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SUCCESS REMOTELY: A CASE STUDY OF MESKULA OY

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Abstract			
<p>Digitalization has been a guiding force for change and development across multiple industries, organizations, and roles in the modern era. In the context of business studies, the varying effects of digitalization have been analysed, for example, from the perspectives of change management, digital transformation, strategy, organizational culture, and leadership. As the modern workforce relies on different technologies in increasing numbers, the relevance of effective leadership in the e-world is gaining momentum.</p> <p>Although leadership in the digital era, otherwise referred to as e-leadership, has been studied since the turn of the century, the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly made remote working practices drastically mundane, introducing virtual work to the everyday life for many. However, research suggests that there remains significant doubt both in managers beliefs in their own virtual management skills, as well as, in the capabilities of employees to work online.</p> <p>Research has proven that virtual working arrangements are hardly a sole upgrade to existing practices, but pose several challenges for effective communication, trust building, performance management, and ethics. However, companies aim to benefit from the other side of the coin in increasing numbers when scouting for the best talent across country borders, establishing faster response and decision-making processes, implementing around the clock services, saving on office space, and reducing emissions caused by commuting.</p> <p>Reaping the benefits of virtual working arrangements thus calls for effective management practices to overcome the challenges presented by the e-world. Academia has presented shared forms of leadership as a solution for tackling the downsides of virtual work when increased autonomy of employees results in reduced need for formal supervision. However, the ways to ensure successful implementation of such forms of leadership as well as the role of the formal leader remain scantily explored.</p> <p>This study aims to contribute to the academic discussion surrounding shared forms of leadership in the context of virtual teams by examining a company where shared leadership is a strategic tool to manage a fully virtual organization. The results of the study provide further support for shared leadership as a way to tackle the challenges emerging from virtual working arrangements, while additionally shedding light into the success factors for successfully implementing shared leadership. The results also pave way for understanding what exact behaviours should remain the responsibility of formal leadership.</p>			
Keywords e-leadership, e-leader, virtual teams, virtual organizations, remote work, collective leadership, shared leadership, digital culture			

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: The trajectory of digital transformation

Digitalization has been shaping the business realm with a firm hand already for nearly a century, affecting organizations and their operations almost invariably in all dimensions. Processes, tools, business strategies, products, and organizations as a whole have been in constant turmoil, adapting and keeping up with the development of technology (Lorenz, Rüssmann, Strack, Lueth & Bolle, 2015) and the pace seems to only be accelerating. This can also be seen in the EIBIS Corporate Digitalization Index (European Investment Bank 2020, 2022), which illustrates the degree of digital adoption in the European Union corporations by country. In 2019, the lowest index number in EU was slightly below 50 (Latvia), while in 2021 the lowest index number was well above 60 (Bulgaria). Similarly, the highest index number in 2019 was around 85, while in 2021 the highest index number reached a hundred (Finland).

The way in which technology is creating fundamental change in working practices has been identified across variety of disciplines such as medicine, engineering, and social sciences (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). In business literature, the notion of digitalization has been explored for example, in the context of change management and digital transformation (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney & Coglisier, 2010; Li, 2020), strategy (Mitroulis & Kitsios, 2019), organizational culture (Martinez-Caro, Cegarra-Navarro & Alfonso-Ruiz, 2020), and leadership (Cortellazzo, Bruni & Zampieri, 2019). It is undeniable that the modern workforce relies heavily on different technologies to carry out their tasks and “digital technology is rapidly becoming as infrastructural as electricity” (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016, p.350), making it rather evident that debating the relevance of digitalization in organizations is a moot point.

When talking about digitalization, the Covid-19 pandemic and remote working often steals the spotlight. The exceptional circumstances acted as an accelerating force for digital transformation in companies when transitioning to remote working practices became a condition for survival during a global pandemic. The abrupt change forced both employees and managers to face new challenges, such as combining the work and home life, managing virtual teams, and finding ways to carry out tasks digitally in

increasing extents. According to a survey by Harvard Business Review (Pryor, 2021), 86% of the interviewed business executives agreed that their company had accelerated their digital transformation during Covid-19. Out of those respondents 91% “intend to maintain that swifter speed,” indicating that the transition forced upon organizations as a lifeline in a crisis, is becoming the new norm shifting the trajectory and speed of digitalization in business.

While remote working and virtual leadership are not brand-new concepts, the accelerating speed of digitalization has ignited a wildfire of disruptive change in working practices that is fundamentally transforming organizational life to far-reaching extents. Organizations are starting to leverage the benefits of remote practices in increasing numbers, scouting for the best talent across country borders, luring in the best candidates with appealing and flexible working practices, providing around the clock customer service with “follow the sun” strategy, saving funds on office space and reducing environmental impacts of commuting.

However, as with any type of change the process is not always necessarily linear or without resistance. For example, whilst the two most digitalized processes during the pandemic were quite naturally remote working systems and team collaboration and communication (Pryor, 2021), some companies argue that remote work is resulting in lower productivity and have required their staff to return to office full-time. The topic spikes controversy and is inarguably very context or industry dependent while the post-pandemic market is still finding its way to the new norm. Academic research also agrees that the virtual environment is not solely an upgrade to existing practices but one that poses challenges for effective communication, trust building, motivation, ethics, and performance management.

The drawbacks of virtual practices raise a question; how to ensure successful outcomes and productivity in the era of virtual work? Research suggests that virtual teams, organizations, and environments present a fundamental change that calls for significantly different management and conceptualization (Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Lu, Shen & Williams, 2014). The setting has changed when others often have access to the same information as leaders and the ability to share it widely, putting leaders in a key role of managing relationships with diverse players. At the same time,

organizational hierarchies and boundaries are becoming foggy and fluid, transforming organizational roles, responsibilities, and structures. This change in the business environment is paving way for collective forms of leadership as well as new forms of organizational structure, forcing us to re-examine and evolve our conceptualizations of organizations and leaders (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019).

Reaping the benefits of digitalization and remote working practices therefore require better understanding of this new environment where our traditional practices and theorizing do not seem to apply without adjustment. This thesis aims to contribute to the academic debate surrounding e-leadership, virtual teams, and shared leadership by studying the other extreme, a fully digital organization where all work is done remotely full-time by workers with a freelance status. In the case of Meskula Oy, shared virtual leadership is adopted as a strategic tool to create successful business and individual outcomes, job satisfaction and growth in the virtual setting. By examining the manifestation of shared leadership behaviours and the meanings behind them, this study sheds light on which leadership behaviours are (and should or should not be) shared amongst virtual teams, as well as what is the role of the formal leader.

1.2 Methodology, goals, and research questions

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to study the emergence of collective leadership and the role of an e-leader in the virtual context through representative methods and tools described in chapter 4 of the thesis. A qualitative approach allows for a deeper analysis and interpretation of the meanings created in the human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.47), that constitute and guide organisational practices. To be able to draw conclusions and outline appropriate behavioural practices for virtual management from individual experiences, qualitative methodology is seen to best serve the purpose of this study.

Shared forms of leadership have been presented as a solution for the challenges posed by the virtual working environment. Literature speculates, that in the context of shared leadership the increased individual responsibility and self-management will lead to

decreased need for monitoring and supervision. As an emerging strain of academic research, the remaining ambiguity and uncertainty are apt to cause hesitance in systematically adopting the theory in practice. Empirical investigations confirm a widely shared insecurity about virtual leadership skills amongst managers (Parker, Knight & Keller, 2020), calling for more detailed research on best practices. The aim of this study is to contribute to our understanding of how leadership behaviours are shared in virtual teams, as well as what leadership tasks should remain the formal leader's responsibility.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to the successful implementation of shared leadership in the virtual setting?
2. What expectations team members have for the formal leader?

1.3 Limitations and structure of the thesis

To answer the outlined research questions a qualitative methodology is adopted. This approach can impose certain limitations for the wider generalization of the findings when data is obtained from a small sample in the context of a case study. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) also point out that behind qualitative research the personal biography of the researcher can influence the direction and interpretation of the study.

The case study focuses on a fully digital company, where all 14 members from sales roles to the CEO work remotely providing digital services. This extreme context also calls for consideration of applicability to hybrid working conditions or bigger companies.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the topic, justifying the research plan and outlines the research gap. Research questions are presented along with methodology and limitations of the study. The second chapter will familiarize the reader with the scholarship around e-leadership and virtual management. This chapter ties the research to its academic theoretical framework. In the third chapter the case study of Meskula Oy is presented followed by a chapter outlining the research design. The fifth chapter moves on to analyse findings from the research. Chapter six presents conclusions of these findings alongside suggestions for future research directions.

2 E-LEADERSHIP AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the modern market remote work, teams, and management are no longer solely a solution for multinational corporations, but a mean that is becoming trivial and challenging the traditional organizational setting. Remote working is creating fundamental change in organizational practices, underlining the importance of effective leadership in these new environments. Although in the post-pandemic world the topic has more momentum than ever, in leadership scholarly the topic origins back to the turn of the century. Avolio, Kahai and Dodge (2000) were one of the first to use the term *e-leadership* while reviewing previous studies to coin a justified definition for the term: “a social influence process mediated by Advanced Information Technology (AIT) to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and/or performance with individuals, groups and/or organizations.” (p.617). The authors described that leadership and technology have a reciprocal relationship where both notions influence each other, constantly transforming one another and the organizational structures they constitute. Indeed, it has been suggested that fundamental goals of leadership remain, but the manner of achieving them has shifted towards virtual and remote ways of leadership (DasGupta, 2011, p.29).

The early 2000s presented an initial spike in interest when academia started to discuss this new notion of e-leadership in increasing numbers. Studies explored e-leadership in relation to the rise of e-business and managing rapid change in the modern market (Walker, 2000; Kissler, 2001 as cited in DasGupta, 2011, pp.3-4), the effects e-leadership has on different actors involved and challenges the remote environment presents for management (Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Cascio, 2000), as well as the properties of virtual teams (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2008; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). The revolutionary potential of this new leadership paradigm was evident from early on: Zaccaro and Bader (2003) estimated that “e-leadership will be the routine rather than the exception in our thinking about what constitutes organizational leadership” (p.377).

Although e-leadership has rather far-reaching history in academic literature, there is a notable exponential growth in publications during the last decade. Cortellazzo, Bruni and Zampieri conducted a systematic literature review into publications surrounding

digitalization and leadership, noting that “while all peer-reviewed articles in our sample are from 2000 on, 60% were published after 2014” (2019, p.4). The authors suggest that the rise in publications can stem from the expectations that “technological evolution will be even more disruptive in the near future” (p.4) and call for more efforts to unify and bring clarity to an increasingly important body of research that has been conducted in a rather “fragmented and dispersed fashion across different disciplines” (p.1).

