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Towards a Leadership Framework for Hybrid Projects

A qualitative study of project managers' leadership while balancing the contrasting demands of traditional and agile project management

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Preface

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who contributed to this thesis. First, a special thanks to the respondents who participated in our study, as their engagement was crucial in conducting this study. We are also grateful for our supervisor, Jonas Söderlund, who has supported us with guidance throughout the semester. Finally, we thank our opponents and peers for their thoughtful feedback and help in reviewing our drafts.

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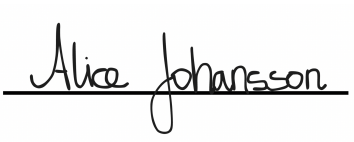
Minou Larsdotter



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Abstract

Title: Towards a Leadership Framework for Hybrid Projects

Background: As project management evolves towards hybrid approaches that combine traditional and agile principles, project managers face increasing complexity in navigating the tension between them. While research has explored managerial solutions, little attention has been given to leadership perspectives. Existing frameworks solely reflect agile leadership, offering little guidance on how to manage the tensions between the agile and traditional principles. This leads to a disconnect between theory and practice as hybrid projects are not simply about embracing one approach over another, but rather about integrating both in a way that addresses the demands of each.

Purpose: This study aims to explore how project managers in hybrid projects navigate leadership tensions, and whether their leadership style is agile, traditional, or a hybrid of both. Ultimately, the purpose is to build a theoretical framework that reflects the experiences of project managers and supports both explanatory depth and practical guidance.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative research design, including semi-structured interviews with eight project managers with leadership responsibility in hybrid projects. The analysis follows an inductive approach, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data, as well as a thematic approach to interpret recurring themes.

Empirical findings: This study shows that all project managers adopted hybrid leadership to navigate the contrasting leadership demands in hybrid projects. Furthermore, the empirical findings revealed underlying logics guiding leadership behavior, shaped by various contextual and interpersonal influential factors.

Conclusion: Building on the empirical findings, this study provides a framework that highlights how project managers face multiple contrasting leadership demands, with all but one giving rise to leadership tensions. Instead of offering a one-size-fits-all solution, this framework contributes by illustrating the dynamic nature of hybrid leadership.

Keywords: Hybrid project management, Project manager, Hybrid leadership, Leadership flexibility, Dynamic leadership, Leadership tension, Leadership continuum

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1. Introduction

Project leadership is being tested as projects move toward hybrid management, an approach that blends structure and stability with flexibility and adaptiveness (Cooper & Sommer, 2018). While being presented with leadership styles that only accommodate one of the contrasting demands, either traditional leadership offering structure or agile leadership facilitating flexibility, project managers in hybrid projects are asked to balance both traditional and agile principles (Zasa et al., 2020). These developments raise important questions about how project leadership can remain responsive to the contrasting demands in hybrid projects when facing forces that are fundamentally different in nature.

As hybrid project management becomes more widespread, leaders are increasingly expected to operate in project environments shaped by both agile and traditional principles (Hass, 2007). Leading in such environments requires the ability to reconcile conflicting values and behaviors (Lavine, 2014). The challenge lies not only in mastering both approaches but in knowing how to switch between them, or ultimately combine them both simultaneously (Yulk & Mahsud, 2010). As Yulk and Mahsud (2010) argue, effective leaders must be able to diagnose situational requirements and balance contradictory expectations through strategic behavioral variation. This capability becomes essential in hybrid projects where leadership demands can shift rapidly and dramatically.

1.1 Background

In 1985, Peter Drucker first published his book *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, where he wrote about how organizations should transition from bureaucratic practices to instead focus on innovation and new opportunities (Denning, 2017). Today, 40 years later, we are experiencing what Drucker described as the future of work – living in the age of agile. Since the rise of agile project management, a significant body of research has described the benefits of adopting an agile approach, including increasing returns, higher customer satisfaction, and workers who are emotionally engaged at work (Rigby et al., 2016). The agile project management approach emphasizes the search for

opportunities, rapid experimentation, and flexibility (Denning, 2017). In contrast, the traditional approach is rooted in hierarchy, alignment, and control (Lane & Down, 2010). Together with the development of agile project management, agile leadership has emerged, shifting away from the traditional command-and-control leadership style, instead embracing a more coaching and engaging approach (Jordan et al., 2022).

The rise of agile is often described as three waves: agile teams, agile at scale, and business agility, with the first wave starting off in the context of software development (Dingsøyr et al., 2019). Even though the Agile manifesto was not released until 2001, several software development approaches from the 1990s could have been considered agile due to their opposition to the traditional "waterfall" structure at that time (Hoda et al., 2018). However, as the Agile manifesto was published, agile practices became more mainstream, although the adoption was still limited to the software industry. The focus of this first wave was on building agile teams, consisting of small, dedicated, and adaptive units that could develop software with fast turnarounds (Hoda et al., 2018).

By 2010, agile project management had become more standardized, and a second wave brought more focus on developing agile at scale (Dingsøyr et al., 2019). During this time, more emphasis was put on coordinating work at a larger setting, across several teams, within a single agile framework. This allows organizations to coordinate and synchronize several projects at the same time, ultimately improving alignment in operations and organizational efficiency. In 2018, research showed that 97% of organizations were using agile management in some form, and that 52% had the majority of their teams adopting agile principles (Hoda et al., 2018). Lastly, the third wave of agile refers to business agility, which has not yet been seen in full-scale (Dingsøyr et al., 2019). Nonetheless, there is an increasing interest in the development of a full-scale agile framework that allows for agility at the organizational level. However, Dingsøyr et al. (2019) advise against adopting such frameworks, as the reality is much more complex and may require a more balanced approach.

Today, most organizations are in the mindset of the first and second wave, implementing agility in teams and across projects. However, while agile principles have been highly effective in the software industry, their implementation in other sectors

presents challenges (Cooper, 2009). Many industries lack the organizational flexibility inherent to software companies, as complex structures and rigid processes often hinder agile adoption. In response, hybrid project management has emerged as a solution, integrating agile principles within a structured traditional framework to balance adaptability with stability (Zasa et al., 2020). This results in a hybrid approach that combines the benefits of the two project management approaches (Cooper & Sommer, 2016).

1.2 Research Problem

As project management transitions towards a hybrid approach, the role of the project manager becomes increasingly complex. Project managers must navigate the contrasting approaches in hybrid project management: agile management, emphasizing flexibility, and traditional management, prioritizing structure. In addition to integrating these opposing forces, project managers also have to balance their managerial responsibilities with their leadership responsibilities (Cleland, 1995), a task which is not always simple.

Leadership refers to influencing people in order to meet a certain objective (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 4). However, similar to the managerial forces in hybrid project management, leadership involves opposite assumptions about how to most effectively practice leadership to meet those objectives (Lavine, 2014). This has resulted in leadership often being presented as a continuum, with contrasting leadership styles, reflecting the opposite assumptions, on either side. In a project environment, traditional leadership is based on the need for control, structure, and efficiency (Shenhar, 2004), while agile leadership answers the demand for autonomy, flexibility, and innovation (Denning, 2016; Rigby et al., 2018). These leadership styles align with their respective project management approaches, making them effective within their own frameworks but potentially counterproductive when applied to the opposing approach (Nerur et al., 2005). In a hybrid project environment, this creates leadership tensions, where leaders have to manage conflicting, yet equally important, demands.

