward a collective vision, connect the organisation to its environment and provide strategic leadership for learning. These dimensions are elaborated more in this report's upcoming discussion of assessing organisational learning.

Individuals and Teams

Individual learning is the foundation for organisational learning. Senge's discipline of personal mastery refers to individuals that are committed to personal growth, continuous learning is integrated in their daily actions, and they are aware of their lack of competence in some areas and strive to grow and develop their competence. (Senge 1990) Competence is created through shaping experiences, and learning should involve understanding of new knowledge and then applying and testing it into practise (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Learning should be seen as a skill that can be developed.

Individuals learn all the time, but that does not mean it is equivalent to or leads to organisational learning, which does not occur without team learning, thus making teams the fundamental learning unit in an organisation (Senge 1990). Senge's early contribution noting teams as the elemental factor for learning in organisations has been evolved in various studies and learning in teams is considered a central function to increase strategic and operational responsiveness (Edmondson, Dillon et al. 2006). We will take a look of the element of learning in teams in the next section.

2.1.2. Collaborative Learning in Teams

The Concept of a Team

Team as a term is used in many contexts, and therefore the term and concept of teams needs to be defined in the context of this study. Team learning is one of the five disciplines of a learning organisation according to Senge as outlined in the previous section. Sydänmaanlakka (2012) defines team as a small group of people who are committed to shared objectives and operations while also sharing accountability and possessing competence that complement each other's' skills. Referring to teams that learn, Senge seemed to be referring to any groups that collectively are able to achieve things unattainable individually (Senge 1990). In this sense team can be used to describe any close community with common purpose and objectives inside a company (Viitala 2008). Team learning is crucial for delivering results, and to achieve this teams should have collective intelligence and awareness of other's competence, trust in each other's contribution and support the performance of other teams as well through collaboration. (Viitala 2008)

Katzenbach and Smith studied dozens of teams in over 30 companies to discover the performance variables in different teams and levels of performance (1993). The researchers state that the term 'team' is often used too loosely and cannot be used to describe any group working together (Katzenbach, Smith 1993), and they also name having both individual and mutual accountability as a fundamental differentiating factor. Teams' performance is also considered to be a result of both individual and collective efforts, whereas a working group's members create result solely with individual contributions. Team is an established term inside the case organisation used to refer to the group of employees that are sharing responsibilities and following their performance as a group with the lead of the department manager. Team is also used to refer to the group of managers working together towards the goals on both a departmental and organisational level. Each manager strives to deliver results contributing to the organisation's overall operational objectives by planning and managing work procedures and evaluating performance of their sales team. Therefore, team is considered an appropriate term to use in this research and during data collection, even if the term's definition might be arguable.

Elements Supporting Learning in Teams

Team learning as a process can be described quite similarly with individual learning as the “process of a team acquiring new knowledge, skills and experience that will lead to changes in team actions” (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). In order to a team to improve its performance frequent evaluation should take place, where the team reviews the current situation towards future goals in order to collectively create action plans for development.

Team learning as a skill goes beyond common team building. The aim is not merely to influence behaviour such as communication and performing tasks together successfully. Learning how to learn collectively is a challenging process that requires individual self-knowledge in order to develop collective knowledge and align with others. (Senge, Ross et al. 1998) Alignment of the team is imperative in order to translate hard work to team effort, and also ensures a smoother management of a team where individuals are empowered (Senge 1990) According to Senge, a teams’ larger, shared vision “becomes an extension of personal vision”, and effective team learning requires open dialogue, thinking together to gain insights only attainable collectively. Organisational learning does not occur without team learning, which makes teams the fundamental learning unit in an organisation (Senge 1990), and often the defining factor for successful knowledge sharing in the organisation (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Team learning can also be seen as the ability to combine individual competences (Sydänmaanlakka 2012), where several minds are greater than one mind and collaboration fostering the learning of other teams and individuals (Senge 1990).

Having relevant skills and being able to collaborate using individual competencies is not enough to reach the desired alignment that Senge outlined. In addition to dialogue, shared knowledge and competence, a team also needs common objectives. Lack of one or more of these factors is likely to prevent learning in teams (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) in their analysis of teams identified the most significant factors for team success to be a shared vision and mission. Collective understanding of tasks appeared to be a more defining factor for success than skills, and a shared vision provides individual incentives while maintaining the course toward the organisation’s objectives (Laakso-Manninen, Viitala 2007).

Edmondson, Dillon et al. (2006) conducted a wide revision of studies about team learning to provide insights into how teams learn. Learning in teams appears to be central in

supporting strategical responsiveness (Edmondson, Dillon et al. 2006), which supports the core characteristic of a learning organisation being able to learn and adapt according to the environment. Edmondson et al. noted how the strategical benefit of team learning is not in carrying out changes, but in increasing the tolerance of uncertainty.

2.1.3. Learning in the Flow of Work

Learning in the flow of work is a concept made known by Josh Bersin, who argues that making learning part of the daily workflow will be the new paradigm for learning in corporate settings (Bersin 2018). Learning should be incorporated into daily work and includes dedication from both individuals and the company, also called as bottom-up and top-down learning. Bottom-up learning requires an individual to be actively present in their work routines as in paying attention to others' ways of working, asking for feedback and contributing to a channel where people work, learn and share together. Top-down learning is about creating opportunities to develop needed skills within the company. Systems and platforms for knowledge and sharing should be accessible and easy to use, and a channel for learning with active and encouraging presence of company leaders should exist.

Bersin points out how organisations' learning platforms have adopted similar principles and visuals seen in popular social media and streaming platforms, so they would come across as more appealing and easier to use. However, this might not always serve the interest of business, where people aim to learn what they need in the moment to apply it in their work, instead of browsing for relevant or interesting content. According to a study conducted by the Josh Bersin Academy in 2015 among over 700 organisations, an average employee has less than half an hour a week to spend on formal learning. The lack of time for formal learning points out the need for more informal learning opportunities and immersing learning into the systems people already use on the job (Bersin 2018). The motivation to learn in the flow of work usually derives from a person's interest in the matter at hand, so therefore informal learning is most likely to be more effective.

Watkins and Marsick developed their Dimensions of Organisational Learning theory to the notion of organisational learning being informal, continuous and embedded in the work (Watkins, O'Neil 2013), and the "most significant learning [is] least structured". Although formal trainings are still very relevant for managing performance and

competence, informal learning for groups and individuals should be supported with an enabling learning culture built by leaders (Watkins, Marsick 2003). This can be observed at the case company through this study.

Learning in the flow of work can be firmly linked to the principles of a learning organisation and organisational learning. The principles of learning in the flow of work are also very relevant when considering the learning environment in the case organisation. The working situations and circumstances in a retail company can be sometimes very hectic and unpredictable; people usually work within irregular hours and in shifts, having relevantly little power to the issues they face daily, and adjusting their work routines according to customer flow. The practical suggestions for improving and supporting learning by making learning part of the daily workflow contribute to the objective of this research to study how leaders in the case company learn, collaborate and support learning.

2.2. The Role of Leadership

This research focuses on gaining understanding and information about the learning, collaboration and competence supportive actions of sales department managers in a retail organisation Company X. As described in the learning organisation theories; a supportive learning environment is fostered by leaders, and management also should ensure propitious circumstances and an enabling work environment providing learning opportunities in an organisation. The leaders in this study are creating as well as performing in the current learning environment. They are in other words simultaneously contributing to the conditions that they are experiencing, which is also the core concept, the premise for Senge's true learning organisation.

Leadership has been defined differently by each researcher, but the apparent common conjecture of leadership comprises of a process that aims to influence people in an organisation or a group. (Yukl 2013) Also, speculation about management and leadership as separate concepts will be left out from this research, and it is assumed that managerial roles also involve leading (Yukl 2013). Sydänmaanlakka states that leadership should be redefined and proposes for example to merge leadership of people and management of things together, as well as combining the most useful elements of various leadership approaches instead of speculating the suitability of each, especially

because of the drastic change in the work environment (Sydänmaanlakka 2005).