So, what do we know about e-leadership? Overall, research suggests that e-leadership and new virtual working environments require an entirely new approach. Kelley and Kelloway (2012) studied contextual factor’s and leadership behaviour’s effects on individual outcomes, concluding that the same model of leadership did not fit both virtual and proximal environments. As Lu, Shen, and Williams (2014) remind us, it cannot be assumed that “leadership skills identified in offline context should be transferred to virtual leadership without any adjustment.” (p.55). Leaders are faced with much more complex and diverse tasks when managing widely connected people and rapidly changing entities and situations, requiring multiple roles. Thus, e-leadership is not only an extension to traditional ways of leading, but a fundamental change in the leadership paradigm (Avolio & Kahai, 2003).

2.1 The battle of remote versus proximal: opportunities and challenges

The shift towards e-leadership changes the environment and ways in which leadership manifests, bringing on both new challenges and opportunities. Managing employees from different countries, time zones, cultures, who also speak different languages presents a much more complex task for a leader than in a traditional setting. Some reoccurring challenges in the e-leadership literature include **managing the distance between leader and follower, effective communication, trust, performance management, and ethics** (DasGupta, 2011; Cortellazzo, et al., 2019).

Antonakis and Atwater (2002) point out how the notion of leader distance (physical and social) is intertwined with several leadership theories, contributing to the

effectiveness of leadership. They analyse how the sum of physical (geographical distance) and social distance (such as status, power, or hierarchy) effects leadership outcomes and argue that “matching the degree of closeness that followers expect” (p.675) is detrimental. Thus, they conclude that “leader-follower distance can contribute to or detract from leader effectiveness” (p.697). As expectations of organizational practices evolve, leaders are forced sooner or later to face the obstacles of managing virtual teams and organizations to match expectations about flexible working arrangements.

When discussing e-leadership, the leader-follower physical distance is taken for granted as a starting point. Physical distance has been often linked to weaker leadership outcomes when communication becomes harder (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Humphreys, 2002; Howell, Bowen, Dorfman, Kerr & Podsakoff, 1990; Bass 1998). Drawing from communication theories, Puranova and Bono (2009) maintain how “face-to-face communication is superior to computer-mediated communication” (p.344), making a variety of leadership actions more difficult. Research supports this when several drawbacks to physical leader distance in electronic communication have been identified, such as missing non-verbal or context cues, misunderstandings and information loss and feelings of social isolation (Puranova & Bono 2009; Kelley & Kelloway, 2012). As communication plays a central role in a relational function such as leadership, difficulties in conveying meanings and understanding others can easily knock collaboration and performance off its course. Finding right motivational factors, understanding the type of support needed and the ways to inspire members can become an increasingly difficult task. Virtual teams indeed have been found to “take longer to make decisions, and team members are less able to make inferences about other members’ knowledge or anticipate their responses” (Kelley & Kelloway, 2012, p.438).

Along with difficulties in effective communication, establishing trust between team members and leaders is one of the most crucial challenges in virtual teams. As dense relationships and the ability to observe one another have often been seen as prerequisites for trust formation (Burt & Knez, 1996), the “behavioural invisibility” present in virtual settings can cause confusion and uncertainty about cheating, neglect of others’ interests, and mis-anticipation of others’ actions (Wilson Straus & McEvily, 2006, p.16; Sheppard & Sherman, 1998) Although research agrees that trust formation

virtually is harder than in person (Hill, Bartol, Tesluk & Langa, 2009; Wilson, Straus & McEvily, 2006; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014), Wilson et al. (2006) demonstrate empirically how virtual teams can achieve comparable levels of trust with face-to-face teams already within three meetings. While research suggests that an initial face-to-face meeting can be very impactful in trust formation especially for short-term projects, what remains scantily explored is the exact leadership techniques to promote trust creation virtually (Cortellazzo et al. 2019).

A more specific aspect to consider is the leader's trust towards members. A Harvard Business Review study shows that 40% of managers have low confidence in their own abilities to manage employees remotely, while "a similar proportion of managers had negative views about remote workers' performance" (Parker, et al. 2020, p.4). The study concludes that doubtful managers can resort to micromanagement, close monitoring, and to develop unreasonable expectations for employees to be always available, ultimately destroying employee wellbeing and success whether employees were performing at a desired level or not. The authors paint a hypothetical scenario to illustrate the development of a "negative spiral": when a manager turns to micromanagement and unethical expectations of availability as a response to seeing an employee struggle to perform at the same level virtually, the negative attitudes spill over to employee motivation and trust only disrupting productivity further.

If the virtual environment poses so many disadvantages, why are digital working practices becoming increasingly popular? Many organizations seek to benefit from the opportunities when flipping the coin. **Instant and fast communication one-on-one, reaching and assembling teams with the best talent across borders, better performance, 24/7 customer support with "follow the sun strategy"** (DasGupta, 2011, p.9), **faster response times and decision making, lower costs for example on office space as well as cutting emissions** present vast opportunities to gain advantages in the densely competitive and globalized market (DasGupta, 2011; Horner-Long & Schoenberg, 2002). Unarguably, digitalization is creating pressure for organizations not only to be able to respond to rapid change but to identify new opportunities in a turbulent environment to maintain competitiveness (Lynn Pulley & Sessa 2001).

2.2 Traditional leadership theories explored in the virtual context

At the core, it can be said that the e-leadership literature builds on advanced information technologies theory (Huber, 1990), which merely highlights the broadly accepted assumption that digital technologies affect organizations and their processes (Cortellazzo, et al. 2019). The transformational power of digitalization and the impact of technology is self-evident, which in the e-leadership scholarly manifests as a lack of explicit references to “the extant theoretical frameworks describing the impact of digital transformation on leadership” (Cortellazzo, et al. 2019, p.4). However, when it comes to different theoretical frameworks of leadership, several viewpoints have been adopted.

Analysing characteristics of e-leaders is amongst the most explored aspects of e-leadership. While according to universal (trait) theories certain inherent and innate characteristics set leaders apart (Cowley, 1931; Lord, Varder & Alliger, 1986), contingency (situational) theories stress that adopting one’s leadership behaviours and style to correspond to the situation is detrimental for effective leadership (Kerr, Schriesheim, Murphy & Stogdill, 1974; Donaldson, 2001). Studies exploring e-leaders’ behaviours and characteristics do not clearly support one or the other theory, but rather underline the characteristics that separate e-leaders from traditional leaders (Cortellazzo, et al. 2019, p.5). Adaptive structure theory (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994) adds a layer to this discussion by suggesting that technology and leadership enjoy a requisite relationship where both cause the other to change and evolve. Taken together the theoretical perspectives support the argument that e-leadership differs significantly from traditional leadership conceptualizations, requires adaptation, flexibility, and deeper analysis of causal relationships.

When expanding the lens from e-leader characteristics to a behavioural perspective examining the leader’s relationships and exchange with followers, main theories include transformational and transactional leadership, leader-member exchange theory and shared forms of leadership. Studies examining the interplay of transformational and transactional leadership theories (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass 1999) focus on either the inspirational ways in which leaders motivate others to perform above expectations, or how the leader-follower relationship is seen as an exchange. In a

traditional face-to-face setting research has acknowledged that transformational leadership reaches better results for example in regards of cohesiveness, effectiveness, and performance (Jung & Sosik, 2002; Howell, Neufeld, and Avolio, 2005; Greimel, Kanbach & Chelary, 2023). Similarly, Ruggieri found transformational leadership to be perceived as more satisfying than transactional in the virtual setting (2009). Several other studies echo these observations, confirming the positive effects of transformational leadership to apply also in the virtual environment (Rafique, Hou, Chudhery, Waheed, Zia & Chan, 2022; Antonakis & House, 2013; Bagga, Gera & Haque, 2022). However, the communication medium used does not seem to be the influential factor in the relationship between leadership styles and outcomes (Hambley, O'Neil & Kline, 2007).

The leader-member exchange theory moves on from the assumption that one size fits all and suggest that “the nature and quality of the relationship between leaders and their team members” predicts outcomes (Cortellazzo, et al. 2019, p.7). Drawing from leader-member exchange theory, Jawadi, Daassi & Favier (2013) suggest that in the virtual context open system roles, roles of rational pursuit of goals and human relation roles positively affect leader-member exchanges while internal process roles such as coordination and monitoring “are not key elements for relationship-building” (p.206).

A common source for the drastic changes in management seems to stem from the “democratization of informational power” (Cortellazzo, et al. 2019, p.8), as information is easily available and distributed by a growing number of players. As power dynamics and decision-making power becomes more distributed, shared forms of leadership have been suspected to gain momentum in the context of e-leadership and virtual teams. Similarly, a network perspective has been suggested to better describe the widely interconnected digital era.

2.3 Virtual teams: best practices

E-leadership most often manifests in the context of leading virtual teams that are dispersed geographically. Hambley et al. define virtual teams as “interdependent groups of individuals that work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with communication links that are heavily dependent upon advanced information technologies” (2007, p. 1). Academia has studied virtual teams from several viewpoints, such as communication, benefits and challenges, structure, trust, the varying degree of virtuality, and ethics (DasGupta 2011).

Virtual teams are becoming increasingly popular in the digital era, reducing costs and time spent on travelling as well as creating the ability for organizations to respond quickly in the constantly changing environment (Bergiel, Bergiel & Balsmeier, 2008). When country borders are no longer a boundary condition, virtual teams can achieve higher levels of productivity and effectiveness when the best talent can be reached easily (Jawadi et al., 2013). However, as opportunities can't be seized without tackling the challenges the virtual environment presents, virtual team leaders need to be able to navigate communication problems, creating cohesion, different cultural backgrounds and working across time zones (Cortellazzo et al., 2019, p.14).

Scholars agree that challenges in communication pose one of the biggest managerial challenges in e-leadership (Jawadi et al., 2013). In the virtual setting leaders can't necessarily rely on expressions or non-verbal clues and the risk of misunderstandings or information loss increases. Frequent communication is proven to improve job satisfaction, trust, and performance of virtual team members (Hart & McLeod, 2002; McLarnon, O'Neill, Taras, Law, Donia & Steel, 2019), underlining the importance of navigating communicational challenges. Choosing the right communication channels and frequency, preventing misunderstandings, and supporting effective decision making are key tasks for an e-leader.

Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen (2007) studied effective virtual team leaders to outline best leadership practices for e-leaders. The authors argue, that since “goodwill is hard to observe virtually,” trust is based on actions that need to be “as explicit as possible for others to see” (p.61). The authors maintain that regular meetings among virtual

teams were the “lifeblood of the team, even when tasks were distributed among all team members” (p.64). To optimize cohesion and productivity, the e-leader must structure these meetings and manage the virtual “work-cycle.”