Leadership tensions involve "*contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time*" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Furthermore, Denison et al. (1995) states that the test of a leader is their ability to *"hold two opposed ideas in their mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function*" (p. 526). Despite this complexity, existing frameworks for hybrid project managers primarily focus on managerial responsibilities, such as designing the project setup, (Azenha et al., 2021; Baird & Riggins, 2012; Conforto & Amaral, 2016), largely overlooking the leadership responsibilities and the challenges managers face in reconciling the leadership tensions that arise from blending traditional and agile management approaches. Moreover, the few frameworks that address leadership tend to focus exclusively on agile leadership. These frameworks describe the project manager as responsible for fostering autonomy, flexibility, and collaboration, characteristics which align with agile leadership (Azenha et al., 2021; Conforto, 2024). Additionally, hybrid teams, defined by cross-functionality, are often led without formal leadership (Zasa et al., 2020), also aligning with agile principles (Denning, 2016).

This shows how previous research predominantly portrays the project manager as one who solely adopts agile leadership, principles, and mindset, yet it neglects to address how they should effectively integrate and balance these with traditional principles. In practice, hybrid projects are not simply about embracing one approach over another, but rather about integrating both in a way that addresses the demands of each. As a result, there is a disconnect between theory and practice: current frameworks simplify leadership in hybrid projects by overemphasizing agile ideals, offering little guidance on how to manage the tensions between the agile and traditional principles.

Several scholars have argued that complexity and ambiguity are the defining managerial themes of the 21st century (Lavine, 2014). Trends of globalization, increased competition, and technological development raise intricacy and ambiguity, calling for researchers to think paradoxically (Lewis, 2000). Poole and Van De Ven (1989) state that tensions are often downplayed, and Eisendardt (2000), agreeing with their statement, argues that "*simplicity is elegant but often untrue*" (p. 704). This leaves us with theories that are incomplete, suggesting that theory-building acknowledging this tension perspective would not only be a resource to the research field, but also provide a

valuable contribution to the organizational practice. Echoing these statements, Lewis (2000) states: "*Managers need to recognize, become comfortable with, and even profit from tensions and the anxieties they provoke, for the contribution of paradox to management thinking is the recognition of its power to generate creative insight and change*" (p. 764). Therefore, this study challenges the assumption that project managers in hybrid projects solely adopt agile leadership. Instead, it engages with the idea that leadership in hybrid projects may take on a hybrid character itself, what may be understood as hybrid leadership.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

This study will investigate whether leadership in hybrid project environments is agile, traditional, or hybrid. The aim is to explore how project managers navigate contrasting leadership demands in their leadership as well as explain the reasoning behind their leadership, built on individual's experience and perceptions. The purpose is to develop a more practical and nuanced theoretical framework that reflects the complexities of leadership in hybrid projects, rather than presenting an idealized model of agile leadership that may be unattainable in practice. Hence, this thesis will offer practical insights and a theoretical understanding of leadership in hybrid projects. Accordingly, the following research questions will be examined:

RQ1: What leadership tensions do project managers experience in hybrid projects?
RQ2: How do project managers navigate these tensions in practice?
RQ3: Why do project managers adopt particular approaches when navigating leadership tensions in hybrid projects?

While the first research question aims to expose the contrasting leadership demands in hybrid projects, given the contradictory nature between traditional and agile project management, the second question explores how project managers actually respond to and manage them. Finally, the third question seeks to explain the underlying logic that influences how their leadership is practiced.

1.4 Delimitations

The aim of this study is to explore how project managers practice and perceive their leadership in hybrid projects. To maintain a clear focus, several delimitations have been established. First, the study's sampling is limited to project managers as participants. While acknowledging that other relevant stakeholders, such as team members or executives may provide valuable insights, they have been excluded from this study due to the specific focus of the research. Second, building on the research problematization highlighting hybrid project management consisting of contrasting demands of practices, the study is delimited to solely study hybrid project environments, ensuring consistency.

Lastly, this study will focus exclusively on agile and traditional leadership styles, chosen for their relevance within the context of this research. While recognizing that many leadership styles overlap, suggesting that a project manager's leadership may be influenced by other styles, the goal of this study is to develop a leadership framework specifically for hybrid projects, incorporating both agile and traditional approaches. Given the relationship between these two leadership styles, they will serve as the foundation for this framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides the theoretical framework for this study. It begins by introducing the concept of project management, followed by a distinction between traditional, agile, and hybrid project management. It proceeds by examining traditional and agile leadership, offering contrasting perspectives on how leadership is practiced, as well as exploring the concept of leadership tensions and hybrid leadership. Lastly, previous theoretical models are presented to illustrate the variables and considerations that influence hybrid leadership. Together, they serve as analytical tools for understanding how leaders in hybrid projects assess situational cues to decide whether a more agile, traditional or hybrid leadership approach is appropriate.

2.1 Project Management

2.1.1 Project

A project is an organizational entity designed to achieve a specific objective, usually involving a delivery within a set timeframe, budget, and according to predefined performance criteria (Gaddis, 1959). The duration for a project can vary, but it is finite. A project can be understood as an integrated part of a broader organization (Joubert, 2024). Therefore, they do not operate in isolation and are often part of broader systems involving multiple interconnected activities and environments. These components interact with and influence one another, which makes projects inherently complex. As a result, project management becomes both more demanding and increasingly important (Joubert, 2024).

2.1.2 The Project Manager

Central to the project is the project manager, who is responsible for the execution of a project (Project Management Institute, n.d.). Early perspectives primarily define the project manager's role as managerial, involving administrative and coordinating tasks, along with technical competence and expertise to understand and support the project (Gaddis, 1959). The project manager's responsibility is to deliver a finished product according to the following three aspects: the determined requirements, within a set budget, and on time. Accordingly, a skilled project manager is able to successfully

balance these factors responsive to changing circumstances (Gaddis, 1959). However, more recent views highlight the growing importance of leadership in project management, moving away from solely focusing on managerial responsibilities.

Building on Gaddis's idea, Burke and Byron (2014, pp. 141–145) suggest necessary skills for a project manager are technical competence, along with leadership, management, and project entrepreneurship skills, where the latter refers to networking, spotting opportunities, and solving problems. Accordingly, a project manager is required to have a broad set of skills.

However, the literature field has varying interpretations of the concepts 'management' and 'leadership', which are particularly relevant for the discussions of a project manager's role. Cleland (1995) presents Davis's (1967) idea of leadership as a constitutional part of management. In contrast, Hersey and Blanchard (1977, p. 4) suggest that management is a special kind of leadership, positioning leadership as the overarching concept. Cleland (1995) proposes the two roles as connected, as a project manager often needs to possess both in today's complex project environment. Hence, there is a difference between leadership and management, but they are closely interconnected.