2.2.1. Supporting Learning in an Organisation

Previously mentioned personal mastery is the starting point for individual learning that needs to be enabled and supported, and this is where leaders have the key role to lead with example (Senge 1990; Viitala 2008). Garvin (1993) stresses the importance of having time for reflection and analysis so that learning would not get buried under the rush. From Garvin's building blocks of a learning organisation the third block is called leadership that reinforces learning, which includes actions such as encouraging different views, enabling time for reflection and active listening. (Garvin 2008)

In the Marsick's and Watkin's Dimension of Learning Organisation (2003) leadership is defined as strategical, where leaders make sure learning is connected to the organisation's vision and operational goals. Managers in the organisation support opportunities for learn, encourage collaboration and advocate learning with their own example. During the studies conducted for developing the questionnaire for measuring the dimensions of the learning organisation, Marsick and Watkins found out that empowering "people with collective vision, collaboration and team learning [...] were not by themselves strong enough to impact perceived changes". Providing strategical leadership for learning showed most evidence to have an impact on financial performance.

An organisation's commitment to learning is based on the commitment of its members. Supportive environment is a crucial element in supporting personal mastery, and the best way leaders can foster that environment is by their own example (Senge 1990). Ultimately, every individual is responsible of their own learning, but that does not mean adult learners would not need support as well (Viitala 2008) nor does it decrease the importance of a manager's role. Supporting learning is even more necessary in the increasingly challenging and changing environment. Leaders can encourage self-development by stressing the imperative of learning and giving positive feedback readily. Leaders foster an environment where learning is not depended on the leader's activity, meaning that the conducive culture should be reinforced continuously. (Viitala 2008)

In similar turbulent circumstances in which learning organisations can succeed, leaders need to be flexible, curious and requesting feedback to develop (Yukl 2013). A chaotic situation calls out leaders to clarify objectives and action principles to create order and a sense of meaning (Viitala 2008). Viitala states that the dimensions of leadership are no longer identified with just managing people and things, but a third dimension; managing change and development, has emerged in leadership studies.

There seems to be no clear recommendation of a most suitable leadership approach adopted from previous leadership studies. Generally, it seems leadership theories are sometimes briefly discussed in some organisational learning literature, but no clear linkages are being made. The dimensions of organisational learning and elements supporting it revolve around inspiring individuals to learn by connecting their personal development goals to the organisation's vision and objectives. Transformational leadership theory describes that effective leadership appeals to people's values and emotions and helps subordinates to understand the significance of their work to the organisation. Yukl summarises the guideline for transformation leadership to be describing a clear vision and how to achieve it, acting confident while conveying trust and leading by example (Yukl 2013).

While there are various theories and models developed describing different leadership styles, it is not apparent whether the research about organisational learning requires a connection to a specific existing style of leadership. The concept of a learning organisation contains strong propositions regarding culture and emphasises the role of leadership with recommendations for practical and structural elements. Some of the reviewed literature about organisational learning theories mention leadership styles, and especially transformational leadership (Viitala 2008; Sydänmaanlakka 2012), but they also mention the evolution of leadership theories.

The researcher questions the applicability of the term 'style' when discussing leadership in a learning organisation and argues that organisational learning is based on systems supporting learning and competence that leaders in the organisation build and cultivate, which supports Senge's (1990) definition of learning organisation leaders as designers, not captains of a ship. This means how leaders are creating and fostering the culture of learning and sharing, which helps the organisation to stay afloat and swiftly change course when needed. In this sense, leadership certainly appears as a broad concept including inspiring with a vision, designing learning processes (Senge 1990) in the organisation and maintaining clarity in the midst of change.

2.2.2. Competence Management

Understanding the process of learning for an individual, team and the whole organisation it is critical to support effective learning and competence development (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Managing competence begins from defining a company's core competence, the main competitive advantage, according to the company's vision and strategy. Determining the gap between desired and current level of competence will work as a basis for planning development and actions. According to Sydänmaanlakka, managing organisational competence is the most important task for a management team today.

Organisation's core competence can be defined as a combination of processes and technology, a unique competitive advantage, accumulated knowledge that can be utilised holistically in the organisation to generate added value for customers (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Collective learning, communication and committed cross-functional collaboration (Prahalad, Hamal 1990) are some central elements in the organisation's core competence. Core competence is something that is not achieved by vigorous research and development nor can it be easily imitated by competitors (Prahalad, Hamal 1990; Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Individual development is always the starting point for developing competence of staff and it should work as a process for managing knowledge. Managing the knowledge attained from individual learning should include applying learning in practice, sharing competence with the team and documenting learnings to contribute to the organisation's competence (Sydänmaanlakka 2012).

In competence management, leaders have different areas to focus on comparing to the traditional way of managing performance. The basic elements of performance management are setting objectives, follow-up, feedback and improvement, and the main purpose being to improve performance (Sydänmaanlakka 2012). Viitala (2008) conducted a wide field study where around 1300 participants evaluated the activity of their manager in the area of competence management. The study concluded in four central elements for competence development and enhancing learning: steering the focus of learning and competence, creating a conducive learning environment, supporting learning processes and leading by example.

Individuals and teams should see themselves and each other as equally vital parts of the organisation, each contributing to the competence and performance of the organisation.

Sydänmaanlakka argues that core competence derives from teams, and the most important task of a department manager is to maintain and develop the competence of a department and to see it contributes to the organisation's strategy (Sydänmaanlakka 2012) Competence is built on knowledge, which is the product of learning.

2.2.3 Knowledge Management

A brief look into knowledge management offers a view to understand the role of knowledge in learning and competence management. Knowledge management can be defined as a process where knowledge is created, acquired, documented and shared, and the application of knowledge into practise to make decisions is the ultimate objective (Sydänmaanlakka 2012).

Learning can also be defined as a process of transferring and processing knowledge, implementing knowledge in practise, which then generates new knowledge through practice. The premise for knowledge management is to make organisational knowledge and experience accessible for all in the organisation. (Sydänmaanlakka 2012) In literature about organisational learning many researchers refer to knowledge as either explicit or tacit knowledge (Garvin 1993; Sydänmaanlakka 2012; Viitala 2008), a concept popularised by Nonaka. Tacit knowledge is a combination of technical know-how and inner beliefs, therefore having both practical and cognitive elements, where cognitive aspect includes our inherent mental models moulding our perception. In contrast to systematic explicit knowledge, which can be quite easily shared in various forms, tacit knowledge is not so easy to communicate. (Nonaka 2007). Knowledge management is an important element in this study, because it can reveal how effectively the people in the case company are able to work together and collaborate. In a retail environment, situations can change daily, routines are altered and new updates need to be quickly attainable to serve customers.

Sharing knowledge

To adapt and transform on the go using the learnings acquired through experience requires that knowledge is attainable for everyone in the organisation. Accessible knowledge is often perceived as the explicit knowledge or information available for employees in various digital sources, but often competence is built on tacit knowledge.

In addition, defining explicit knowledge solely by its visibility on digital environment can be problematic. (Sydänmaanlakka 2012)

Ways to facilitate and encourage knowledge sharing are having suitable and accessible information systems where to document proven practices, and also social networks for knowledge and idea sharing, or e.g., addressing a task collectively on a digital platform. It is imperative for leaders to be present on these systems, contributing to the learning culture. (Yukl 2013)

The research of Nevis, DiBella et al. (1995) argued that learning is a production task as any other, and it remains in the organisation although individuals change, which makes learning a system-level phenomenon. The researchers' field study resulted in a model for organisational learning process that include acquisition, sharing and utilisation of knowledge, and stressed the importance of disseminating and integrating knowledge, that they stated to have gained less attention. They suggest studies about learning in the organisation to address all stages of the process to gain more understanding about how knowledge becomes collective, because "[true knowledge] includes the meaning or interpretation of information, and a lot of intangibles such as the tacit knowledge of experienced people that is not well articulated but often determines collective organisational competence". (Nevis, DiBella et al. 1995) This notion encapsulates the purpose behind this study about supporting learning and competence in an organisation.