Virtual teams often consist of a diverse group of individuals with varying “experiences, functions, organizations, decision making styles, and interests” (Malhotra et al., 2007, p.63). The authors argue that a team’s innovation capabilities are directly affected by how well the forementioned diversity is “understood, appreciated, and leveraged” (p.63). The way to achieve this is simply to make sure team members know each other better. The study noted that collaboration became more efficient once co-workers became more familiar with each other’s backgrounds and expertise.

Whilst virtual workers can’t be observed the same way as in a face-to-face setting, e-leaders have access to certain data and records to determine levels of participation. Malhotra et al. (2007) approach monitoring digital activities as a tool to outline the needs for further support. Coaching and training are presented as a way to encourage more frequent use of “electronic communication and collaboration resources” (p.66). However, the digital transformation raises new ethical questions e-leaders must consider. Close monitoring of employees can easily cross a line over to unreasonable examination of digital footprints or sensitive data, “inflict information overload” or “further blur the lines between one’s work and personal life” (Cortellazzo et al. 2019, p.2; Kidwell & Sprague, 2009). Whilst ethical concerns are being addressed slowly through legislation such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the responsibility setting ethical norms beyond meeting pure legal requirements still rests on the shoulders of the e-leader.

2.4 Emergence of shared forms of leadership

The digital era can be described by dense interconnectivity, wider information accessibility and rapid change. Decentralization of power and responsibility allows organizations to create the flexibility needed to thrive amid constant change (Pearce &

Cogner, 2003, p.123) Organizational and hierarchical boundaries are becoming more fluid when collaboration is becoming easier to facilitate and single employees more responsible for organizing and managing their own work in the virtual environment. Consequently, collective, or shared approaches to leadership (Pearce, 2004; Ensley, Hmieleski & Pearce 2006; Pearce, Manz & Sims, 2009) are expected to gain foothold in the virtual setting (Cortellazzo, et al., 2019). The theory identifies a team as a potential source of leadership, where actions that “guide, structure, or facilitate the group may be performed by more than one individual, and different individuals may perform the same leadership behaviours at different times” (Carte, Chidambaram & Becker, 2006, p. 325). When leadership is seen to manifest in “living systems of relationships,” the notion can be conceptualized as a relational process rather than something performed solely by a heroic leader (Pearce & Cogner, 2003, p.21).

Shared leadership theory challenges the individual level perspective of traditional leadership theories by calling out the narrow focus on heroic leaders and neglecting the effects of “informal leadership or larger situational factors” (Pearce & Cogner, 2003, p.22). Research has decisively shown how shared, distributed, and self-leadership methods can achieve significant levels of effectiveness and performance in the context of virtual work (Carte, Chidambaram & Becker, 2006; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Houghton, Pearce, Manz, Courtright & Stewart, 2015; Hoegl & Muethel, 2016; Mayer, Sivatheerthan, Mütze-Niewöhner & Nitsch, 2022). As virtual forms of working are becoming more mundane, academia has suggested facilitating forms of shared leadership and self-leadership virtually as a possible answer to the management challenges presented by the e-world.

Although responsibility is distributed in shared forms of leadership, this doesn't mean a formal leader of the team can't be identified. Different forms of shared leadership emerge depending on the approach a team adopts. Responsibility can be divided equally, or members a team can take on and step back from leadership behaviours dynamically. However, the phenomenon becomes informal in situations where shared leadership emerges due to lack of formal leadership. The question of who is leading naturally is one of the most studied aspects of shared leadership in virtual teams. (Mayer et al., 2022).

Whilst the different forms of shared leadership are acknowledged, the exact role and behaviours of the formal leader remain unexplored. In the perspective of leadership behaviour theory, leadership behaviours are categorized either as task-orientated, such as task clarification and planning, supervision and problem-solving or relations-orientated, such as support, development, opportunities, and recognition (Yukl, 2013). In the traditional face-to-face context Sweeney (2022) show how both type of leadership behaviours can be shared. In relation to performance, Han, Yoon, Choi and Hong (2021) show negative associations between shared task-orientated behaviours and performance, as well as positive ones between relations-orientated behaviours and performance. However, Mayer et al. (2022) present total opposite findings in the virtual context where “the influence of shared task-orientated leadership behaviours was found to be positive and the influence of shared relations-orientated leadership behaviours negative (p.102). As Han et al. (2021) focus on team level outcomes whereas Mayer et al. (2022) adopt an individual perspective, contradictories are speculated to possibly stem from differences in virtual or face-to-face environment, team or individual perspectives or cultural factors. Taken together further research on behavioural aspects of shared leadership is required to “get more insights on which exact leadership behaviours are typically shared in virtual settings and which should continue to be adopted by the leader” (p. 91).

Mayer et al. (2022) also point out that “virtual teams often work on complex cognitively demanding tasks that require a high level of self-management” (p.94). Self-leadership or management describes how individuals can successfully and systematically “lead themselves to higher levels of performance and effectiveness” (Pearce & Cogner, 2003, p.124). Strongly connected to empowerment (Anderson & Prussia, 1997; Manz, 1992) self-leadership can indeed become the solution for e-leaders struggling with effective communication, trust creation, motivation, and performance management in the virtual setting. It has been argued that higher autonomy and self-management can increase the feeling of individual responsibility and accountability, further diminishing the “need for control-seeking behaviours previously exerted by leaders” (Cortellazzo et al. 2019, p.11).

Overall, it is safe to say that shared leadership is enjoying a significant amount of academic attention and is gaining popularity especially in the context of e-leadership.

Although the approach is portrayed as a solution to overcoming obstacles of the virtual environment, we shouldn't assume the approach to be beneficial under any conditions (Pearce & Cogner, 2003). Nordbäck and Espinosa show how shared leadership can “actually lead to detrimental effects in terms of lower team effectiveness” (2019, p.321) if uncoordinated. The authors investigate the ways in which shared leadership is managed in global virtual teams, concluding that successful application of shared leadership requires both implicit and behavioural coordination. Implicit cooperation addresses joint understandings about leadership responsibilities, that can be highly important in teams with cultural diversity and varying leadership expectations. Respectively behavioural coordination tackles the “explicit actions aimed at coordinating the leadership activities taking place in the team” (p. 321).

Although there is encouraging evidence towards shared leadership approaches in the virtual environment, some authors argue it's not utilized to its full potential (Hoegl & Muethel, 2016). Considering contradictory academic findings as well as recordings of limited virtual leadership skills (Parker et al. 2020), the topic invites more detailed research on the topic to outline best practices.

2.5 Skills of an e-leader

As digitalization transforms the environments in which leadership manifests, research has taken interest in the skills required from e-leaders to successfully navigate in the virtual setting (Horner-Long & Schoenberg, 2002). Studies exploring the differences between e-leaders and traditional leaders outline several key skills needed from leaders in the virtual environment: **communicating through digital media, high speed decision making, managing connectivity, managing disruptive change, digital skills as well as developing one's leadership skills.** (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

As virtual work introduces both leaders and followers to a wide set of new digital tools and communication channels, the leader is tasked to organize effective

communication. Research has pointed out that choosing the right communication tools is a crucial matter in conveying messages effectively as well as managing the relationship of autonomy and isolation of followers (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). In addition to structural organization of communication, e-leaders must face the restricting effect of virtuality on communication clarity and effectiveness. Finding ways to inspire and motivate followers virtually is an important skill for an e-leader.

In addition to expanding communication channels and modes, in the widely connected digital environment e-leaders are forced to speed up their decision making (Horner-Long and Schoenberg, 2002). Lynn Pulley and Sessa (2001) argue that e-leaders must make decisions even in situations where all the necessary information isn't available nor is there time to analyse the situation appropriately. At the same time information has become increasingly available within highly connected networks, where followers can easily voice their opinions to a variety of audiences. The shift in the social environment calls for tolerating ambiguity (Horner-Long & Schoenberg, 2002).

The digitalization of business is often viewed from a change management perspective, requiring e-leaders to successfully manage disruptive change. Initially academic discussion surrounded the ways in which digital transformation was led within companies, underlining the need to develop strategy and skills to successfully implement and support employees with digital change (Cortellazzo et al., (2019); Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney & Coglisier, 2010). The continuous development of technology and digitalization have permanently shifted the setting for leadership, requiring new levels of adaptability, continuous evaluation, and development as well as the ability to inspire followers to keep up with the changing environment. The e-leader needs to be capable of not only reacting to change but develop a sense of initiating it to strive after opportunities.

The growing interest on e-leadership in academic research mirrors the need for developing one's leadership skills to match the modern needs. E-leaders are required to "be both people-orientated and technically minded" (Cortellazzo et al., 2019, p. 13), mastering social aspects of leadership while being experts of the technologies they utilize. Boe and Torrgersen (2018) call for unifying technical and change management skills in leadership training to create leadership skills that endure ambiguous situations.

Considering how shared forms of leadership are gaining momentum, skills of self-management as well as coordinating teams adopting shared leadership behaviours gains importance. Although responsibilities are distributed, several tasks for the formal leader remain. When followers become more responsible for their own work, supporting the development of needed self-management skills is required. Choosing the right team members in regards of skills and cohesion, outlining both implicit and behavioural coordination needs, outlining team role and boundaries and implementing the best situated form of shared leadership require the attention of the formal leader. Pearce and Cogner (2003) outline the formal leader's responsibility as "facilitating and encouraging the sharing of leadership roles and behaviours among team members" (p.125).

3 THE CASE OF MESKULA OY

Meskula Oy is a Finnish marketing agency founded in 2020. The company supports its clients in long-term personal and business growth by providing digital lead generation services and business coaching for realtors operating in the US and Canada. Meskula Oy is the market leader in online value-first listing acquisition for licensed real estate agents who are looking to scale their business. In 2022 their turnover reached 792 000 euros with a profit of 164 000 euros with a growth rate of 682% compared to 2021 (Kauppalehti, 2022). Meskula's clients include self-employed realtors and teams working for real estate agencies. The average customer retention at Meskula is 9 months.