Management refers to the activities and practices associated with the execution and completion of a task (Project Management Institute, n.d.). Cleland (1995) presents Davis's (1967) view of managerial responsibilities, including activities such as planning and decision-making. Hersey and Blanchard (1977, pp. 3–4) agree on this, however, they argue that management is not strictly restricted to activities regarding the task, and that it also includes managing individuals and groups to achieve organizational objectives through motivation and control. Similarly, Burke and Barron (2014, pp. 141–145) state that management concentrates on systems, including planning and controlling, indicating that managerial practices can be directed towards the task and the team. Nevertheless, whether management addresses the task or the team, all activities are focused on the execution and completion of the task.

In contrast, Hersey and Blanchard (1977, p. 4) define leadership as impacting an individual or group's behavior regardless of the alignment with the organization's goal. This can be achieved through leadership activities such as motivation and inspiration (Davis, 1967, as cited in Cleland, 1995). However, in a project environment, Adair (1973) emphasizes three core leadership responsibilities: task, team, and individual. Accordingly, a leader must attend to all three responsibilities and balance their needs in order to lead a project efficiently. Ultimately, as Shenhar (2004, p. 573) states, "*The best project managers are also leaders, who inspire their teams with meaning and vision, and then make sure it is all done well.*" To conclude, it is evident that the concepts 'management' and 'leadership' are closely interconnected. While this study focuses on leadership in projects, management will also be covered due to its close relation.

2.1.3 Project Management Approaches

Project management refers to the application of skills and techniques to meet project requirements. In practice, this takes the form of activities such as planning, organizing, and executing tasks (Project Management Institute, n.d.). According to the Project Management Institute, there are three project management approaches that can be tailored to specific projects and applied across industries. The project approach can either be traditional by adopting a predictive life cycle, agile by adopting an adaptive life cycle, or hybrid by combining the two processes (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008).

The traditional approach is plan-driven and suits contexts where a clear goal and roadmap exist from the start of the project (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008). In traditional project management, the scope, timeline, and budget are defined early in the project lifecycle, with any modifications being carefully controlled (Fernandes et al., 2018). Emphasis is put on minimizing changes throughout the project by conducting thorough analysis and creating a detailed design at the outset to ensure high-quality outcomes (Vinekar & Slinkman, 2006). In contrast, the agile approach is for contexts where the goal is evident but there is no clear way to get there. Fernandez and Fernandez (2008) argue that without knowing how to get to the place where one needs to be, generating a detailed plan is impossible. Instead of a plan-driven approach, agile projects are change-driven and utilize a just-in-time planning model. The approach is

designed for continuous learning, and the objective is to discover solutions as the project progresses (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008).

2.1.4 Hybrid Project Management

Today's fast-changing and uncertain environment has exposed limitations of the traditional linear model being too rigid and proving ineffective (Cooper & Sommer, 2018). In response, many organizations turn to agile project management, which enhances responsiveness and quality in turbulent conditions. However, an entire shift is difficult, resulting in the creation of the hybrid project management approach, yielding the best of both sides, by being flexible and productive without losing structure and control in projects (Cooper & Sommer, 2018). Nonetheless, challenges still exist as the agile concept conflicts with the traditional culture and structures of planning cycles, team configurations, and system integrations (Zasa et al., 2020). Hence, Zasa et al. (2020) have identified three corrective actions to facilitate hybridization. First, gradual and collaborative integration involving both management and teams for alignment. Second, a cultural shift towards agile with clear visions and shared direction, and third, increased understanding of the value and logic behind agile, ensuring collaboration and alignment between teams and managers.

However, there is no unified definition of hybrid project management in the current field of literature. Reiff and Schlegel's (2024) literature review reveals two different definitions of hybrid project management, where the majority of the findings describe it as a combination of traditional and agile approaches, and the other as an integration of agile into the existing traditional approach. Similarly, Bianchi et al. (2022) describe hybrid project management as a combination, and Prakash et al. (2024) as a combination of agile and traditional principles. Moreover, there are also definitions as a combination of predictive and adaptive approaches (Costantini et al., 2021), and a combination of plan-driven and agile approaches (Mirzaei et al., 2024). Accordingly, there are various interpretations of hybrid project management, however, the common characteristic is the coexistence of traditional and agile. Ultimately, the hybrid project management approach aims to leverage the advantages of the two approaches (Cooper & Sommer, 2016; Costantini et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2024; Prakash et al., 2024; Zasa et al., 2020). This core definition, established in the literature, will be used in this thesis.

2.2 Project Leadership

Leadership has been conceptualized in many different ways, giving rise to a variety of theories and frameworks (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). A leadership style refers to a leader's characteristics and the way in which they choose to lead (Parson, 2024). Leadership is about influencing an individual or a group's behavior to accomplish goals (Davis, 1967 as cited in Cleland 1995; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 4). Building on this, project leadership applies this definition to the project setting, where the project manager, as a leader, directs and influences the behavior of the followers, the project team. Moreover, project leadership aims to accomplish particular objectives, namely the project's (Burke and Byron, 2014, p. 29). Consequently, project leadership can be considered as a specialized application of general leadership principles within the context of project management.

Based on the principles of traditional and agile project management, two corresponding leadership styles have emerged: traditional leadership and agile leadership (Nerur et al., 2005). While both are rooted in project management, making them suitable for leadership in projects, they reflect fundamentally different approaches. Traditional leadership is based on control, predictability, and structure (Shenhar, 2004), whereas agile leadership emphasizes flexibility, collaboration, and adaptability (Rialti & Filieri, 2024; Rigby et al., 2018). Following, the different characteristics of traditional leadership and agile leadership will be explored.

2.2.1 Traditional Leadership

Traditional leadership is rooted in the structural perspective of organizations, which prioritizes efficiency, hierarchy, and rational decision-making. This perspective has two primary origins: scientific management and bureaucratic theory. The scientific management approach, by FW Taylor (1911), presented by Bolman and Deal (2003), sought to maximize efficiency by planning, breaking tasks into minute, repetitive motions, retraining workers to minimize wasted effort, and establishing clear hierarchies of control. Later theorists have expanded on this work, developing principles centered on specialization, span of control, authority, and delegation of responsibility (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Max Weber's bureaucratic theory is rooted in a

rational, rule-based system rather than the patriarchal, personality-driven organizations of the past. He envisioned a hierarchical organization with clear divisions of labor, standardized rules, and technical qualifications (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Together, these principles form the core of traditional leadership, shaping its emphasis on structure, control, and predictability in modern organizations.

The traditional management style sought to maximize productivity by defining jobs as narrowly as possible. A key principle of traditional leadership is maintaining a clear chain of command, where managers direct and control subordinates, ensuring that tasks are completed according to predefined standards (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The role of a traditional manager encompasses planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 185). Moreover, the core of this management style is a structure with high direction, control, and financial incentives serving as motives suitable for less mature and unskilled workers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 185).