From the above descriptions it can be concluded that the organisational culture needs to be conducive for learning, and leadership should focus on building this culture, by fostering an environment for continuous learning opportunities and reflection. This means to cultivate a working environment where there are regular opportunities for managers to share knowledge between themselves or with their teams. There should be strategical planning and actions for developing competence that contribute to the organization's vision, and knowledge management should have clear processes for documentation and sharing attained knowledge.

2.4 Assessing Organizational Learning: The Theoretical Framework

The overview of key concepts around organisational learning provide a versatile palette of concepts and theories for assessing learning and leadership in an organisation. In this section the applicability of key theories for the purposes of this research is evaluated.

Senge's groundwork provides foundational principles describing the infrastructure and mindset needed in a learning organisation. However, it is not clear how these conditions manifest themselves in practice so they could be observed. Methods for assessing organisational learning are not presented, but methods for developing an apt mindset and open dialogue in an aspiring learning organisation are emphasised. Senge (1990) states that the learning disciplines; systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning are "personal", and about how we think as well as how learn and interact with others. Senge's theory has received critique for being more idealistic than theoretical, and not providing practical solutions for organisations (Caldwell 2012). However, the work is widely referred and offers an inspirational source for literature about organisational learning (Sarala, Sarala 1996). It is not meant to offer a set of practices, but practices are formulated in the context of each organisation. Despite the challenges in direct applicability, the researcher considers Senge's work to provide relevant building blocks to formulate and clarify an organisation's vision. However, it will not offer an applicable framework for data collection.

Garvin's building blocks for a learning organisation mentioned in 2.1.1 suggest useful methods for building and assessing learning in organisations. The components provide a strategic approach for assessing and improving learning in companies with supportive processes and practices for utilising and managing information. The building blocks above demonstrate components for fostering a conducive learning environment through reflection, psychological safety and active leadership, while having formal processes for learning and managing information. However, the elements of collaboration, learning and working in teams towards a common objective seems to be missing. Garvin et al. propose their tool to work as a solution for assessing the benefits in a company through performance in each building block. For this research it does not provide enough perspective to examine leaders' collaboration in the case company.

Watkin and Marsick have developed a widely used Dimensions of a Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) as a result of expansive field study, literature review, workshops and testing. Their dimensions are not intended to be a guideline for practices, but a framework to reflect the organisational culture. (Sidani, Reese 2018)

Watkin's and Marsick's Dimensions of a Learning Organisation:

- Create continuous learning opportunities
- Promote inquiry and dialogue

- Encourage collaboration and team learning
- Create systems to capture and share learning
- Empower people toward a collective vision
- Connect the organization to its environment
- Provide strategic leadership for learning

Brief summary of the dimensions:

In a learning organization, learning is embedded into work and there are ongoing opportunities for development, and the organisation's culture cultivates questioning, feedback and experimentation. Collaboration is enabled in the work design so that groups can both work and learn together, and there are accessible and maintained systems to share learnings. People in the organization are working towards a shared vision and they are aware of the impact their work has in the organization. Leaders have the key role in mediating all endeavours, supporting learning and making it a strategical mean to drive results. (Watkins, Marsick 2003)

Watkin's and Marsick's dimensions of a learning organization provide a relevant framework for this study, including both individual and organizational level, with the elements of collaboration, continuous learning and collective vision. During several years of literature and case studies, these dimensions have been rigorously tested to validate and further develop the created dimension of a learning organization. In a search for better comparison of organisations, and measures to examine links between learning and performance the scholars have also formulated the Dimensions of a Learning Organisation Questionnaire (DLOQ).

This research aims to explore and gain understanding of the daily reality of learning and collaboration among the department managers in the case company. The purpose of this study makes qualitative means more suitable, and therefore the questionnaire itself will not be used to gather data, but the elements of the DLOQ are used for qualitative data collection and analysis.

2.5. Summary of Theoretical Framework

The above summary of the literature on organisational learning gives an idea of what is considered a favourable environment for learning in an organisation, including the

infrastructure and managerial mindset. This study aims to find out how sales department managers in the case company perceive organisational learning in the case company and how they learn individually and together.

From the above descriptions it can be concluded that the organisational culture needs to be conducive for learning, and leadership should focus on building this culture, by fostering an environment for continuous learning opportunities and reflection. There should be strategical planning and actions for developing competence that contribute to the organisation's vision, and knowledge management should have clear processes for documentation and sharing attained knowledge.

The following themes summarise the main topics presented in the literature review and were formulated for the data collection among department leaders, representing the concepts in Watkin's and Marsick's dimensions of the learning organization, and in the literature review.

Learning in the organisation

A conducive learning environment enables continuous learning opportunities on the job, there is time for learning, reflection and problem solving, and people openly explore new things. Leadership supports and reinforces learning through encouragement, open dialogue and showing example.

Collective learning and collaboration

People work, learn and reflect together, actively sharing knowledge as well as giving support and feedback. Teams and individuals are aware of and can benefit from each other's competence. People work towards a shared vision and connect learning to business.

Knowledge and competence management

The organisation has systems for collecting and transferring information to which everyone has access to. Sharing of knowledge and learnings is enabled for all and done efficiently and actively. Individual competence contributes to the collective competence in the organisation.

These themes were used to create the frame for the interview and formulate questions for the primary data collection process.

3.METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore and familiarize with the leaders' experience regarding the current learning culture and the aim is to gain an understanding of how sales department managers of the case company learn individually and collectively, how do leaders collaborate, and how they are supporting the learning and competence of their teams.

3.1 Research approach

The facts that the researcher works in the organisation and is studying a phenomenon in a specific setting makes this research a single case study. Forming a perception of the context in which the events take place is central to the subject, and case study works as a strategy to understand the current situation (Saunders, Lewis et al. 2016) as a whole.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative measures were used to collect the primary data with semi-structured interviews. Beliefs and habits around learning stem from ingrained thought patterns and attitudes (like Senge's, as Senge (1990) also explains with the element of mental model. Therefore, these underlying assumptions are best examined through interviews during which the interviewees may present their views freely, thus providing a deeper understanding of the context where the examined actions take place (Saunders, Lewis et al. 2016).

The themes for the interviews were formulated from the chosen theoretical framework, meaning that the approach to analysis is deductive. However, during the process of data analysis these themes were slightly modified.

3.2 Data collection

A semi-structured interview serves as a means to address pre-determined key points (Saunders, Lewis et al. 2016) which is needed in order to detect possible patterns, compare the findings with the theoretical framework and to detect and discuss possible areas of development. A request to participate to the research were sent to all nine sales

department managers in the case company and in the end four managers were interviewed. This means that around 45% of the examined group took part in the study, which makes the results of this research a fairly valid and accurate representation of the current mindset and practices of the sales department managers in the case company.

Interviews were conducted in order to obtain understanding of the managers' general experience about supporting learning and competence in their unit and how are those elements present in their everyday working life. The interview frame consists of three themes: leader in the organisation, collective learning and collaboration and sharing knowledge and competence.



Figure 1. Interview themes (Hervanto 2020).

The first theme of the interview intended to explore the managers mindset about learning and themselves as leaders. The second theme focused on the collaboration of managers and their regular actions around reaching the objectives and enhancing competence. Third theme of the interview attempted to gain insights on the practices around sharing and managing knowledge within and between teams in the unit.