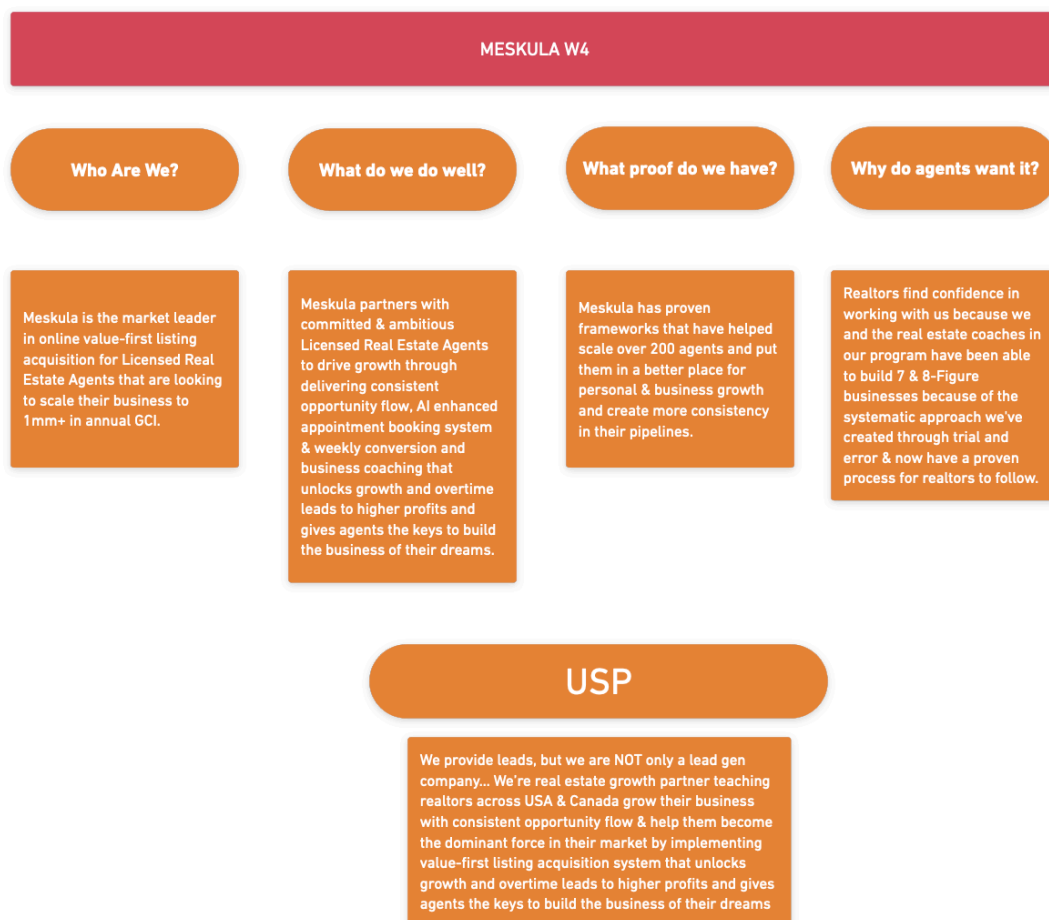


Table 1. Meskula's four Ws and unique selling point

The company’s vision revolves around supporting clients’ growth both personally and professionally. Whilst lead generation through an appointment booking system is the company’s core service, the vision aims to paint a picture of a wider impact and partnership between Meskula and its clients. Transformative support is delivered through coaching and opportunity creation, where Meskula strives to be an active force in pushing clients through turbulent business environments towards long-term and consistent growth for clients’ own businesses. Meskula’s strategy includes holding “the queen bee role,” which illustrates the importance of delivering on their value promise (See Table 2). Rather than merely providing a tool that might get clients where they want to be, the queen bee role underlines the responsibility Meskula takes over making the tool work for each client in each situation and delivering the value they desire. Meskula has ambitious growth targets and aims to be the number one sought after real estate growth partner in their market by 2026 with 10 million annual revenue and 15-20% net profit (See Table 3).

MESKULA QBR (QUEEN BEE ROLE)

GENERATING OPPORTUNITIES

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- Queen bee role: Queen bee’s role in the hive is producing eggs... to accomplish their big promise: survival. If queen bee dies or can’t produce enough eggs (aka fulfill the role), they’ll find a new queen bee to serve this vital role. This does not mean that everyone’s main role is to produce eggs BUT to protect this vital role of egg production so that they’re able to survive (big promise). The tough truth: Queen bee doesn’t matter BUT the role (activity) she does matters!
- To accomplish our big promise “to put each human we touch in a better place for personal & professional growth allowing them to have more control over their finances & time while being able to do the things they’ve always dreamed of” and being able to give agents the keys to building the business of their dreams... we need to always protect opportunity generation.
- This does not mean leads are the main thing that matters but generating opportunities IS. Us as company need to constantly be generating opportunities for & with our clients, whether it’s thru online lead generation, coaching them on how to find opportunities even when they can’t see the opportunities or through outbound activities... the how or who does not matter but the activity of opportunity generation matters. Without opportunities, generated by us, our clients or with our clients... we can’t accomplish our big promise.
- Simply put:
 - We must ALWAYS protect our QBR and if our main opportunity generation channel, online lead generation, dies or slows down, we MUST find way to generate opportunities to accomplish our big promise while we’re getting the main channel running smoothly.

Table 2. The Queen Bee Role

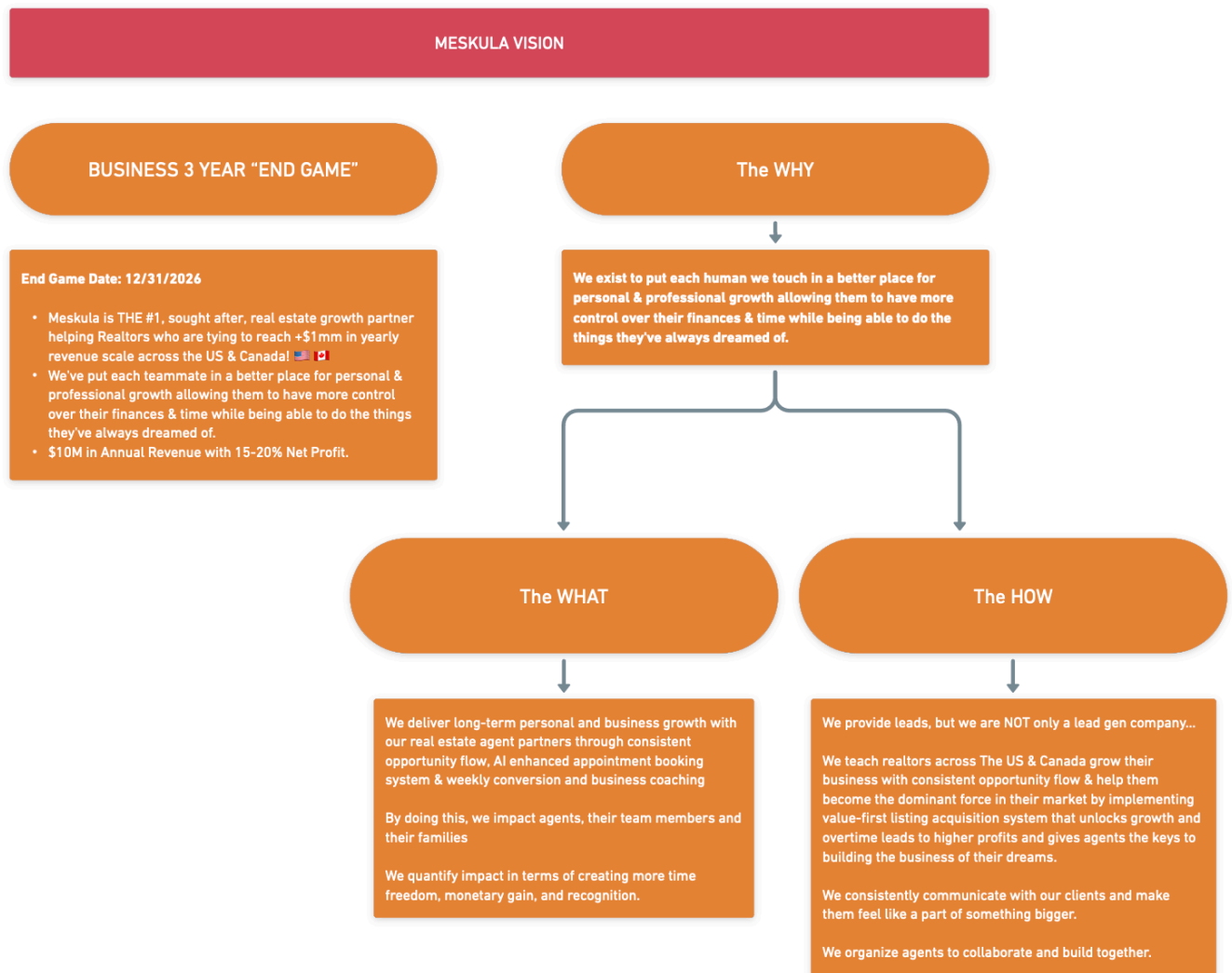


Table 3. Meskula's vision

Meskula Oy's organizational chart can be described as rather unique. The captain of the ship, founder and CEO handles the roles of COO, CFO, CMO and Head of Sales. Besides the CEO, the company has zero employees on payroll but across operations and sales there are 13 people working on a self-employment status to keep the company running (See Table 4). For the sake of clarity, these self-employed workers will be further referred to as "employees." 11 out of the 13 employees work full-time whilst one member of the sales team and the video editor work on part-time basis. All employees work 100% remotely from 7 different countries. As the company doesn't require the employees to work from any specific location, individual employees might sometimes also work "on the road" from different countries.

Country	Number of employees
Canada	3
Mexico	3
United States	2
Philippines	2
North Macedonia	1
Australia	1
Pakistan	1
Finland	1 (CEO, owner)

Table 4. Meskula Oy employee locations.

Across the organization, four main functions can be identified. The CEO/ founder is responsible for the executive level tasks, while employees are involved in operations, sales, and marketing (See Table 5). In delivery, two different teams work in client success and media buying supervised by the operations manager. The CEO acts as the manager for the sales and marketing teams. In addition to their core service, Meskula Oy facilitates coaching amongst clients. Thus, the coaching team consists of 4 partner clients that participate in mentoring other clients.