In practice, a traditional project manager operates with an operational mindset, prioritizing efficiency, performance, and adherence to time and budget constraints (Norrie & Walker, 2004; Shenhar, 2004). Their primary focus is on schedule and cost control rather than on achieving competitive advantage, addressing customer needs, or ensuring long-term market success (Shenhar, 2004). At the start of a project, they define the scope by outlining requirements and needs, which are then structured into a process-driven approach that emphasizes specific tools. These processes typically include cost, time, and quality management, as well as communication, information flow, and performance measurement. The tools, on the other hand, encompass budgeting, planning, and scheduling, among others. Together, these processes and tools form the foundation of the traditional project management framework, having a strong emphasis on qualification criteria for the project (Shenhar, 2004).

Once a clear problem definition is established, traditional project managers create a structured plan for the entire project, adhering to it from initiation to completion. Their focus is on delivering short-term results, as they consider time-to-market the most critical success factor (Shenhar, 2004). In essence, their role is centered on execution, ensuring the task at hand is completed and considering the job done once it’s finished,

with little emphasis on broader strategic goals beyond project delivery. Moreover, the organization operates with an internally focused, top-down structure that prioritizes delivering value to shareholders (Denning, 2016).

Traditional leadership approaches are closely aligned with the priorities and methods of traditional project management, emphasizing structure, control, and efficiency. The traditional leader follows a command and control culture (Cleland, 1995), which is built on control and top-down directed leadership. Pigeau and McCann (2002) describe control as the structures and processes designed to manage risk and ensure stability, while command is seen as the creative expression of human will necessary to accomplish a mission. They argue that effective command is built on three dimensions: authority, responsibility, and competency. Firstly, authority defines the leader's domain of influence, which can be either assigned or earned. Secondly, responsibility encompasses the individual liabilities that come with command and authority, requiring the leader to exercise power responsibly. Lastly, competency encompasses the skills and abilities required to execute tasks successfully, expertise that project managers must possess to lead the team effectively. Since command relies on authority, responsibility, and competency, and control depends on effective command (Pigeau & McCann, 2002), traditional leadership must also embrace these three capabilities to sustain a command and control approach.

However, according to Argyris (1957, 1964) in Bolman and Deal (2003), this structural approach to management can often lead to a conflict between individuals and the organizations they work for. He argued that traditional organizational design, with its emphasis on control and predictability, treated employees more like cogs in a machine than autonomous individuals, hindering personal growth and engagement. Similarly, Margaret Wheatley (1997) suggests that when organizations are viewed as machines, creativity and innovation are suppressed, ultimately leading to their failure.

As Wheatley wrote her article "Goodbye Command and Control" (1997), research had shown that self-managed teams were at minimum 35% more productive than traditional organized organizations. At the same time, businesses were facing increasingly dynamic environments and growing global competition, necessitating a shift in leadership that

aligned with these new realities (Shenhar, 2004). This transition gave rise to several contemporary leadership styles, some of which moved away from traditional approaches in favor of self-management, while others retained core elements of traditional leadership but evolved to address the modern challenges organizations were encountering (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). One such adaptation was transactional leadership, which emerged as businesses sought to foster higher employee engagement to remain competitive. Transactional leaders leverage authority and structured incentives, using rewards and punishments to motivate followers. This leadership style prioritizes processes, supervision, and performance management, while also emphasizing equality and fairness (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Misbahuddin & Maarif, 2025).

Modern leadership is significantly more diverse and complex compared to traditional project management. However, this does not mean that traditional capabilities and practices have lost their relevance today. According to Misbahuddin et al. (2024), traditional project management is commonly used in large-scale industrial projects such as manufacturing and construction, while agile approaches are preferred in service and information technology projects. While the traditional leadership style is not always applied in its entirety, transactional leadership is used in traditional project management. Studies show that the transactional leadership style is suitable for structured environments where defined roles and established processes are present, similar to the waterfall methodology (Misbahuddin et al. 2024). Transactional leadership is defined by its emphasis on performance, tasks, and organization, and emphasizes a step-by-step approach, clear structures, as well as a process-driven leadership style. This is supported by Keller (2006), who argues that control is a key factor for performance in traditional or waterfall project management, aligning with the traditional approach and transactional leadership style.

2.2.2 Agile Leadership

The agile approach is rooted in the agile manifesto, which evolved from the software industry (Beck et al., 2001). Its core values are: Individuals and interactions over processes and tools; Working software over comprehensive documentation; Customer collaboration over contract negotiation; Responding to change over following a plan

(Beck et al., 2001). According to Beck et al. (2001), this means the elements mentioned first are primarily valued compared to the latter, although the latter still hold importance. These values create the foundation for adaptability and flexibility in projects. Building on them, Beck et al. (2001) established twelve principles with a focus on software development. Broadly, these principles emphasize customer satisfaction through continuous and frequent delivery, embracing and adapting to changing requirements, close collaboration, trust and support of self-organizing teams, simplicity, and continuous reflection for improvement. Even though the principle was first developed to accommodate the software industry, the agile approach has gained growing popularity for projects in other industries as well (Cooper & Sommer, 2016).

The agile concept promotes adaptability in the process of working (Rigby et al., 2018) and flexibility in response to emerging needs within projects (Rialti & Filieri, 2024). Denning (2016) describes the core of agile organizations as rooted in three principles: small teams, customer, and network. The agile teams are small, multidisciplinary, and autonomous, working in short fixed cycles, enabling feedback from end users to be included throughout the process (Denning, 2016; Rigby et al., 2018). The multiple repeated cycles throughout the process, favoring test-and learning, make it an iterative and incremental approach (Rigby et al., 2018). Furthermore, Denning (2016) emphasizes that the agile perspective of the customer is about delivering value to them, and the organization adapts accordingly. Lastly, the agile organization operates as a transparent and interactive network collaborating towards common goals, where communication goes both horizontally and vertically across the organization. The agile mindset should not be limited to the teams, it must be a shared perspective across the entire organization to achieve its full potential (Denning, 2016; Rigby et al., 2018).

However, Rigby et al. (2018) acknowledge that even agile organizations consist of a combination of agile teams and traditional structures. Therefore, their focus is to ensure bureaucratic functions do not hinder agile teams, rather than advocating for a radical transformation of the entire organization. Rigby et al. (2018) propose an approach that emphasizes agile values and principles across the organization by embedding them into the company culture and aligning Human Resource procedures to support team performance. With a leadership driving a cultural shift to be agile-centred, even

non-agile parts of the organization need to understand and embrace it. Additionally, it involves adopting a flexible architecture that simultaneously facilitates independence and integration, while also positioning the financial department as a more guiding rather than controlling function (Rigby et al., 2018).

Similarly, Zasa et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of a culture shift towards agile values when integrating the agile concept. Adopting the agile culture requires a shift on the individual and team level, moving away from traditional top-down control towards greater team responsibility. Team meetings support this transition by strengthening team identity and confidence in meeting project goals. This enhances the quality of teamwork, particularly essential to agile principles (Dingsøyr et al., 2018).