The interviews were conducted face to face or during a video call, and the duration varied between 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, following the themes and order outlined in Figure 1. However, the managers were allowed to answer and describe the situations freely, which meant that many of the themes and topics were

brought up by the leaders in connection with another topic. Nevertheless, every interview followed the same structure and order, and all questions were asked with the same wording, with additional pre-written probing questions that were asked if needed. The overlapping of the themes allowed the managers to consider the questions from different angles, therefore providing confirmation of what they had responded before and allowing richness of the data.

3.3 Data analysis

The interview questions were grouped under these three themes. The collected data was analysed using thematic approach. The interview audios were listened several times and transcribed for data coding, where extracts of similar data were labelled under a certain meaning, and then grouping the findings under pre-determined themes. During the process the original themes were modified to represent the data in a more clear and coherent way. Some themes merged in together and other ones were elaborated to do justice for the data.

Revised themes after the interviews:



Figure 2. Revised themes after the interviews (Hervanto 2020).

4.FINDINGS

The answers have been grouped based on the predetermined themes. The themes formulated prior conducting the interviews were slightly modified to better match the data and to facilitate presenting the data. For clarity, learning in the Organisation and Leader in the organization is discussed as two separate themes. Interviewees were allowed to describe their experiences elaboratively, which means the data has been organized afterwards to match insights with the respective themes. These themes are:

- Learning in the organization: *circumstances and opportunities for learning, support from the organization, openness to explore,*
- Leader in the organization: *leadership style, self-development and learning, managing teams and supporting learning*
- Collective learning and collaboration of leaders: *sharing leadership practices and peer support*

During the data analysis the following assumptions were formulated:

1. *Leaders in the case company learn and perform best in close collaboration with other leaders.*
2. *Improving collective competence depend on the opportunities for live collaboration and sharing.*
3. *Leaders' ability to develop competence among themselves and their teams is negatively affected by the abundance of information and the pace of change.*

These assumptions are examined in this chapter by providing a summary of the findings under each theme presented, followed by a discussion about the findings and what they might indicate.

4.1 Summary of the results

In the following sections the summaries of the data in each respective theme will be presented together and the most important findings are discussed. To respect the

anonymity of the interviewees and present the data as neutral as possible, the quotes from the interviews are presented under pseudonyms Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta.

Background/Experience

Four out of nine sales department managers in the unit took part in the research, which is nearly half of the target group and therefore making these findings a valid representation of the team of leaders examined. Leaders experience in the organisation is between 7 to 13 years, and from that time they have acted as a leader in the case company for 5-12 years. Two of the four leaders had prior manager experience outside the case company.

During the interview some situational factors were brought up that need to take into consideration. The year 2020 most probably will be remembered of the global covid-19 pandemic that severely affected societies and businesses worldwide. The interviews were conducted during autumn 2020, around eight months after living with various and constantly updated restrictions and guidelines regarding everyday life and ways of working. Each interviewee in one way or another mentioned the effects of the exceptional times people were going through. Other mentioned factor was also the recent and ongoing changes in the executive team of the case company.

4.2 Summary of theme 1: Learning in the organisation

Learning in the organisation

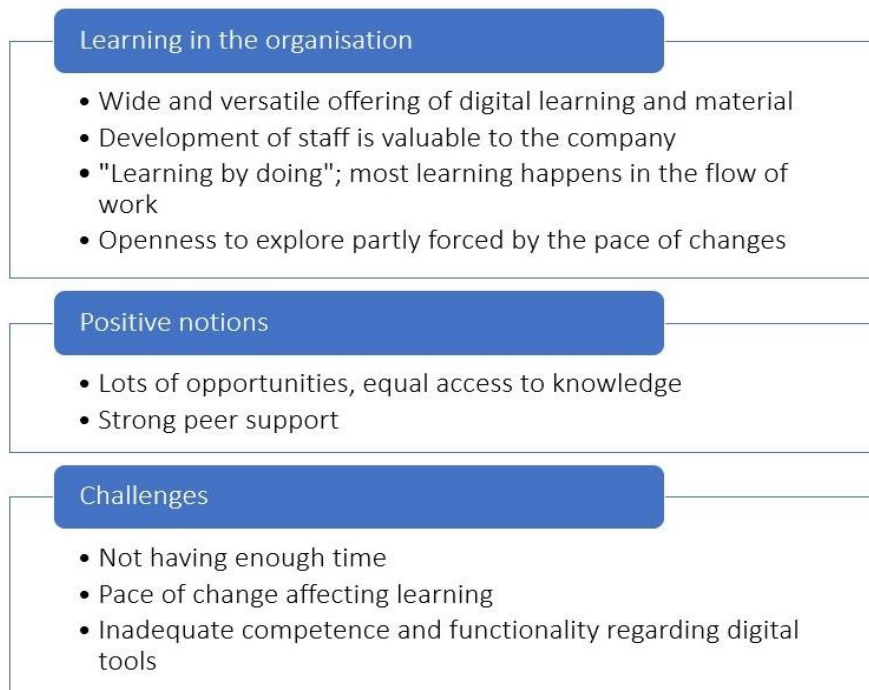


Figure 3. Summary of learning in the organisation (Hervanto 2020).

Circumstances and opportunities for learning: Two respondents mentioned development of people being a value in the company, and the vision of company growing together with its members. This reflects directly the company values mentioned in 1.3 and correlates with the ideal prerequisites of a learning organization discussed in the literature review. All respondents mentioned the vast options for learning in a digital format that is offered by the company. The opportunities of having online learning available for all were recognized, but two leaders also commented it takes away the element of interaction. As will be discussed in the context of the themes below, majority of the managers learning happens during interaction with managers, and the leaders unanimously felt they can always get support from their peers when needed. All individuals interviewed also said that learning happens mostly on the go while working, that it is learning by doing. The issue of not having time for formal learning was raised by every respondent, managers Beta, Gamma and Delta brought up the lack of planning the learning in terms of time and content.

“the issue is how to plan it timewise, and also not being sure about the content, what is a good training, and for whom is it for, how to structure all that” (Delta)

Openness to explore and try new things: When asking about openness to explore new things, three respondents (Alpha, Beta and Delta) connected it to the circumstances affected by external factors like the prevailing pandemic and pace of technological changes that force people to try new things and learn through exploring in practice. Alpha and Beta also expressed during the interview that the demand for rapid learning of new things does not leave room for change leadership when introducing e.g., new routines to staff. Generally, the importance of learning through exploring new things in practice was expressed in the answers, and the answers mostly referred to adopting new digital tools as an example of learning by experimenting. In addition, the impact of leadership was mentioned to set the atmosphere for exploration.

Positive notions: As can be seen from the answers, the leaders recognize the plenty opportunities for learning, and they acknowledge the existence and value of strong peer support.

Challenges: The pace of change was recognised by all the respondents, challenging learning both in the individual and organisational level. The prevalent pandemic accelerated the speed of changes, forcing people to learn quickly and adapt. It was pointed out that the company should be able to react more quickly to external changes and also to new ideas. Another issue emerging in the interviews with Alpha, Beta and Delta, was the reality of having to use digital tools that are unfinished, or people don't have the competence to use them yet.

“we use time and energy to learn how to work with unfinished programs, when working with customers we should have perfectly functioning programs” (Beta)

This was experienced to cause loss in time and performance, when people do not know how to use certain tools, or a software update is introduced before it is working properly. The quick change to new tools seemed frustrating to the managers, and they felt unprepared.

“we lost so much time when people don't know how to use the tools they have, we should be able to give[support] with quick reaction to get the feeling that the learning matters, that they [top management] care” (Alpha)

Discussion: What could have been done better to prevent managers from feeling this way? Is it really even realistic to have perfectly ready programs and train the staff comprehensively before implementing new programs, updates or routines?