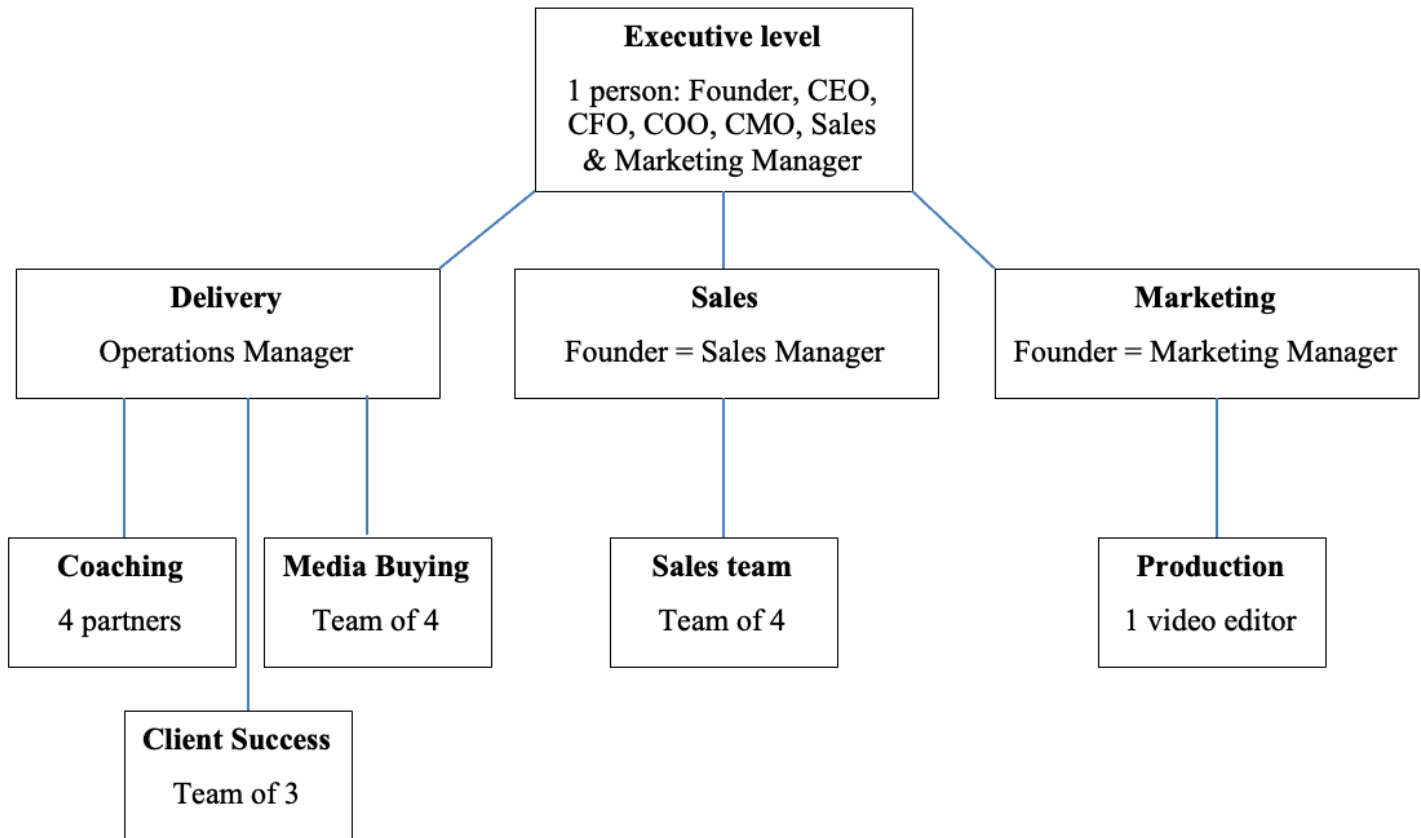


Table 5. Meskula Oy Organizational Chart

This type of self-employed / freelance based organizational structure can be said to spike controversial opinions when it comes to its effectiveness and benefits in regards of organizational culture. As digitalization advances and we are moving more and more towards virtual teams and organizations, the pressing matter of creating strong digital culture gains importance. The aim of Meskula Oy is to uphold a strong digital culture where the self-employment of “employees” provides certain organizational benefits for the company and moves responsibility more to the individual. Cohesion is still achieved through providing employees with freedom and flexibility through the possibilities to organize their own work, consistent “traditional-like” given mission and framework for conducting business and systematic attempts at creating joint culture.

Shared forms of leadership are seen as the optimal state on the executive level. The company’s values (See Table 6) highlight strong individual ownership and responsibility over one’s own role as well as taking initiative to provide value for all parties involved with a growth attitude. The company values provide a framework for employees to utilize in their own decision making.

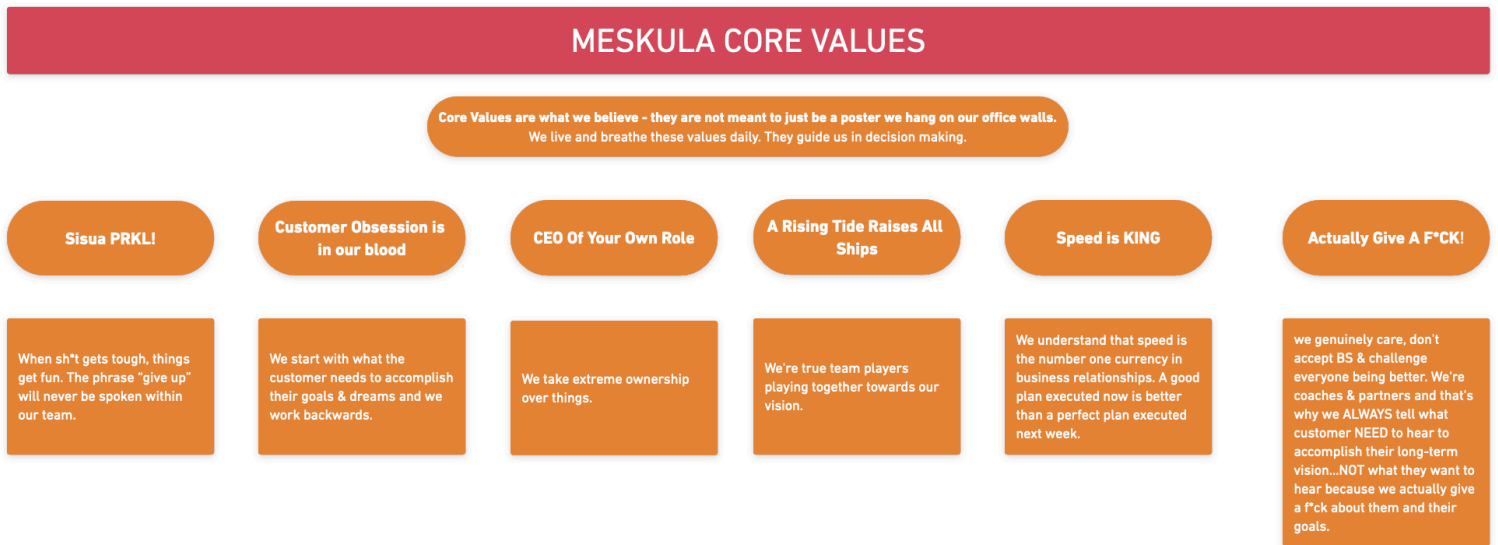


Table 6. Meskula Oy’s core values.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative approach to study the emergence of shared leadership in virtual teams in the form of a case study. Since the research focuses on individual experiences and meanings behind them to describe reasoning and expectations towards virtual shared forms of leadership, a qualitative approach is justified. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the empirical method for data collection, while data analysis was conducted by abductively coding for relevant themes before interpretation by the researcher. This chapter presents in detail the methods of data collection, analysis and explains the manner in which the research was conducted.

4.1 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews with Meskula Oy owner and employees. The selected approach follows the mainstream of case studies by choosing interviews as the data collection method (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility and discovery of relevant themes in the moment, which was seen to best serve the purpose of the research. Additionally, predefined questions guide the interviews towards relevant matters from a theoretical point of view, making sure that necessary aspects are addressed.

Altogether 8 one-to-one interviews were conducted. All the interviews were held remotely in English and lasted for about 40 minutes to one hour. All the interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed for further analysis. The participants included three members of the sales team, one media buyer, two members of the client success team, the operations manager, and the CEO. The age of participants varied from 21 to 54 and the median age was 27. Seven out of the eight participants were male and only one female. Nationalities represented included Finland, North-Macedonia, Mexico, Canada, and the United States (Table 7).

Participant	Role	Age	Gender	Country of residence/ most frequent location
Participant 1	CEO, owner	26	Male	Finland
Participant 2	Operations Manager	31	Male	North-Macedonia
Participant 3	Client Success Manager	27	Female	Mexico
Participant 4	Client Success Manager	23	Male	Mexico
Participant 5	Media Buyer	21	Male	Canada
Participant 6	Sales Consultant	31	Male	Canada / Colombia
Participant 7	Sales Development Representative	27	Male	United States
Participant 8	Closer	54	Male	Canada

Table 7. Interviewee demographics.

Interviews were guided with a set of predefined questions which aimed to address the individual attitudes towards shared leadership behaviours at Meskula Oy as well as opinions about the effects and causes of individual leadership responsibility. Participants were first asked to freely describe their perceptions about their job and virtual work, both from a positive and negative perspectives. To further guide the discussion towards meaningful aspects from a theoretical point of view, participants were asked to describe leadership behaviours and different processes at Meskula Oy, the leadership and decision-making processes they take part in as well as their perceptions about culture, motivation and personal preferences. Discussions provided relevant insights into self-leadership, shared tasks as well as the role of the formal leader.

Additionally, the interview with the formal leader (CEO) included approaching the topic from a strategic point of view to understand the conscious efforts and reasoning behind formal leadership at Meskula Oy.

4.2 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from interviews was automatically transcribed for further analysis. To be able to interpret the data and achieve meaningful conclusions, the narrative interviews needed to be analysed systematically. Utilizing the recordings, transcripts and interviewer notes, primary research data was derived from the overall data set. Outlining primary data allowed for broadly identifying the parts of data that would be beneficial for the research interest and questions. The primary data set thus included comments and remarks considered relevant and valuable for the aim of the research and irrelevant data was disregarded. However, some secondary data which was not alone seen as relevant for the research questions was still included to contextualize the analysis and support the other remarks.

The primary data set was then further analysed systematically in detail by coding for relevant themes abductively. Abductive approach integrates both theory testing deductive and theory building inductive methods of analysis. Some themes were

chosen from a theoretical perspective, and relevant arguments, comments and remarks were chosen to be included with the intention of testing a specific aspect of theory. At the same time, some themes emerged inductively from the transcripts as reoccurring patterns and were identified as relevant in a more bottom-up process. Abductive reasoning was seen to provide the best premises for interpretation, when important theoretical aspects were underlined but at the same time the reasoning remained open for any neglected themes. Initial coding resulted in 270 individual pieces of data divided under 19 codes (See Table 8).