Agile projects consist of collaborative teams with autonomy (Denning, 2016; Rigby et al., 2018). As they are self-governing, they have authorized decision-making and the chain of command and control is shortened, which enables faster work and contributes to a higher team motivation (Rigby et al., 2018). Since the leaders do not have operational responsibilities with delegating work, they can instead engage in the long-term perspective with strategies and creating and communicating visions, aligning with agile leadership (Rigby et al., 2018), and being the concept of transformational motivation (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Moreover, leaders act as problem solvers and facilitate work by removing obstacles and providing support (Rigby et al., 2018). Rigby et al. (2018) imply that correctly implemented agile teams tend to produce better results compared to traditional approaches, in regard to having higher team productivity and delivering faster, better quality at a lower risk.

Furthermore, traditional project management has a project manager with several responsibilities, whereas agile projects have these responsibilities distributed among various roles (Cooper & Sommer, 2016). The distribution of roles in agile projects consists of the agile team, which is coached by a facilitator, and an initiate owner being responsible for the results (Rigby et al., 2018). One of the most prominent agile frameworks, called Scrum, assigns the roles as product owner, an agile coach called Scrum master, and the agile team referred to as a development team (Cooper & Sommer, 2016; Lawong & Akanfe, 2025). The product owner is responsible for the

project and managing stakeholders, whereas the Scrum master ensures the agile principles are followed, and is responsible for the development team and its daily operations. The division of responsibility in agile projects enhances collaboration and communication, which tends to lead to greater success than traditional project structures (Cooper & Sommer, 2016).

In contrast to traditional project management, where a project manager is responsible for leading their team to accomplish the project goal, agile leadership considers the daily operations and outcomes a joint responsibility within the team (Cooper & Sommer, 2016). The agile team is self-organizing in regards to planning, execution, and competence. They are empowered to distribute tasks independently and be in charge of daily decisions, which creates an increased sense of project ownership and engagement in the project (Cooper & Sommer, 2016). In the absence of a traditional project manager in the middle, better communication and knowledge integration appear in the agile teams (Cooper & Sommer, 2018).

In addition, agile teams reflect distributed leadership, where shared responsibility among team members and interactions are emphasised over individual directions (Spillane et al., 2004). Harris (2008) describes it as a dynamic process, where the leadership shifts among individuals rather than being fixed around one individual, but notes its success depends on factors among the organizational culture, development needs, and its sensitivity to change.

Furthermore, agile team members require flexibility in competence, described as M-shaped knowledge, a concept referring to a combination of contributory knowledge and interactional expertise (Bredin et al., 2017, pp. 222–226). As agile team members are expected to take on tasks outside their primary discipline area when needed, they require expertise in several areas, so-called contributory knowledge (Bredin et al., 2017, pp. 222–226). It is also necessary to have a broad knowledge in other areas to support team members and enhance knowledge integration, referred to as interactional expertise.

In order to facilitate the creation of agile teams, agile leaders pass their capabilities on to the team by empowerment and motivation (As'ad et al., 2024; Samodien et al., 2024). When letting go of control and adopting an empowering approach, they enable their teams to independently navigate change and challenges. Additionally, agile leaders motivate employees to develop agility and adaptation through embracing change rather than resisting it, creating agile teams with openness to novelty, curiosity, and flexibility (Bauwens & Cortellazzo, 2025).

Moreover, agile leadership emphasizes servant leadership, prioritizing the team, where the agile coach fosters collaboration, encouragement, and problem-solving in the team (Lawong & Akanfe, 2025). Servant leadership emphasizes collaboration and team empowerment (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). Although Eva et al.'s (2019) review reveals overlaps with other value-based theories, it possesses distinct characteristics. While both servant and transformational leadership emphasize followers' needs, servant leadership considers followers' growth as an end goal itself rather than serving organizational goals as transformational leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Similarly, although both authentic and servant leadership stress authenticity, the former is not driven by a sense of inner motive to serve others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Compared to ethical leadership focused on rule-based ethics, servant leadership takes a more flexible approach by also considering the individual needs of followers and situation (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Servant leadership motive relies on being an other-oriented approach rooted in individual support and guidance, where leaders serve others by offering support and empowering employees to become independent and feel valued (Eva et al., 2019). This approach fosters a culture of support, collaboration, and well-being, which contributes to better-served customers. Eva et al. (2019) found that servant leadership is positively correlated with valuable results at an individual, team, and organizational level. The leadership style suits organizations with a long-term perspective focused on benefiting all stakeholders, not just short-term shareholder profit. However, servant leadership implies effort and commitment in developing its culture, where leaders need to be role models to create mutual trust between leaders and followers (Eva et al., 2019).

Accordingly, servant leadership principles facilitate agile leadership practices by prioritizing support and team needs.

2.3 Leadership Tensions

Leadership tensions are defined as "*contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time*" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Previous research has studied the tensions in leadership theories, which has resulted in several paradoxical perspectives on leadership, including ambidexterity, complexity, and paradox (Lavine, 2014). Ambidexterity can be understood as a form of leadership flexibility that addresses competing, but equally important goals (Lavina, 2014). Birkinshaw and Gupta (2013) note:

> Essentially ambidexterity provides a normative perspective about how organizations function. It says that managers are making choices and trade-offs among competing objectives, and when they do their job well, they override the organization's tendency to go down the path of least resistance (p. 293).

Research on ambidexterity underscores the importance of leadership in managing competing demands. Tushman et al. (2011) argue that firms succeed when leaders can embrace tensions between existing practices and new initiatives, accepting and managing conflicting strategic demands. O'Reilly and Tushman (2011) add that ambidexterity is behaviorally enacted and shaped by leadership's ability to resolve these tensions. However, ambidexterity often focuses on balancing two competing goals without questioning the way those goals are defined or whether there might be a better way to approach them (Argyris & Schön, 1997). It sees tensions as a choice between two sides and aims to give equal attention to both, rather than exploring new or creative ways to deal with the conflict.

The second perspective is offered by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), who highlight the need for leadership that can address the growing complexity in the modern world. Drawing on McKelvey and Boisot's (2003), "*law of requisite complexity*," they argue that only equally complex leadership systems can effectively manage complex environments.

This aligns with Denison's et al. (1995) findings on cognitive and behavioral complexity in leadership. While cognitive complexity is essential for understanding the complex environment of tensions, Denison et al. (1995) emphasize that it must be matched with behavioral complexity, as leadership is fundamentally behavioural. Effective leaders, therefore, must be able to both comprehend and act upon the tensions present in complex systems.

The final paradoxical perspective suggests that *"contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time.*" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382) . Prior research argues that managing paradoxical tensions does not entail eliminating them, rather one should explore them. Poole and Van de Ven (1989) propose an acceptance strategy for paradoxical tensions. Similarly, Lewis (2000) argues that accepting that opposition exists offers a sense of freedom and reduces needless debates. Smith and Lewis's (2011) research shows that tensions can hold both negative and positive responses. If overly favouring either extreme, it can trigger negative responses and vicious cycles. However, effective management can instead foster reinforcing cycles that support learning and performance (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

2.4 Hybrid Leadership

Tensions and competing demands are recurring themes within leadership theory. Rather than offering universally applicable solutions, many leadership models present contrasting approaches that reflect different assumptions about human behavior, motivation, and organizational priorities (Lavine, 2014). As a result, leadership is often conceptualized along spectrums, where opposing styles or behaviors represent different ends of a continuum. One of the most well-known examples of such a continuum is found in Full-range leadership theory, which captures the dynamic between transformational and transactional leadership. Similar to traditional and agile leadership, transformational and transactional leadership represent two opposing styles of leadership, each responding to different leadership demands.