The concept of a learning organisation contains the characteristics of adaptability, constantly learning and unlearning according to changes in the environment. The mentality should be in accepting the constant change and transformative nature of our ways of working and digital tools. To cultivate a receptive atmosphere requires strong, exemplary leadership, as discussed in the previous section about supportive leadership. Transformational leadership was mentioned as a suitable approach when maintaining a clear vision while facing changes. The expressed frustration might be prevented with better preparation and communication that aims to affect the mindset. Senge (1990) mentions how a shift of mind is needed when becoming a learning organisation, and adopting systems thinking, that enables to see the connectivity in everything. Also, like mentioned by manager Beta; there should be room to vent out frustration and have open dialogue about negative feelings.

4.3 Summary of theme 2: Leader in the organisation

Leader in the organisation

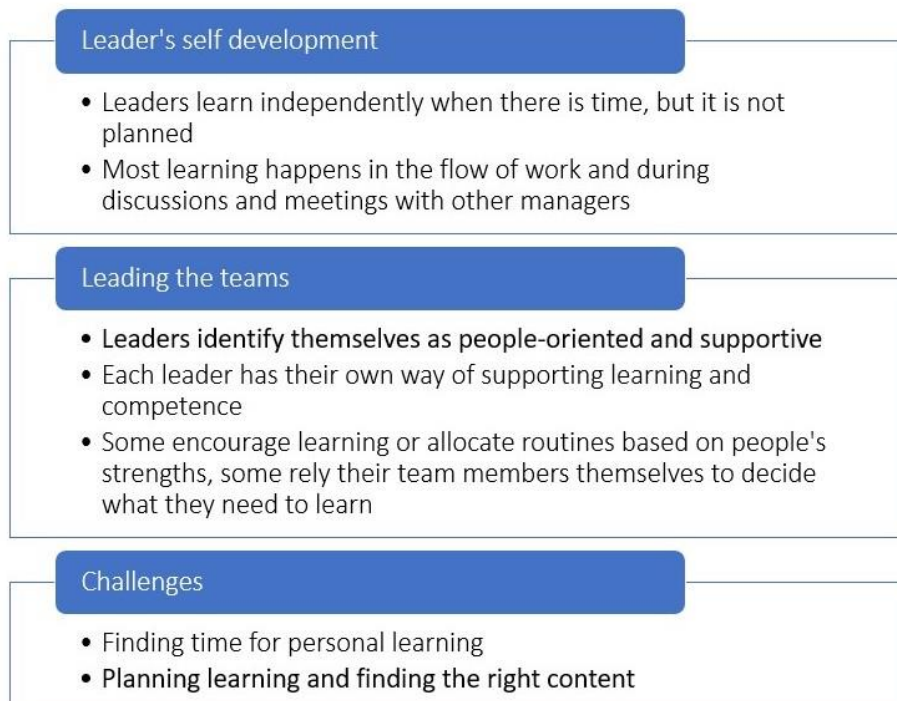


Figure 4.. Summary of Leader in the organisation (Hervanto 2020)

Leadership style: Each leader interviewed identified themselves as people-oriented leader and mentioned supporting their team members as one of their main purposes. This directly correlates with the company's public statement about their working culture mentioned in 1.3, showing a uniform adoption of the organisation's values among the managers. Half of the respondents also described how they aim to provide their team members development opportunities in their daily work based on their strengths and encouraging to find solutions themselves.

Self-development and learning: All respondents stated not really having time for learning, referring to formal learning specifically and how it is challenging to find time for personal learning or planning own learning.

"there is no planned time really, you take the time where you can get it" (Beta)

All leaders told they mostly learn in the flow of work, "learning by doing", and a great part of learning also happens in regular sales meetings with other sales managers.

"working together with others learning happens all the time" (Gamma)

These types of informal learning also provide opportunities for sharing tacit knowledge, supporting the notions mentioned in the section about knowledge management. Two respondents mentioned it would be beneficial to have a discussion about suitable learning opportunities for them during their own development talks and have them planned as they do with their team members. This raises a question about the leaders' own development journey, and whether there would be enough support and tools available for the leaders to also plan their own development, while they keep their departments running.

"I'm still responsible of my own development, it's about prioritising, and I prioritise what happens on the store floor" (Delta)

Managing teams, supporting learning and competence development: Each leader has their own way to work with supporting learning and competence of their teams. Two respondents rely on their team members to express what they would like to develop, and other two share responsibilities in the team according to individual skills. The mentioned practices varied from teaching or sharing new knowledge to the team to encouraging team members to learn themselves so they could teach others in the team. Development talks are the main forum for planning and assessing development, yet Alpha and Delta clearly stated to also allocate tasks in a way that they support and improve a team

member's strengths. When asked about the sharing of these different supportive practices, the managers mentioned they are occasionally discussed during meetings and each respondent felt there could be more sharing of how each of them does it and more discussion about how the supporting of learning and competence development could be done successfully in the managed teams.

Objectives and competencies are mainly discussed inside the department, mostly during individual development talks with the employees twice a year. Leaders agree each sales team has competence specific for the team, and often that specific competence is not perceived necessarily useful to others, but it is tapped into when need occurs.

4.4 Summary of theme 3: Collective learning and collaboration of leaders

Collective learning and collaboration of leaders

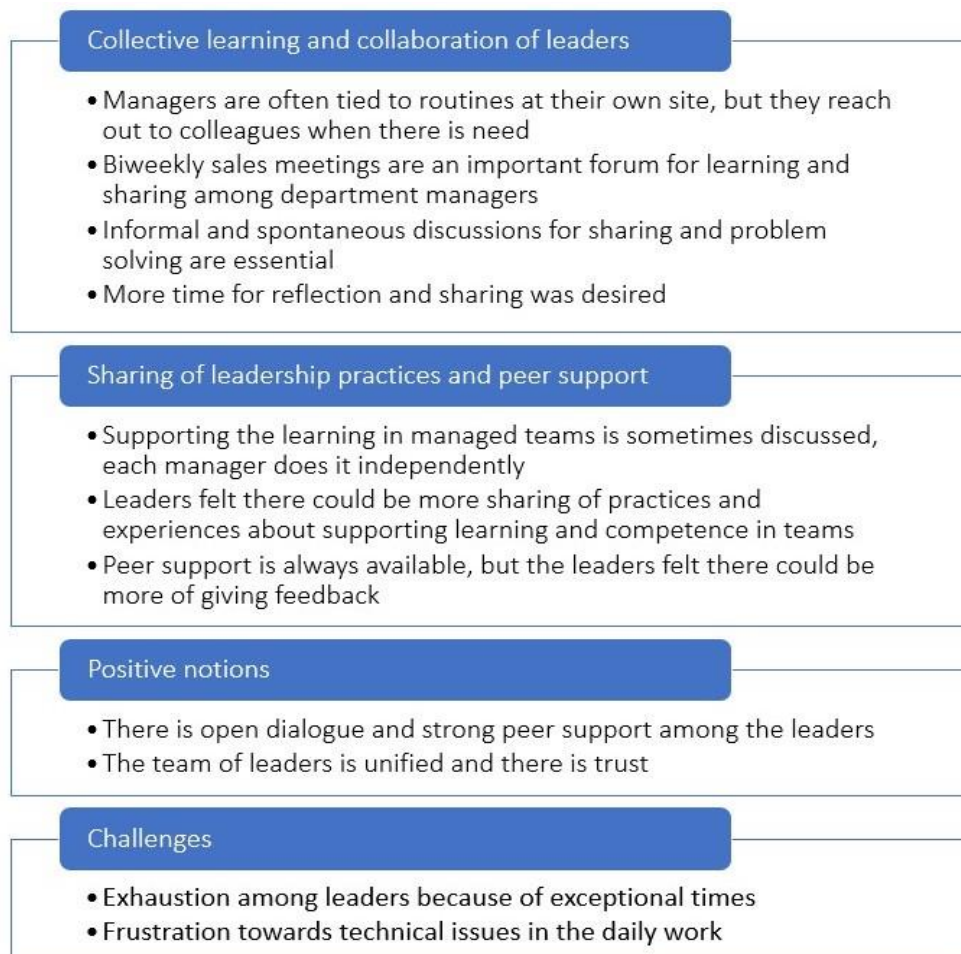


Figure 5. Summary of collective learning and collaboration (Hervanto 2020).