Initial code	Examples of individual pieces of data
Is leadership shared & how	<p>“At our best, leadership is shared”</p> <p>“I ask my team not to ask me”</p>
Why is leadership shared	<p>“Because of the size, age, and maturity”</p> <p>“I don’t think you can’t have that”</p>
Benefits of shared leadership	<p>“Freedom to grow”</p> <p>“People are more satisfied when they have a say”</p>
Role of a formal leader	<p>“You have to give chances for people to manage their own role”</p> <p>“They need somebody to listen to them just like they’re listening to plans”</p>
Mission to follow	<p>“I love being a part of a company that he (CEO) has created. It helps you do great things”</p>

Obstacles for shared leadership	“People are feeling pressure because they don’t want to let you (the formal leader) down.”
Promoters for shared leadership	“Yeah he (leader) trusts us and he's okay with f*** ups when we have a channel going on so that's something that I really appreciate and that only means there's room to grow”
Task vs. relations orientated leadership behaviors	“I give tasks maybe twice a week. People come to me more to ask if everything they did was okay”
Leader characteristics	“People somehow want the hype virtually from a sort of a cult figure who has a big vision”
Positive sides to virtual working	“Working wherever you want to” “Number one is flexibility definitely”
Challenges in virtual working	“We’re doing all these cool things, but we never really get to see each other”

<p>Freelance vs. employee identity</p>	<p>“I always saw myself as an employee”</p> <p>“Employee. Maybe because it’s my main source of income”</p>
<p>Promoters for unity & employee feeling</p>	<p>“When I started seeing how the company benefits from your inputs even as an appointment setter, that’s when I started feeling more connected towards it”</p>
<p>Promoters for job satisfaction</p>	<p>“You get constantly challenged. You must grow as a person”</p> <p>“Seeing behind the scenes”</p>
<p>Personality characteristics</p>	<p>“I enjoy the challenge and pressure but I don’t like being told what to do”</p> <p>“Challenges, I enjoy providing myself that”</p>
<p>Meaning of values</p>	<p>“It’s a great place where the values of the company I believe live”</p>

Self-management	“I think working remotely any role you’re in, it’s going to require a lot more responsibility than in person”
Genuine care	“He cares about us in our lives, he always asks me about how things are outside of work”
Culture creation	<p>“It feels like a family at Meskula for sure, with all the different group chats”</p> <p>“having that culture where everybody knows every part/role of the business is important for the goal”</p>

Table 8. Initial codes and examples.

In later analysis the coded categories were compared, combined, divided, and interpreted (Schreier 2013, p.113) to achieve a more theoretically meaningful cohesion in regards of codes. None of the codes were seen as irrelevant for further analysis, and all primary data was included moving forward. However, several codes were reorganized, and one higher-level category was added to include the contextual factors. The process allowed for more broad categories to form with subcategories presenting interrelations. The further analysis resulted in 7 categories and 13 subcategories (See Table 9).

1. *Is leadership shared & how?*
 - a. *Personality characteristic*
 - b. *Self-management*
2. *Why is leadership shared?*
 - a. *Benefits of shared leadership*
3. *Obstacles for shared leadership*
4. *Promoters for shared leadership*
5. *Role of a formal leader*
 - a. *Task vs. relations orientated leadership behaviours*
 - b. *Mission to follow*
 - c. *Leader characteristics*
6. *Culture creation*
 - a. *Freelance vs. employee identity*
 - b. *Promoters for unity & employee feeling*
 - c. *Meaning of values*
 - d. *Genuine care*
 - e. *Promoters for job satisfaction*
7. *Context*
 - a. *Positive sides to virtual working*
 - b. *Challenges in virtual working*

Table 9. Final Coding with Categories and Sub-Categories

5 FINDINGS

This chapter discusses emergent findings of the study that are synthesized, interpreted, and initially tied to academic theory by the researcher. The findings underline a strong, strategic choice of shared leadership in support of organizational and individual outcomes in a remote setting at Meskula Oy. The findings generally confirm the nature, opportunities, and challenges of the virtual setting, and demonstrate how shared virtual leadership behaviours have been implemented in a successful way.

5.1 Context: perceptions of virtual work

It became evident that general perceptions surrounding virtual work at Meskula Oy were in alignment with academic discussion. Flexibility, convenience, and geographical freedom were seen as valuable upsides to virtual work from the employee's perspective. Several of the employee's enjoyed being able to travel and have more freedom when their work doesn't make them location bound. This upside was seen so valuable, that several participants noted that if they weren't working at Meskula Oy, they would be working virtually for someone else. Results thus indicate that geographical freedom is not only a competitive advantage for recruiters but becoming a prerequisite when choosing employers in the digital era.

“I feel that 2023 and the time we’re living in it (remote working) is just more normal than anything”.

“That’s two hours a day you are missing just from commuting” (when working at an office)

At the same time, participants agreed with many of the common downsides to virtual working such as social isolation, and communication challenges. As many people at Meskula Oy come from different cultures, speak different languages and work on different time zones, communication, and collaboration become harder in some ways.

“We're all in different time zones pretty much, sometimes, you have to wait an extra date, an extra day to have your task done, or your question answered”.

“Specially building out the culture in a remote team.

If you would have picked any other topic apart from what you're doing, would have probably been creating culture in a remote team because that's really hard.”

“Sometimes you feel like you're on an island by yourself.”

“I genuinely miss that face-to-face human interaction throughout the week.”

Some concerns also pointed out the blurred lines between working and free time in the remote setting. One participant described a situation where another employee attended a work meeting whilst dealing with a family emergency at the hospital. It was speculated that pressure to attend work meetings even in situations of “force major” were rising from cultural factors rather than pressure created at the company. At the same time, another participant noted that since the communication technology is “always on” it is sometimes hard to detach yourself from the work.

Noteworthy is, that regardless of admittable challenges and downsides, all participants described the situation to be working for them. Challenges were seen as “overcomable” and worth navigating to enjoy the benefits that virtual working offers. In some ways, certain challenges were also described as positive or enjoyable.

“It's weird at the beginning, you're used to speaking your own language and when you speak English, you got to adapt another way. And I love when somebody starts explaining and they give you the whole background, they're in the Philippines somewhere and they're like ‘Hey guys we got this thing going on here, right?’”

“It challenges you to become adaptable and curious.”

“I guess the best thing and the worst thing is the same because it's remote, I do like it, I do love it. It's more of a good thing, I'd say than a bad thing.”

“Definite challenges when you’re dealing in different time zones. Ultimately if you got people that are interested in working with you, they’re going to wait for you to get those answers.”

5.2 Shared leadership as a strategic choice

The interview with the CEO of Meskula Oy revealed a conscious and strategic choice to utilize shared forms of leadership throughout the company. To the question “is leadership shared at your company” the CEO replies “when we are at our best, it is” while pointing out that one of their core values is being the CEO your own role. The fully digital company strives to close the gap between the degree of investment, effort and individual responsibility over the company’s success felt by the founder/CEO and employees by aiming to successfully adopt and coordinate shared forms of leadership. The approach is seen as a mutually beneficial when the company utilizes everyone’s knowledge and skills for solutions, problem solving and innovation, and employees have better job satisfaction when they see possibilities for self-development, enjoy a sense of freedom and decision-making power (See Table 10).

Organizational	More sources of ideas for solutions, problem solving and innovation. Increased accountability on an individual level reduces need for supervision.
Individual	Possibilities for self-development, sense of freedom and decision-making power for employees leads to better job satisfaction

Table 10. Benefits of Shared Leadership as a Strategic Choice.

The shared leadership approach is specifically seen as a suitable management practice in the virtual setting.

“We are remote workers and that gives him (CEO) less control because it's not an in-person setting, where we show up at an office and he can put it right in front of our face Hey, here's what you have to do and whatnot. We log into a computer; we see each other for an hour a day and it's about it.”

Whilst requiring a lot of individual responsibility from employees in regard to their own role, this is seen to be compensated by the freedom that shared leadership allows. As long as certain requirements and expectations are met in their role, employees have the freedom to organize their work in the way they best see fit. This creates a strong sense of freedom and decision-making power appreciated by employees that contributes to their job satisfaction and motivation.

“I have the freedom; I know what I need to take care of and need to make sure that I know that what I need to take care of but I have the freedom to do it on my own time and whenever”

At the same time the CEO acknowledges that in their situation shared leadership doesn't always necessarily play out in a beneficial way or isn't implemented successfully in every situation. However, when coordinated well it is seen as the optimal state they strive for. The CEO sees shared leadership and increased individual responsibility as the most optimal way to manage the virtual setting, where communication and supervision are hard. In this context, the importance of the right personality fit was highly underlined. Personalities that enjoy responsibility, freedom, show initiative and proactiveness were considered a better fit to the organization, strategy, and management practices by the CEO.

5.3 Shared virtual leadership manifesting in practice at Meskula Oy

All the participants had similar views for interpreting the company value of being the CEO of your own role; you have personal responsibility to not only to make sure that all aspects of your role are handled as perfectly as possible on a daily basis but also mapping out your own goals and thinking for yourself what are the right things you should be doing. When it came down to the participants' role, they were expected to be able to navigate problems, make decisions, and lead the teamwork together based on company mission and values without needing to turn to formal leadership.

“Before asking a question, you have to double check yourself not to waste anyone’s time.”

“I mean there are some top-down stuff sometimes, but that’s when nothing else is working”

“We have certain KPIs and goals that we are all aware of for our clients. So, if there is a campaign that’s underperforming or whatever, the media buyer already knows what the problem is, and they should already know what the solution is.”

”Running to him (formal leader) would be something that's never happened before and super tough decision or whatever.”

Participants were also asked to describe the leadership they perform and different decision-making processes they take part in. Leadership was seen to arise from different individuals at different times, as well as the result of teamwork in certain ways.

“I find myself being a leader when it’s not exactly my task.”

“We just share ideas on how to make everything better for the clients. If it’s for client success manager how to do better campaigns or how do we get better results for the people, we all participate.”

“I always try to be very clear with information and catch on even and whoever is concerned with this task, for example, media buying, hey, we need to send this, I will make sure I didn't hear them. I send them a click up, I'm just all over the place.”

“I kind of do audits of some accounts and kind of just give insight to the other media buyer.”

“I don't have a leadership position for that, but I kind of do it from my own good will.”

“Especially with the time zone difference. They stop around, one, two, three pm my time, right? So for the rest of the day, we don't even talk to him whatsoever. So definitely, I have to take some things into my own hands and, take care of things that need to be taken care of, without necessarily communicating with the boss man.”

Whilst participants agreed that distributed decision-making and leadership doesn't always work out and everyone sometimes makes a wrong call, it is seen as a better management practice in the long run when everyone throughout the company develops a sense of the business mission, believe in it, feel like they have a say and see how their actions affect the overall trajectory of the business.

“Encouraging them to think for themselves before asking, even at the risk of more failures at first, they will develop faster.”

“Sometimes you might make a mistake because you didn't run it by this specific person. That would probably be the most ridiculous reason to say, this isn't better than the conventional way of doing it because people still make mistakes in the conventional way of doing it. So, I've seen less mistakes being done here.”