However, there is an ongoing debate about whether there is one ideal leadership style on the continuum, or if a more flexible, hybrid approach is necessary, combining two

opposing styles (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). For instance, since the introduction of transformational and transactional leadership theory, the field has largely favored transformational leadership as the ideal. However, more recent studies challenge this perspective, arguing for a more balanced view in which transactional leadership is recognized as both relevant and valuable in certain contexts (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

The distinction between transformational and transactional leadership was first introduced by Burns (1978) in a political context and later developed by Bass (1985) within organizational management. These two styles have since become central to leadership research (Jensen et al., 2019; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). As Conger and Kanungo (1994) note, the key difference lies in the nature of the exchange between leaders and followers: while transformational leadership seeks to inspire and elevate individuals by offering purpose and meaning, transactional leadership is based on the exchange of resources through reward and punishment (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Together with laissez-faire leadership, defined as the absence of active leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 756), these styles make up what is known as Full-range leadership theory (Antonakis, 2012). This model conceptualizes leadership on a continuum, from the passive laissez-faire style, to transactional and lastly to transformational, the latter being positioned as the most active and effective form.

However, Doucet et al. (2015) state that although Avolio (1999) and later Bass and Riggio (2006) acknowledged that leaders often use both styles in combination, research has frequently emphasized transformational leadership as the superior form. This focus has led to transactional leadership being viewed as secondary, described as less effective, and less desirable (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) argue that this portrayal introduces a bias in the literature, overlooking how transactional leadership can be effective in specific contexts or as part of a blended leadership strategy. Moreover, the tendency to treat transformational leadership as a singular, ideal model oversimplifies the complex reality of leadership behavior and its situational impact (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

Opposite leadership styles, such as transformational and transactional leadership, present the pure leadership styles since they emphasize only one of the two underlying demands. However, Meyer and Meijers (2018, pp. 33, 255) argue that there are hybrid styles in between, as the pure styles only make up the two ends of a continuum. In fact, they suggest that two contradictory styles can offer effective solutions combined, advocating for a hybrid approach. In a leadership context, Meyer and Meijers (2018, p. 255) refer to these findings as combinations – "*combining elements of both poles in an attempt to get the best of both worlds*". This can either be achieved through ambidexterity, the ability to pursue contrasting styles simultaneously (Meyer & Meijers, 2018, p. 255), or through innovative leadership styles where existing elements offer new combinations. This is what March (2010, p. 82) refers to as adaptive combinations, a "*process by which new elements are produced from combinations of established old ones*", which generates novelty. There are endless adaptive combinations to hybrid leadership (Meyer & Meijers, 2018, p. 256), which can only be hampered by the imagination of the maker (March, 2010, p. 81).

Additionally, hybrid leadership can also be understood as leadership flexibility, which refers to switching between leadership styles (Meyer & Meijers, 2018, pp. 232–233). This dynamic leadership approach can be visualized as a lack of barriers between two styles, allowing the leader to transition from one style to another based on situational cues. This requires responsiveness – quickly assessing the demands of a given context and adjusting the leadership accordingly. Effective responsiveness involves four key steps: sense what is needed, understand the signals, select a fitting response, and apply the appropriate style (Meyer & Meijers, 2018, pp. 232–233).

Meyer and Meijers (2018, pp. 53–54) suggest that a leader's personal traits and personality will affect which leadership style a leader feels comfortable practicing. They refer to this style as the default style, and it will generally be the one that costs the least effort for the leader to practice. It can therefore seem awkward when stretching one's repertoire of leadership styles, and it costs more energy as practicing opposite styles may not come as naturally. However, this can be challenged through leadership development (Meyer & Meijers, 2018, p. 227), as improving one's default style and

simultaneously expanding one's set of other leadership behaviors will lead to greater leadership agility facilitating dynamic leadership.

2.5 Hybrid Leadership Models

Several theoretical models have emerged, emphasizing a leader's ability to adjust their leadership style based on situational cues. Rather than committing to a static leadership approach, leaders are encouraged to adapt their behaviour to meet the varying needs of different situations by adopting a dynamic leadership approach. These models act as frameworks, supporting leaders in identifying which leadership styles are most appropriate according to influential factors. To gain a holistic understanding of the factors that influence hybrid leadership, three complementary models are introduced, each offering a different perspective on what factors to assess.

2.5.1 Situational Leadership

Situational leadership, originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard, implies that the appropriate leadership style can be determined by considering the followers' abilities in a given situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, pp. 160–170). Accordingly, their model states that leadership should be considered in regard to the followers' level of maturity, defined in terms of ability and willingness to perform a task. Moreover, Hersey and Blanchard (1977, pp. 160–170) categorize leadership styles along two dimensions: task behavior, which refers to the degree of direction needed from a leader, and relationship behavior, which involves the degree of support required.

However, this original version has faced criticism, primarily due to conceptual and empirical weaknesses (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). One key issue is the vague definition of "maturity" and the lack of empirical evidence supporting the match of leadership style to follower development level. Moreover, the original model's reliance on a linear progression of follower development stages has been challenged for oversimplifying complex leader-follower dynamics.

In response, the original Situational leadership theory underwent revision, resulting in an updated model that addressed the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the original

model (Blanchard, 2007). The updated version replaces the broad concept of "maturity" with a typology based on two distinct dimensions: competence and commitment. These are no longer treated as compensatory attributes but rather as interactive variables that define a follower's developmental state. Furthermore, four alternate definitions of employee developmental level were specified. Firstly, the enthusiastic beginner benefits most from a directive leadership style, where the leader provides clear guidance and structure. Secondly, the disillusioned learner requires a coaching style, involving both high directive and high supportive behavior to guide and motivate the individual. Thirdly, the capable but cautious performer needs a supportive leadership style that builds confidence and reinforces autonomy. Lastly, the self-reliant achiever requires minimal oversight and thrives under a delegating leadership style. Importantly, delegation is not seen as the mere absence of leader behavior but as a deliberate transfer of decision-making power and a recognition of the follower's capacity for self-leadership (Blanchard, 2007). This resulted in a framework for individualized leadership, where each team member requires assessment and adaptation in terms of leadership.