Reflection of new and learned things happens sometimes during sales meetings. Mainly reflection derives from faced issues, when seeking an answer to a problem. Managers say to be quite tied down working at their own site, but they find it easy to approach colleagues and ask their input and support. These discussions happen on the go and are usually spontaneous. Informal discussions seem to be an essential part of leaders' daily work and collaboration. The biweekly meetings among sales managers of the unit are described an important source for learning and sharing by every respondent. Each respondent also told they would like to be able to reflect and share more together with others.

Sharing leadership practices and peer support: Each leader expressed interest in sharing more of their experiences about supporting learning and competence of their teams.

"[there]could, and should be more sharing of proven good practices and discussion and collaboration, not via email but actual discussion" (Delta)

Feedback sharing is perceived useful and uplifting, and three leaders mentioned there could be more feedback sharing, but usually they have not actively asked it themselves.

Comments: Reflection is problem oriented and therefore seems reactive. There is no assigned time for reflection, but leaders seem to be active in reaching out for support when they need it. Leaders are aware of the competence of their peers and they feel there is strong unity and good collaboration among them. This again reflects well the company values and also supports learning and team collaboration in the organization, as explained in the literature review. Enabling opportunities for collaboration would offer a forum for feedback sharing, and in the process, it might be good to foster the climate by practicing asking for feedback.

Common objective and vision: When asked about the common objectives of their teams or among the team of leaders, the answers varied. The responses focused on sales goals and maintaining everyone's well-being and ability to work. The given business plan was mentioned by two of the respondents, saying that it was discussed maybe a couple of times a year, while another comment stated that the business plan is not present enough or connected to actions.

“There is no common vision, it is good if people barely remember the content of business plan at the end of the [fiscal] year, the objectives are not present in the discussions” (Delta)

Positive notions: Team spirit among leaders is perceived very good with open dialogue and support available whenever it is needed. The team of leaders is unified and there is trust, peer support and sharing

Challenges: Exhaustion among leaders because of exceptional times (pandemic) was brought up. Leaders showed concern towards the growing trend of implementing unfinished or new programs and tools to daily work without offering consistent support or instructions, updates are not ready when programs are in use, the staff does not have knowledge or skills to use some of the programs, and the demand for learning new tools and ways of working happens on the go. Frustration towards technical issues in the daily work, expression of frustration should not be suppressed, those feelings should be allowed to let out, sometimes there should be room for dialogue about negative issues. Also, the expressed lack of common vision and connection of activities to the company’s business plan should be examined. As shown by studies mentioned in the literature review, internalizing common vision and objectives is essential for a team to learn and perform.

4.4 Summary of theme 4: Knowledge management and sharing

Knowledge management & sharing

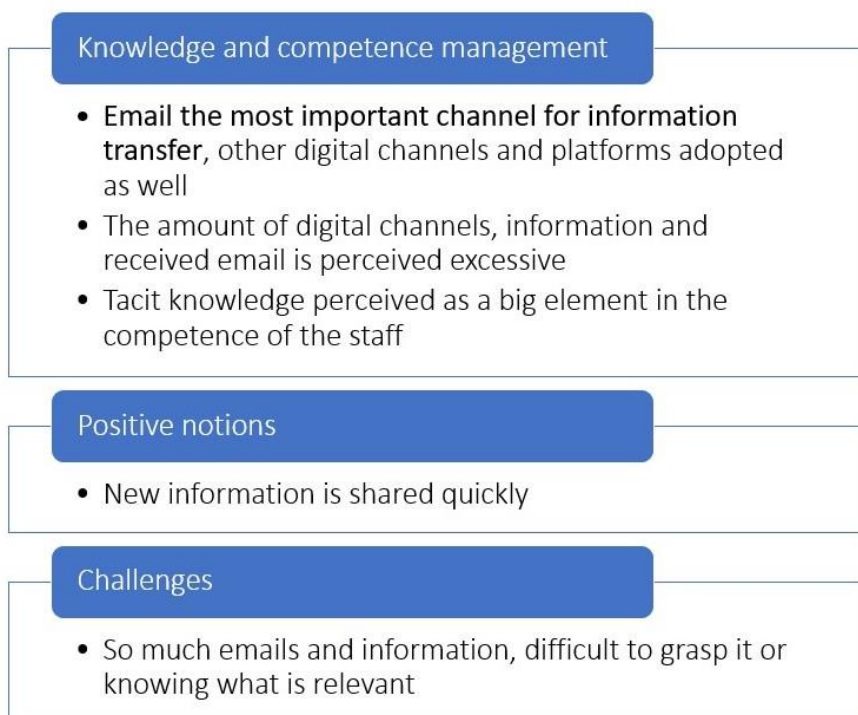


Figure 6. Summary of knowledge management and sharing (2020).

Email was the most important channel for information transfer according to all respondents, but most of them pointed out it not to be as effective to gain understanding or learn new methods or tools as directly consulting a colleague. This suggests that regardless of generous digital sharing of explicit knowledge in the company, it might not always serve learning objectives, which supports the theories about knowledge management in 2.2.3. As Gamma explained: *“There is so much information, sometimes challenging to know what is really relevant for own department”*. Beta stated that *“emails are full of links to other forums [...] it’s difficult to grasp information and often easier to just talk about things”*.

Tacit knowledge and competence: Tacit knowledge was perceived as a major source for competence in the sales function, leaders’ answers led to understand that the accumulated knowledge and experience would not be possible to transfer or adopt other way than observing or learning by doing. By two managers, the main competence of their teams was described as “an attitude”, something that cannot be taught. The leaders’ awareness of the tacit knowledge in the organisation is key in supporting collective competence in an organisation.

“Everything else can be learned, but the right attitude is difficult to learn, it comes naturally and is reinforced through example” (Beta)

Competence was said to sometimes be invisible as well, employees may not be aware of the specific competence in other departments, or the manager might be unaware of a team member’s potential

“one might think development talks are the way to detect it [potential], but it’s not enough, how could I find and utilise the competence?”. (Delta)

Other managers’ competence was well recognized and appreciated, while stating that the competence is much possessed and accumulated among the managers who have worked in the unit since the starting day. Another comment by Gamma brought up the question *“what would happen if suddenly half our managers left?”*. The leaders all agreed that this type of competence and tacit knowledge is attained and transferred through interaction.

Comment: Making tacit knowledge explicit is a complex and time-consuming process, that might not be feasible in every organization. Also, it is questionable, whether this would be worthwhile in a retail organization, or if anyone would have time to go through it and transform to competence through practical application. One might also ask, if the very nature of tacit knowledge, being experience based, will prevent it from being documented and utilized for passive learning. In an organisation, it is recommended to ensure sharing and transferring of tacit knowledge by collaboration and through observing and hands-on learning with a peer. A highly positive signal appearing in the data is the willingness to share different types of knowledge among managers, ergo nobody seems to be hoarding knowledge. When collaboration seems to be on a healthy foundation such as this, it is even more recommendable to foster an equally enabling environment for competence and knowledge sharing in the organisation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research was initiated to find out how leaders in case Company X learn and collaborate, and how it is supporting the learning and competence of teams. By conducting and analysing semi-structured interviews the research has shown that the sales department managers in the case company mainly learn in the flow of work and collaborate through informal encounters mostly focused on problem solving. Two overarching themes were rising from the data as main circumstantial factors affecting learning: digital competence and pace of change, or the time factor. The pace of social and technical changes combined with the hectic work circumstances in a retail organisation can be a challenging environment to incorporate meaningful learning opportunities. This will be reflected below by answering the questions that initiated this research.

How do sales department managers learn and collaborate with each other in the case company?