5.4 Self-Leadership

When asked about shared leadership in the virtual setting at Meskula, participants brought up self-leadership almost without exception. As the remote setting allows a lot of freedom, self-leadership skills are highlighted in achieving efficiency. All participants agreed with having a lot of responsibility over their own actions. Self-leadership skills like time management, discipline and energy levels were seen as key factors for being able to succeed in their virtual role.

“I’m not the best, but I think I’ve gotten decent at it. Managing my own kind of energy and managing myself.”

“You have to have really good organization skills to work online”

Answers highlighted that although the approach at Meskula Oy gives employees a lot of freedom, individuals need to be accountable to themselves to be able to meet the expectations set by the business and formal leadership. Succeeding at their roles requires self-leadership in the form of taking action and putting in the work in which ever form to be able to get to the results needed.

“Basically, you're your own boss, Your're in charge of yourself, what you get done is on you. It's all on you to do every task that, you need to do have the discipline to, take care of what you need to do. And, if you slack then that company which is you goes down. And if you're on top of things and you, check all the boxes and stay on track then that company will flourish, which is, yourself, right? So just a mindset thing to discipline.”

In this context the role of personality traits and characteristics were also speculated in relation to being suitable for remote working. Most of the participants agreed that they enjoy challenge and responsibility, and it keeps them motivated. Company culture was also described to be” big on everyone being concerned, invested, and taking initiative.”

5.5 Obstacles & promoters of successful shared leadership: Role of the formal leader

Overall, the results indicate that in the context of shared virtual leadership followers turn to the formal leader for vision, expectations, support, accountability, and example. However, a prerequisite for shared forms of leadership to manifest is the opportunity for employees to claim leadership. If formal leadership runs over employees, doesn't involve others in decision making processes, is impatient with the learning curve or turns to micromanagement, shared forms of leadership won't emerge.

5.5.1 Opportunity, involvement, and acceptance

The CEO of Meskula Oy characterizes himself as a control freak, who gets easily frustrated and has the urge to intervene or worse, take over and end up doing tasks himself. He notes that it has been a conscious effort for him to grow more patient and adopt a leadership style that allows for mistakes and a learning curve to ultimately raise the collective skills of the company. He believes that the successful implementation of shared forms of leadership depend on the individual motivation and feeling of responsibility of employees.

“People are more satisfied when they have a say.”

One way the formal leader can create this is consistently involving employees in the decision-making processes.

“He is always taking the time to listen out to, my thoughts and the other employees' thoughts and take everything into consideration, before he makes a decision for the most part, he listens right?”

“Everything that I've wanted to do differently, I've been able to share and express, and we've done it.”

In addition to having patience for the learning curve, the participants highlighted an accepting attitude towards mistakes. As the management practice requires a lot of

individual responsibility and initiative from employees, certain pressure emerges to please the management. Meskula Oy has dedicated a Slack channel for sharing mistakes called f*ck ups, where everyone shares their mistakes, and they are celebrated as opportunities for everyone to learn. Certain calmness and tolerance towards mistakes as well as a focus shift from what went wrong to how can we fix it was seen as a promoter for employees to feel comfortable taking responsibility and initiative.

5.5.2 Vision

Another pattern emerging from the research data relates to the vision and big picture, that followers expect from the formal leader. Even though on other aspects and specific areas leadership tasks are shared, participants appreciated the ways in which formal leadership gave a specified mission to follow, had found a way to utilize an opportunity and coordinated the operations. Answers also highlighted communication skills in explaining and installing the vision of the company in others. This pattern emerged also on different levels when team managers are expected to have the vision and communicate to others about the vision and mission of the specific team.

“Internally implement the vision and make others believe in it.”

“Recently we’ve been talking a lot more about the values and kind of why we’re doing what we’re doing. And what makes up our culture and the why and how and all that stuff. And that really helps.”

Participants expected and admired the formal leader for creating and communicating about the opportunity that the company is taking advantage of. Having the vision for the company, unifying the different operations and being the “north star” for employees represented aspects the participants appreciated from the formal leader.

“I love to be a part of a company that he (CEO) has created. Because it helps you do great things, right? It’s a vessel to achieving amazing stuff.”

“The fact that he’s built this machine that, I can just get online every day and look at my calendar, start, and just get my mind right. Then just open up the computer and meet people all day.”

5.5.3 Expectations

Whilst the management practices at Meskula Oy allow for a lot of individual freedom, the condition is that everyone meets the expectations set together to achieve success in business. This calls for clear communication from formal leadership on what these exact expectations are. At Meskula Oy different teams had certain KPIs and target metrics as their formal goals to be met. This provides clarity for employees also when thinking about how their digital footprint is examined.

5.5.4 Support and accountability

After expectations are set and virtual workers are left to do their work in the best way they see fit, the formal leader is still needed for support, overall coordination and accountability. Participants included motivating and training employees to fall on the formal leader’s responsibilities. The leader’s role is to remain present and provide employees with tailored support in reaching their goals.

“The leader needs to understand what they (employees) need and give them that. On a daily bit.”

In this context an open approach to communication was praised. Even though Meskula Oy strives for employees to be able to handle things autonomously, the fact that everyone felt that formal leadership was approachable, present and “only a text away” was appreciated. In the same sense a direct and honest way of communicating in both directions was seen as a productive way forward. Formal leadership was not seen as a solely directive force, but as a supportive function to their success.

“They (employees) need somebody to listen to them just like they’re listening to plans”

"He's always asking about what he can do, better himself. He's constantly asking that. What can he help with?"

Participants also described the ways in which formal leadership holds them accountable. What seemed to make a difference was the attitude in which employees are faced when someone is not performing up to the expectations. Participants described that formal leadership calls out slacking and points out when things are not being done as expected, but the approach is to check in and ask why. The process was described as humane, when formal leadership challenges and calls employees out but understands that everyone has bad days and comes from a perspective of hearing others' reasoning and helping employees to grow rather than solely blame and upbraid.

"I mean, there's accountability that you need to hold yourself to but he's also gonna hold you accountable and, ask a question around, why did that person not want to move forward or why was that and why was that? And it keeps you growing as a person and as a remote salesperson."

As the importance of self-leadership skills are highlighted in shared forms of leadership, employee's also showed interest in getting guiding and support from formal leadership in building these skills. Sharing routines and experiences in organizing one's remote work were described as a way formal leadership can help teams optimize their efficiency.

Creating the right energy, motivation, and atmosphere were also mentioned by the participants. Giving positive feedback, approval and raising the energy levels of employees were seen as tasks for the formal leader.

"Yes, we are responsible. I know what I can do and what I can't do. But then other thing I would need his kind of oversight and approval"

"I had the only thing that's running through my mind right now is the energy. because the meetings can be a little boring"

5.5.5 Leading by example

Leading by example was one of the most frequently mentioned aspect when discussing formal leadership. Participants respected the example and commitment presented by formal leadership to high extents.

”He wants you to grow, he challenges you, but he also understands your human, and there's gonna be good days, theret's gonna be bad days. This is an awesome person. Yeah and he leads by example too. So anything he says he backs it by what he does. So I respect that”

”I appreciate someone who definitely challenges you, for sure. and I also appreciate someone that I guess puts their money where their mouth is or walks the walk.”

“Even if I don't like what I hear, I respect it because it comes from a place that he's done it. He knows it and he puts in the work too.”

Seeing that formal leadership genuinely lives by the values they try to instil and are not afraid to get their hands dirty seems to play a big part for employees in regards of their own commitment. The way in which formal leadership shows interest and has understanding about employee level operations passed on a certain feeling of commitment and experience, which in turn earns the respect of employees.

“Every week it was this like, somebody's actually putting in the hours, so it didn't feel like somebody was telling me like, you have to work more. So it was more like what else can I do? To really absolutely kill it in my role, right?”

As formal leadership emphasizes personal growth and pushes employees for taking responsibility and initiative, the ways in which employees see formal leadership do that to themselves also was a factor in the credibility of the leadership practice.

“And I'm constantly seeing that through surrounding himself in different material and different people and different podcasst, different everything that has to do with, How do I be better? And him wanting to grow him, wanting to be better, radiates out.

It hits me and I can't talk for anyone else, but it hits me. I see it and having him as the leader seeing him grow constantly, him learn constantly. And share all that with us is It's huge. So yeah, I think it's great the way he's constantly changing, growing, sharing. He's the North Star for me, and I feel like that allows me to be the North Star for my clients.”

“He's very big, with communication, expectations and meeting those expectations and, making sure that everything is covered and if someone is maybe slacking or, has some time off or whatnot, he's not afraid to, jump in and, get his hands dirty with some of that work as well.”

In this context the maturity and size of the company was also brought up. As Meskula Oy is still rather small, it is easier for the formal leadership to stay present for everyone and up to speed with employee level tasks. Few participants mentioned that as the company grows, they have already noticed that naturally you see less of the leader. In this regard participants craved for efforts in trying to stay present for the big changes and important shifts in the operations.

“I feel that whenever there is an important change, within the company and important change within a strategy, or something being implemented. I think that if he were to actually, let's meet. I want to tell you guys about this, it can be short but just hearing it there, instead of maybe, there's a video, go check it out, there's a sop, go check it. I think we're good on that side of things. just showing up a little more for these important things.”

As the company grows or in the case of bigger companies with more complex hierarchies and levels, attention should turn to mapping out ways in which these formal leadership expectations could be met by middle managers, team leaders, and how the commitment and values of top leadership could be shown throughout the organizational structure.

5.6 Creating digital culture

All employees at Meskula Oy work on a self-employment status and are not technically employed at the company but hired as outsourced contractors. Still, none of the participants felt like an outsourced freelancer.

“I think I’m considering myself a little bit more as a partner – because I constantly find myself not only following instructions, but also trying to see what else I can add on”

“Even though on paper I am a freelancer, I definitely feel like an employee.”

“It's more like I am integrated to the team so it's not like the regular freelance it's just freelance from probably tax perspective but apart from that it's like a team member.”

Participants listed several reasons why they felt more like employees than outsourced contractors, such as the fact that it was their main source of income. Other reasons included a long history with the company, feeling of involvement in scaling the business, the fact that the job felt schedule wise much like a conventional employment, and the amount of responsibility they felt for the company.

The interviews revealed that Meskula Oy has been able to create a collaborative team of freelancers who share commitment towards the business, successfully avoiding the common pitfalls of freelance based teams. Factors contributing to a unified remote culture at Meskula Oy included having clear roles, expectations, as well as alignment in shared and individual goals values, mission, and vision. When employees feel that they are important players in reaching the team’s goals, certain feeling of unity forms.

“When I started seeing how the company benefits from your inputs even as an appointment setter, that’s like in my opinion, when I start feeling more connected towards it.”

“Seeing and feeling how you’re a part of something bigger, like the machine he’s built, makes it feel unified.”