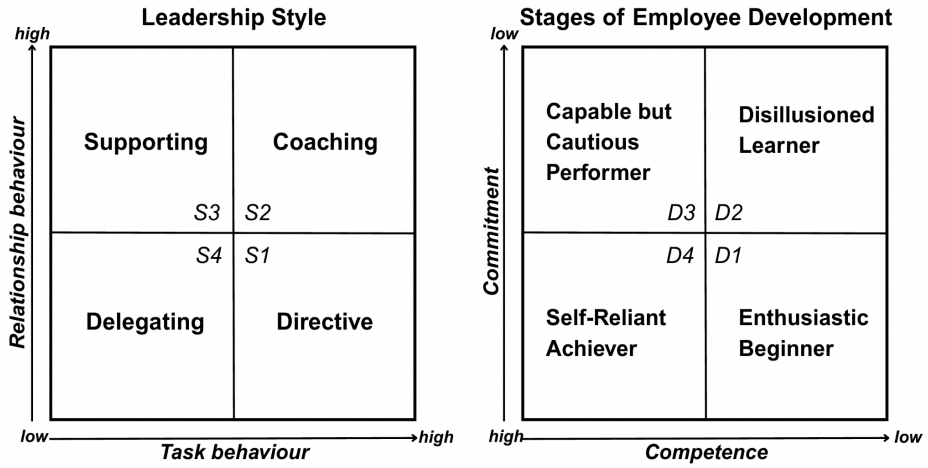


Figure 1: Situational Leadership (Blanchard, 2007)

2.5.2 The Contingency Model

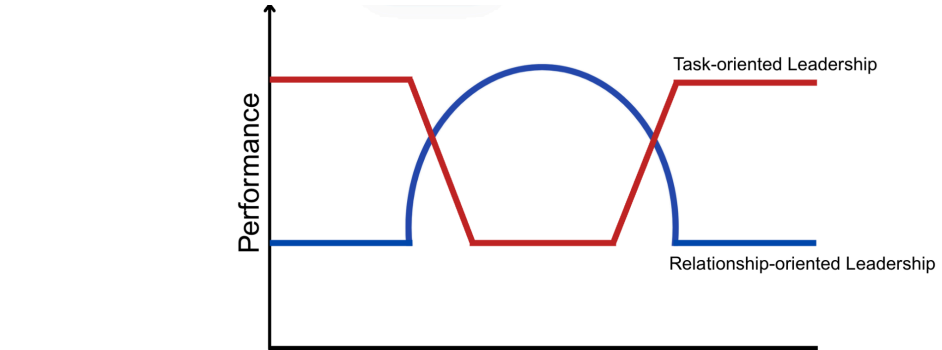
Fiedler's Contingency model, developed by Fred Fiedler in the 1960s, emphasizes the importance of the situation variables in leadership (Fiedler, 1972). Fiedler's approach argues that there is no ideal style of leadership. Instead, the effectiveness of a leader is contingent upon the match between the leader's style and the degree to which the

situation gives them power and influence. Fielder (1972) refers to these situations as more or less favourable, stating that leadership depends on the degree of power they hold, and therefore, the more power a situation gives its leader, the more favourable it is.

There are three situational factors that determine how favorable a situation is, these being leader-member relations, task structure, and position-power (Fiedler, 1972). Leader-member relations refer to the degree of trust and confidence between the leader and their team. Studies have shown that if the leader is liked, respected, and trusted, they have more influence over their followers than if they lacked those qualities (Fishbein et al., 1969). Furthermore, task structure concerns how clearly defined and organized the tasks are (Fiedler, 1972). Similarly, it is argued that leaders have more influence when tasks are highly structured and described step by step than when they are vague with no clear direction (Fishbein et al., 1969). Lastly, position-power relates to the formal authority the leader holds, implying that leaders who have the ability to reward or punish hold more influence than those who do not. Ultimately, these three factors determine the level of situational power a leader holds, which in turn suggests what leadership style is more appropriate (Fiedler, 1972).

Fiedler (1972) distinguishes between two leadership approaches, the relation-oriented style and the task-oriented style. Task-oriented leadership is most effective in situations that are either highly favourable, where the leader has strong authority, clear tasks, and good relationships, or highly unfavourable, where leadership control is needed to impose order and structure. Relationship-oriented leaders, however, tend to be more effective in moderately favorable situations, where a focus on personal relationships and team dynamics can make a crucial difference in performance. This is explained by the assumption that in an unfavourable situation, with low control and uncertain outcomes, the followers will seek assurance and want to establish relationships. However, in situations where they already feel assured and certain, they will be motivated to seek recognition from supervisors and admiration. Therefore, a task-oriented leadership style is better suited to these circumstances, while a relationship-oriented approach is more effective when followers prioritize interpersonal connection (Fiedler, 1972).

The Contingency model assumes a leader is not capable of switching between multiple leadership styles as the leader's personality makes it difficult to change one's behavior (Fiedler, 1972). Instead, this theory argues that one should either change the leader or change the situation to make it suitable for the leadership style the leader applies. However, more recent research argues that leaders can be flexible, adjusting their leadership to be more or less task- and relation-oriented depending on the situation, as well as adopting combinations of both simultaneously (Lavine, 2014; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).



Situation	*Favourable*		*Moderate*				*Unfavourable*	
Leader-member Relations	Good	Good	Good	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor
Task Structure	High	High	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low
Leader's Position Power	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak

Figure 2: The Contingency Model (Fiedler, 1972)

2.5.3 Cynefin Framework

According to Snowden and Boone (2007), leadership needs to be adapted to its changing circumstances, implying a need for flexibility rather than a one-size-fits-all model. They explain that the common mistake of leaders is to rely solely on one leadership style for all settings, motivated by its success in one situation. Thus, Snowden and Boone (2007) propose the Cynefin framework, which considers the context's complexity, aiming to help leaders identify the context and adjust their behavior and decision-making accordingly. The framework consists of four main domains – simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic, each defined by the nature of its cause-and-effect relationship. The fifth context, disorder, is characterized by difficulty

in identifying and categorizing the context into any of the four domains. In such a context, the situation needs to be divided into separate parts, which are respectively assigned to a domain. Hence, leaders must first identify the current context, and handle situations appropriately within that context (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Snowden & Boone (2007) describe the simple context as stable, predictable, and with clear cause-and-effect relationships, where leaders aim to respond with the use of monitoring management, including delegation and straightforward directives. The complicated context also contains a clear cause-and-effect relationship, however, the understanding of the situation is not clear, at least not for everyone, thus requiring further analysis. The leader must consider several potential solutions, including advice from experts, and choose the best one. In contrast, in a complex context, there is no immediate predictable cause-and-effect relationship as it emerges with time. The context is unpredictable, unstable, and unclear, requiring a creative and innovative way of working. Leaders require an experimental and exploratory approach to detect patterns, as there are several factors involved in making the situation difficult. Finally, in chaotic contexts it is impossible to identify the relationship between cause and effect, and both high uncertainty and tension. Therefore, leaders need to take immediate action to recreate a structure in which a strict command-and-control approach with clear and direct communication is necessary (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

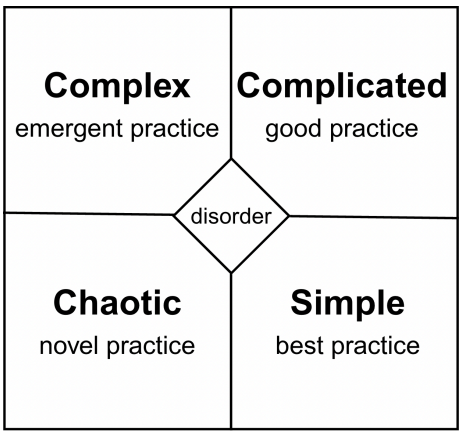


Figure 3: The Cynefin Framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007)

2.6 Theoretical Frame of Reference

The purpose of this chapter is dual: It begins with providing a foundation for the analysis to determine whether leadership in hybrid projects is traditional, agile, or hybrid, as well as the nature of the style. Following that, it presents different logics used in dynamic leadership, which will function as guidelines when analysing which logics are used in hybrid projects.