Leaders own learning seemed to be coming mainly from shared reflections during sales meetings or solving a problem occurring alongside work. Each respondent brought up the issue of not really having time for formal learning or planning learning, and each leader expressed a desire to collaborate and reflect more with other leaders in an organized setting. Informal discussions seem to be an essential part of leaders' daily work and collaboration, and most of the sharing, problem solving, and reflection is spontaneous. Biweekly sales meetings with the managers in the sales function are described as an important source for learning and sharing by every respondent

What are the current leadership actions of sales department managers to support learning and competence?

Each leader has their own way to work with supporting learning and improving competence of their teams with different practices or tools. Leaders could benefit greatly from having more time together for sharing and reflection to collectively find best ways to enhance their teams' learning and competence and thus improving the performance of the entire organisation. When teams' competences and objectives are discussed and planned in relation to the organisation's overall vision and goals the learning becomes strategical, and therefore is aimed to enhance the organisation's collective competence

(Watkins, Marsick 2013). Managers also have expressed a joint desire to increase their opportunities for sharing and reflection and have suggested forums and ideas for organized collaboration and sharing sessions to learn and discuss together about different ways of managing competence in their teams, and also to improve managers' personal development. Competence is not adopted through e-learning or self-learning, and it seems quite complicated to document complex and myriad amount of tacit knowledge and know-how needed.

What are the possible barriers or challenges experienced by leaders in supporting learning and competence?

Frustration towards technical challenges is particularly understandable when considering the settings where work takes place. Staff is working with customers whose expectations need to be met in order to continue doing successful business. Even though people in the organisation would be comfortable with exploring, testing and failing on the go, that might come across negative to the customers. If testing and failing is happening frequently during interactions with customers, what kind of an effect will it have to their perception of the case company's professionalism? In these situations, a person's professionalism to handle these encounters with customers is weighed, and it often has to do with the individual preparedness, the mindset and experience-based competence.

Evaluating whether the infrastructure is ready or apt for supporting learning in the organization is not unambiguous. Individuals understand their responsibility in their own development but feel there could be more time available, and finding the right content feels time consuming to them. The answers did not demonstrate how learning in the flow of work is supported, it seems the leaders learn on the go spontaneously or when a problem rises. Some leaders presented aiming to provide opportunities to their team members to try and learn new routines during their day or working together with another colleague. However, similar planning did not occur in the data when talking about the leaders own learning. Leaders own learning seemed to be coming mainly from shared reflections during sales meetings or solving a problem occurring alongside work, but formal learning did not occur so much. This strongly correlates with what Senge and Sydänmaanlakka stated about team learning in 2.1.2 and considering what Edmondson et al. have established in their studies about learning in teams, there seems to be excellent opportunities to deploy these salutary habits into improving the organisation's responsiveness in the face of change. Meaningful learning being informal and happening on the go is fully in line with Bersin's, as well as Watkin's and Marsick's arguments in

2.1.3. According to managers this was mainly because of the lack of time and also being uncertain about finding the right content from the huge selection of digital content.

The digital challenges deriving from the research findings support Bersin's proposition of learning in the flow being the new direction in corporate learning (Bersin 2018). A study conducted in collaboration with LinkedIn showed that a company's own learning platform is mainly used for only mandatory trainings, and that a third of an employee's work time is lost on email that is irrelevant for their job (Bersin, Zao-Sanders 2019). According to the data gathered among leaders in the case company, the number of digital channels is too much, the amount of information is overwhelming and challenging to process.

It is advisable not to rely too much on technology without proper guidelines or clearly assigned roles and responsibilities to managing the database and knowledge. Technology itself is not responsible for or manages anything (Zack 1999).

Confirming the assumptions from the data with suggestions:

1. *Leaders in the case company learn and perform best in close collaboration with other leaders.* Leaders in the case company perceive discussions and meetings with other leaders the dominant and most effective way to learn in their work. Organisation could benefit from more frequent and close collaboration of leaders that would be organized by the organisation to secure reflection, sharing of learning and benefitting from each other's' competences. Providing more opportunities for reflection would also make the leaders' collaboration more proactive. According to the answers, many discussions revolve around problem solving, which seems mainly a reactive activity. While openly engaging to solve problems is absolutely right, they should also strive to be truly proactive by allocating time in reflecting what might be causing problems in the future and how to avoid them.

2. *Improving collective competence depend on the opportunities for live collaboration and sharing* Learning and building competence mainly happens with 'learning by doing', and knowledge is most effectively shared in daily interaction and problem solving. Time should be secured to allow knowledge and competence transfer in the flow of work from experienced to new worker or when growing within the role, enabling opportunities for sharing and learning. It is advisable to explore the ways how Company X could support and secure the preservation of the accumulated tacit knowledge and competence in the organisation, if an experienced member of the organisation leaves.

3. *Leaders' ability to develop competence among themselves and their teams is negatively affected by the abundance of information and the pace of change.* The myriad sources and selection for learning material was found challenging to navigate and use effectively, while the rapid technological changes affecting work routines was causing frustration and loss in time without appropriate digital competence. Providing more concrete support for leaders to develop themselves and learn new tools together could maximize knowledge transfer and enhance ability to use new tools effectively and teach them to their managed teams. Internal communication channels and guidelines should be revised to ensure information reaches those who it concerns, and the most suitable and effective channel for daily knowledge and information exchange should be re-evaluated. It is imperative for every member of the organisation to know where the latest information regarding their job can be found, and how the digital tools in the company are expected to be used for daily routines and communication.

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Interview questions

Leadership practices supporting learning and competence of teams in a retail organization - Interview guide

Interview themes



Interview Questions

Background questions:

Briefly describe your history at the company.

How long have you been in a managerial role in this unit and altogether?

Theme: Leader in the organisation

Learning organisation can be described as an organisation that continuously learns from its experience and adapts to the changes of environment, where its members can continuously learn, exploring and sharing new ideas.

1. Would you consider your unit as an example of a learning organisation

-> *How does it show?*

2. Do you think people working in your unit are eager to explore new ways of doing things?

-> *How do you see this in your team or other teams?*

3. In your organisation, how would you describe the learning opportunities you have in your daily work? -> *How much do/can you engage in formal learning?* -> *How do you learn in the flow of work?*

4. Do you feel there is adequate time and resources for self-development?

-> *What kind of support are you receiving from a) your organisation? b) your peers?*

5. How would you describe yourself as a leader?

-> *What do you consider your main qualities? How does that show in action?*

Theme: Collective learning and collaboration of leaders

Background questions:

How many people is there in the team you manage?

How long have you been managing your current team?

How many of you are there in the team of leaders and how long have you been a part of that team?

7. When thinking about the team you manage; how would you describe the objective of your team?

-> *Have you agreed this together in your team?*

-> *How often do you talk about it?*

8. What would you say is the unique competence the team you manage brings to your organisation?

-> *Do you talk in the team about the competence you have and what you should have in the future?*

9. With other managers, do you talk about the objectives and competences you have in your teams? -> *Do you talk about/compare your objectives and competences in your teams?*

-> *Where and how do these discussions happen?*

10. In your team of leaders, do you have discussions and dialogue about how you can support the members of your managed teams in self-development, reaching learning objectives and building competence?

-> *How much is there informal discussions about these issues, do they happen spontaneously?*

11. When thinking about the team of department managers, your peers, in this unit; what would you say is the common objective you share as department managers/team leaders?