The practical ways in which collaboration and culture manifest revolved around daily communication tactics and working practices. At Meskula Oy this means regular team calls with different groups and online communication via Slack, celebrating wins, learning together from mistakes, and having for example a sales leadership board.

“We always find time at the beginning to just touch base, hey, how was yesterday is there something exciting happening.”

The participants also underlined the meaning of getting to know each other on a personal level and the unformal way communication is happening throughout organizational structures and hierarchies. When the company is collectively interested in employees’ personal goals and how the job and the company can help them in achieving also personal success, the relationship is seen more genuine.

“The culture is kind of developing at Meskula and that isn’t somebody else’s work. This is like our work.”

”The structure, maybe the lines, they’re not as far apart as walls and stairs dividing different offices and different voices. It feels a lot more human and less company.”

”Having those chats and then whenever we come together for our team meetings it’s not just like the CEO talking and this and that, everyone gets involved and it’s just a good environment. People care about each other and what, they’re up to and, the trips they’re taking and whatnot, and it’s not just a transactional relationship. it’s relational.”

The aspect of genuine interest in employees’ lives and personal matters outside the work context was also highlighted as a leadership skill. Participants described the ways in which the formal leader has shown interest in helping employee’s reach personal goals and happiness and underlined the meaning of that for their job satisfaction and

the culture at Meskula Oy. One participant also mentioned that he had previously worked for another company virtually but left after two months because of ingenuine leadership efforts.

“I feel like he (previous employer) tried to not be transactional, but it definitely wasn't genuine. You can tell when someone was ingenuine with you”

“The man (CEO) was visibly worried. Not for sales numbers going out, he was worried for the person, which is really cool.”

“He would reach out to them or be like what’s going on with this person? I thought that’s just probably a nicer way to say hey get your work done. Which, I guess it kind of is. But with him (CEO), it’s like he actually cares.”

5.7 Task vs. Relations orientated leadership behaviours

When it comes to task and relations orientated leadership behaviours in the virtual setting, the findings partially confirm the results of Mayer et al. (2022). The CEO described his leadership tasks to focus more on relations orientated behaviours, while he presented pure task related leadership “maybe twice a week.” He underlined that the fact that he has implemented a lot of guidelines and frameworks for operations must impact this ratio. He stated that task related leadership is left more on the teams’ shoulders: everyone should be able to navigate problems and situations themselves based on agreed goals, company values, and mission.

The participants echoed the CEO’s views on the distribution of task orientated leadership. When it came to navigating issues, problem solving or figuring out what are the right things to do, employees’ and teams’ carry the responsibility to take initiative and choose direction.

“(Is task orientated leadership shared?) Yeah. 100%. I think that allows for more of an organic way of working.”

The participants also underlined that certain goals and frameworks were coming from top-down as a way to set the goals that they needed to achieve. In that sense tasks were partially defined by formal leadership, but in practice employees have a lot of freedom and decision-making power on what are the right actions to take to achieve those goals. Noteworthy here is also the fact, that all participants felt like their thoughts and ideas were heard in regards of any changes they felt could improve the operations, thus making them active parts in the formation of task related leadership.

When moving on to relations-orientated leadership behaviours, participants described those also to be shared. Although the CEO felt that employees seek more approval than tasks from him, participants felt like the approval and support was coming also from other employees. At the same time both formal leaders, the CEO and the Operations Manager, described how they ask for feedback from employees, making it a two-way process.

“I can tell you where it (relations orientated leadership) comes from now and I’m okay with it, which is everywhere.”

It was speculated that the possible difference between differing preferences in a virtual or traditional setting for the source of task or relations orientated leadership behaviours may stem from traditional, rooted expectations, subjective preferences, and frequency of interactions.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter concludes the study by summarizing and analysing ties to previous research as well as discussing future research directions for e-leadership and virtual working arrangements.

6.1 Discussion

The case study of Meskula Oy confirms several notions of virtual teams and management, whilst shedding light into successful implementations of shared forms of leadership in the virtual setting. The study findings echo the classical opportunities and challenges presented by the e-world. Flexibility and convenience of virtual practices increase job satisfaction whilst allowing the company to find the best fit candidates around the globe. Simultaneously, social isolation, culture creation, ethical concerns, performance monitoring issues and communication challenges arise from virtual ways of working. The noteworthy distinction in perceptions of virtual work from both management and employee sides at Meskula Oy is that all parties agreed that the opportunities and benefits of virtual working are worth tackling the challenges.

Literature has suggested shared forms of leadership to gain foothold in the digital era where dense connectedness results in rapid information sharing, turbulent business environments as well as constant change (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). At Meskula Oy, shared forms of leadership are seen as the optimal state, and a strategic choice to effectively manage a fully virtual organization. Individual employees carry more strategic and leadership responsibilities over their own role and actions, which is seen to increase accountability and reduce the need for supervision. The arrangement simultaneously provides employees with a sense of freedom and decision-making power that increase job satisfaction.

However, research has shown that shared leadership can result even in lower levels of performance when uncoordinated (Nordbäck & Espinosa 2019). So how does successfully coordinated shared leadership play out in practice? At Meskula Oy, leadership behaviours exhibited by employees included making strategic decisions within their own role, brainstorming, and collaborating as a team without turning to

formal leadership, having a very low threshold for suggesting better practices to formal leadership, formal leadership asking for participation in strategic planning and decisions, and “auditing” or guiding other team members. Similarly to Mayer et al. (2022), participants agreed that sharing task orientated leadership behaviours in the virtual setting was beneficial. However, in the case of Meskula Oy relations orientated leadership behaviours were also appreciated as a shared process rather than solely coming from formal leadership. Both management and employee sides described that the way of working at Meskula Oy challenges the employees to develop a strategic sense for the business while aiming for a setting where employees can figure out on their own the best actions to take in regards of the business vision. Successfully implemented, this way of sharing leadership results in increased commitment and motivation instead of purely following orders and “doing the bare minimum.”

In regards of shared leadership and the individual responsibility employees carry, self-leadership skills were heavily underlined. Participants admitted that self-leadership skills impact their efficiency and speculated that personality characteristics and for example personal organizational skills play a part in whether a person can work remotely efficiently. As employees are free to design and organize their work as they see best as long as they deliver on the goals set together with formal leaders, the responsibility of managing yourself in a way that enables you to reach those goals falls on the employee. In this sense the case of Meskula Oy shows supports for academic discussions suggesting that shared leadership reduces the need for supervision when employees have higher autonomy (Cortellazzo et al., 2019, p.11).

Although employees need to hold themselves accountable to be able to deliver on promised goals, accountability was also seen as one task for the formal leader. This was done by formal leadership asking questions and requiring explanations for situations and individual reasoning at Meskula Oy. Combined with a culture of acceptance for failures and emphasis on learning and personal development, the accountability inserted by formal leadership was not seen as negative but encouraging and supportive – even in tough situations.

In addition to accountability, the tasks of the formal leader at Meskula Oy included creating vision, involving others in decision making, setting clear expectations, and

leading by example. The participants of the case study appreciated that even in the context of shared leadership the formal leader acts as the “north star” that provides others with the opportunity and has a clear vision for the business. In the case of Meskula Oy the implementation of shared leadership then has required the formal leader to involve others on decision making, keeping the barriers to suggest improvements low and actively support and implement others’ ideas. To ensure and follow progress, the formal leader’s role is also critical in setting and agreeing on what are the expectations that each employee needs to meet, supporting the claims of Malhotra et al. (2007) in regards of clear set of norms in avoiding communication pitfalls. At the same time, the findings show that the formal leader needs to provide support if needed for developing self-management skills to deliver on set expectations. This in certain ways requires the formal leader to adopt the role of a coach.

A notable distinction in the successful implementation of shared leadership at Meskula Oy is the role of respect and genuine care the formal leader presents as well as the way in which these factors contribute to culture creation. The participants mentioned almost without exception that the fact that they see formal leadership “putting in the hours,” showing how they keep learning, trying to do better and how they have the experience is why they respect and listen to formal leadership. Following the lines of Malhotra et al. (2007), it seems to be detrimental to make trust and respect earning behaviours “as explicit as possible” (p.61). In a similar manner the fact that employees felt like formal leadership cared about them outside of the job, and showed interest for hearing how the job can help them reach also personal goals was a factor for why employees felt satisfied with leadership. This aspect of the study suggests that organizational culture can play a significant role in the successful and highly productive implementation of shared leadership.

Taken together the case study of Meskula Oy provides further support that shared forms of leadership can be an efficient way to tackle the challenges presented by virtual working arrangements. By examining the ways in which shared leadership has been coordinated in a successful firm, the case study contributes to the academic discussions surrounding shared leadership in the virtual environment, the role a formal leader should adapt, and can provide a basis for developing beneficial managerial and e-leadership practices in the virtual setting.

6.2 Answering research questions

Based on the findings of the qualitative research conducted and the interpretations made and explained in Chapter 6.1., research questions are answered.

1. What factors contribute to the successful implementation of shared leadership in the virtual setting?

The case study of Meskula Oy highlights self-leadership, clear vision and expectations, the opportunity to take part in decision making, support, accountability, and genuine culture as success factors for implementing shared leadership in the virtual setting. Successful implementation of these aspects is directly linked to the role of the formal leader.

2. What expectations team members have for the formal leader?

The findings of this study indicate that in the context of shared leadership the formal leader needs to create vision, involve others in decision making and provide the opportunity to learn to take responsibility, set clear expectations, instil accountability, and provide support. Additionally, the formal leader is a key player in creating a culture of self-development and shared responsibility. To ensure this is perceived as genuine and not forced, the formal leader needs to earn the respect and trust of others.

6.3 Future research directions

As the case study follows a small and young company with a limited sample, the application of the results to bigger companies or hybrid practices might not be rational. Future research should investigate the emergence of shared virtual leadership in such environments further. However, the premises of the study can provide a useful reference point for such studies.

With a qualitative approach requiring interpretation by the researcher, it should be taken into consideration that the personal bias of the researcher might influence interpretations. Future studies should utilize other approaches and methods to investigate the topic.

Several participants of the study speculated that certain characteristics, self-management skills or motivations could be a factor impacting productivity when working remotely. As the effects of personality are most often studied from the leader's perspective, turning the lens to the characteristics of others can present new ground to cover. As the sample of this case study remains limited, further research could investigate personal preferences and characteristics deeper, whether such factors influence the probability of successful implementation of shared forms of leadership virtually.

As successful culture creation, genuine care, and interest in personal matters seemed to create cohesion and respect amongst team members and influence the successful implementation of shared leadership, investigating how these factors can be created virtually in more detail similarly presents an interesting angle for future research.

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