-> *Do you discuss about it with other managers*

12. How do you collaborate with the managers in your team, how do you support each other?

-> *Describe the situations and forums in which you mainly connect with other managers*

-> *Do you learn together or individually, do you have time to reflect new learnings together?*

-> *How do you benefit from each others' strengths?*

-> *Is feedback openly given and also asked for?*

Theme: Sharing knowledge and competence

13. How do you collaborate with other teams or departments in the company?

-> *How do you share knowledge between teams/departments, how do you benefit from each other's' strengths?*

14. What would you say is the main channel or activity for sharing knowledge and competence within the teams you work with? -> *Is that effective?*

-> *What do you do when you want to find out something or learn about something?*

-> *How much would you say competence is based on tacit knowledge*

15. When the team or a member of the team learns something new, how is that knowledge utilised? -> *Is there a space for reflection in the team after acquiring new knowledge?*

-> *Is there an opportunity to apply new knowledge in practice?*

-> *Are learnings and knowledge acquired in the team documented and shared?*

Interview guide and questions in Finnish

Sähköpostitse lähetetty tarkempi ennakkotieto haastattelun teemoista haastatteluun osallistuville esihenkilöille:

Haastattelun teemat:

Esihenkilönä organisaatiossa

Mieti itseäsi esihenkilönä ja oppijana; minkälainen olet esihenkilönä, entä oppijana? Millainen rooli oppimisella on yksikössäsi ja päivittäisessä työssäsi.

Esihenkilöiden yhteistyö ja oppiminen tiimissä

Mitkä ovat oman osastotiimisi tavoitteet ja osaaminen ja kuinka niistä keskustellaan omassa tiimissä sekä esihenkilöiden kesken?

Miten teette yhteistyötä esihenkilötiimissä, miten opitte yhdessä ja toisiltanne? Miten teette yhteistyötä työntekijöiden oppimisen ja osaamisen tukemiseksi?

Tiedon ja osaamisen jakaminen

Mitkä ovat päivittäiset keinot ja kanavat tiedon ja osaamisen jakamiseen tiimissä ja sen ulkopuolella? Miten osaamisesta tulee kaikkien yhteistä osaamista?

Alkuesittely (2min)

Tutkimuksen aihe on *Tiimin oppimista ja osaamista tukevat johtamiskäytänteet*, jossa tutkitaan myynnin esihenkilöiden kokemusta ja käytäntöjä tiimiensä oppimisen ja osaamisen tukemiseen päivittäisessä työssä. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena ja tavoitteena on saada tietoa esihenkilöiden kokemuksesta oppimisen ja osaamisen tukemisesta käytännössä sekä mitä toimia he tekevät edistääkseen tiimiensä/alaistensa oppimista ja osaamisen kehittämistä työn ohessa.

Tämä haastattelu on täysin luottamuksellinen ja anonymi. Kaikki tiedot käsitellään nimettömänä eikä niitä voida yhdistää henkilöön tai yritykseen.

Valmiin tutkimuksen löydökset tullaan jakamaan osallistujien kanssa heidän toiveidensa mukaan.

Taustakysymykset (3min)

Kuvaile lyhyesti työhistoriaasi tämänhetkisessä organisaatiossasi

Kuinka pitkään olet ollut esihenkilötehtävissä tämänhetkisessä yksikössä/työurasi aikana?

Esihenkilönä organisaatiossa (10min)

Oppivaa organisaatiota voidaan kuvailla organisaatioksi, joka herkeämättä oppii kokemuksistaan ja sopeutuu ympäristön muutoksiin, ja jossa sen jäsenet voivat jatkuvasti oppia, kokeilla ja jakaa uusia asioita ja ideoita.

1. Onko yksikkö tai organisaatio, jossa työskentelet mielestäsi hyvä esimerkki oppivasta organisaatiosta? -> *Miten se näkyy?*
2. Yksikössä, jossa työskentelet; kokeilevatko ihmiset mielellään uusia ideoita ja työskentelytapoja? -> *Miten tämä näkyy tiimissäsi tai muissa tiimeissä?*
3. Yksikössä, jossa työskentelet; kuinka kuvailisit oppimismahdollisuuksiasi työpäivän aikana? -> *Paljonko käytät aikaa muodolliseen oppimiseen, paljonko opit itsenäisesti? -> Kuinka opit työn ohessa?*
4. Onko sinulla mielestäsi riittävästi aikaa ja resursseja itsesi kehittämiseen? -> *minkälaista tukea saat a) organisaatioltasi/yksiköltäsi? b) työtovereiltasi/muilta esihenkilöiltä?*
5. Miten kuvailisit itseäsi johtajana (esihenkilönä tai tiimin vetäjänä)? -
> *miten se näkyy?*

Kollektiivinen oppiminen ja esihenkilöiden yhteistyö (25min)

Taustaa:

Montako ihmistä johtamassasi tiimissä on?

Kauanko olet ollut esihenkilönä tämänhetkisellettiimille?

Montako henkilöä teitä on esihenkilöiden muodostamassa tiimissä ja kauanko olet ollut tämän tiimin jäsenenä?

6. Ajatellen tiimiä, jota johdat; kuinka kuvailisit **tiiminne keskeistä tavoitetta**/tavoitteita? -> *Onko tämä sovittu yhteisesti tiimin kanssa? -> kuinka usein puhutte tiimin tavoitteista, onko se tehty näkyväksi?*
7. Mikä on mielestäsi johtamasi tiimin **ydinosaaminen**, keskeinen lisäarvo, jota se tuo yksikölle? -> *puhutteko tiimin kesken osaamisestanne tiimitasolla ja kuinka sitä voisi kehittää? -*
8. Käyttökö muiden esihenkilöiden kanssa keskustelua **tiimienne tavoitteista ja osaamisesta**? -> *vertaatteko tiimienne tavoitteita ja osaamista? Miten, missä, milloin käytte keskustelua?*

9. Esihenkilöiden muodostamassa tiimissänne, käyttekö keskustelua, **kuinka tuette tiiminne työntekijöitä** itsensä kehittämisessä, oppimisessa ja osaamisen kasvattamisessa? > *ovatko keskustelut osa säännöllisiä tapaamisia vai enemmän epämuodollisia tai spontaaneja?*

10. Ajatellen esihenkilöiden muodostamaa tiimiänne; mikä on **yhteinen, keskeinen tavoitteenne** myynnin **esihenkilöinä** ja tiimin vetäjinä? -> *keskusteletteko tästä esihenkilöiden kesken?*

11. Kuinka esihenkilötiiminne käytännössä tekee yhteistyötä keskenään, kuinka **tuette toisianne**? -> *Kuvaile tilanteita ja kanavia, jossa pääsääntöisesti kommunikointe ja olette yhteydessä > Tapahtuuko uusien asioiden oppiminen ryhmässä vai itsenäisesti? > Oppimistavasta riipumatta, reflektointe opittuja asioita yhdessä? > kuinka hyödytte toistenne vahvuuksista? > jaatteko aktiivisesti palautetta toisillenne, pyydätkö palautetta toisilta esihenkilöiltä?*

Tiedon ja osaamisen jakaminen (10min)

12. Kuinka teette **yhteistyötä** yksikkösi muiden **myyntitiimien** kanssa? -> *Kuinka jaatte tietoa osastojen ja tiimien välillä, kuinka hyödytte muiden osastojen osaamisesta?*

13. Mikä on mielestäsi keskeisin **toiminto tai kanava** tiedon ja osaamisen **jakamiselle**? -> *koetko sen toimivan hyvin ja tehokkaasti? > kun tarvitset tietoa tai haluat oppia jonkun asian, mitä teet? mistä haet tietoa? > kuinka paljon myynnin henkilökunnan osaaminen on mielestäsi hiljaisen tiedon varassa eli kokemuksen kautta hankittua, yksilön pään sisällä olevaa tietoa?*

14. Tiimin tai sen jäsenen oppiessa uutta, **kuinka tätä tietoa käytetään** ja hallinnoidaan? -> *reflektoidaanko ja keskustellaanko tiimissä uudesta tiedosta ja opituista asioista? > onko mahdollisuus soveltaa uutta tietoa käytäntöön? > Tiimin tai sen jäsenen oppiessa uutta, dokumentoidaanko yhdessä opitut tai työn ohessa opitut asiat? jaetaanko oppeja muille ja missä kanavissa?*