In regard to the first objective, this thesis presents a leadership continuum for project managers in hybrid projects. According to this theoretical frame of reference, traditional and agile leadership are considered to be two pure forms of leadership styles. Together, they present two sides of a leadership continuum, indicating there are possible variances that may occur in between. These variances will be referred to as forms of hybrid leadership, as they, on some level, incorporate both traditional and agile leadership into one leadership style. Furthermore, these variances can both take the form of combinations of traditional and agile leadership, as well as a flexible approach, continuously switching from one style to the other depending on situational cues.

Furthermore, the leadership can either be static or dynamic. Static leadership is fixed and constant, meaning the leader consistently operates from a specific point on the continuum, whether traditional, agile, or hybrid with a stable combination of elements. In contrast, dynamic leadership involves movement along the continuum, where the leadership changes or evolves, sometimes leaning more towards traditional leadership and other times towards agile leadership. Thus, the continuum not only captures the spectrum of leadership styles but also reflects the fluidity with which they can be applied.

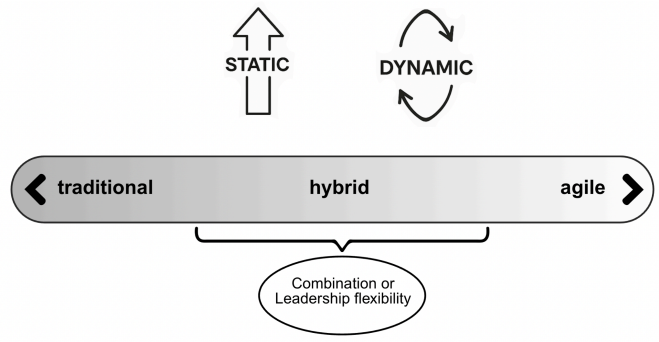


Figure 4: The Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects

Furthermore, in relation to the second objective, this chapter has introduced the Situational leadership theory, the Contingency model, and the Cynefin framework to provide a comprehensive overview of the different logics leaders may apply if using a hybrid leadership approach. Situational leadership reflects a micro-level, individualistic logic, focusing primarily on the follower's needs and development. The Contingency model offers a meso-level perspective, emphasizing the influence of specific situational factors. Lastly, the Cynefin framework brings in a macro-level logic, highlighting the role of broader contextual and external factors that impact the project environment. Together, these three frameworks illustrate leadership logics across the micro, meso, and macro levels. This layered understanding forms the foundation for the upcoming analysis, which aims to explore the logic that leaders in hybrid projects rely on when adopting hybrid leadership. By identifying what logics the leaders use, this analysis explains the underlying reasons for what leadership style they apply, when they apply it, and how they apply it, ultimately creating a framework for leaders in hybrid projects.

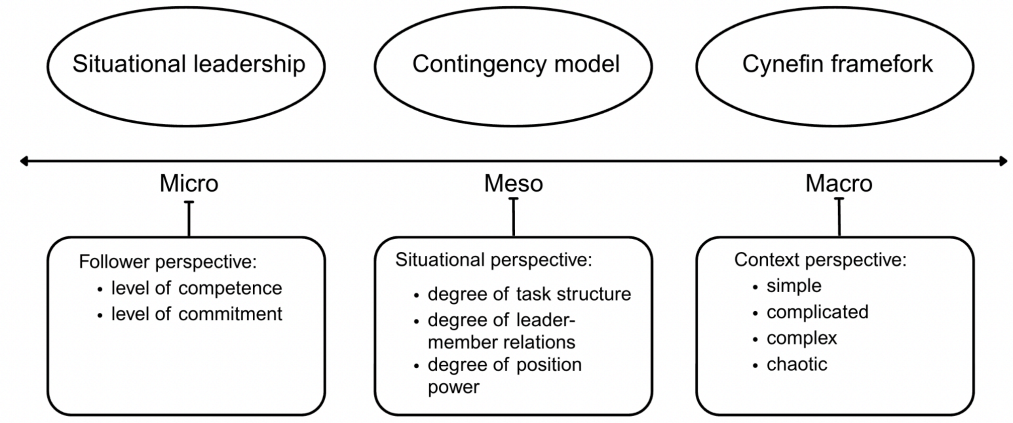


Figure 5: Micro, Meso, and Macro-logics for hybrid leadership

3. Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines the various methods conducted for this study. The following areas will be discussed in regards to choices and considerations: research design, data collection, and data analysis. Moreover, the study's ethical considerations and qualification criteria will be discussed, followed by its limitations and its use of generative AI.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to support its explorative nature, aiming to explore leadership in hybrid projects. Qualitative research aims to identify categories and concepts in order to make sense of a large database, ultimately drawing meaningful conclusions (Bryman, 2022, p. 297). Given the limited prior research on this study's topic, and the nature of our research questions, an inductive reasoning method has been employed. This approach allows theories and patterns to emerge from the collected data rather than being predetermined (Rienecker & Jørgensen, 2017, pp. 172–173). Inductive reasoning, aligning with the qualitative research strategy, focuses on theory generation rather than theory testing (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 58–59). This makes it a suitable approach for this study, as it aims to develop new theoretical insights within the field of leadership in hybrid projects.

The search for theories is grounded in qualitative data, seeking to understand a specific topic by identifying themes and patterns (Bryman, 2022, p. 304). In addition, the model allows us to draw general conclusions from specific experiences by observing trends and patterns in a finite number of data collections (Adams, 2014, p. 10). Research has shown that inductive methods enhance the practical applicability of findings, ensuring that the insights generated can be transferred to real-world project management environments (Klauer & Phye, 2008), which this study aims to do. Moreover, coding, referring to describing data through labeling, categorizing, and organizing data to facilitate analysis (Bryman, 2022, p. 301), was employed to identify themes and patterns. As concepts emerged, theories could be defined, building a theoretical framework that explains different phenomena (Bryman, 2022, p. 306).

3.1.1 Research Philosophy

The choice of a qualitative research design implies that this study is based on a research philosophy that acknowledges embedded assumptions in the approach. Research philosophy refers to the underlying assumptions and beliefs that guide how research is conducted (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 82). Three aspects are taken into consideration: ontology – how reality is perceived; epistemology – our knowledge about it; and axiology – the role of values in research (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 52-55; Spencer et al., 2014, pp. 82-83). This study is based on constructive ontology, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and shaped by individual experience (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 82). Furthermore, knowledge is understood as subjective and context-dependent, meaning that insights are generated through interpretation rather than objective measurement, aligning with the interpretivist epistemology (Hofer, 2001). Lastly, this study adopts a subjectivist axiological stance, acknowledging that the researchers' values and perspective inevitably influence the research process (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016). These philosophical assumptions are consistent with the study's aim and research questions, which seek to understand leadership through project managers' individual experience and perceptions, rather than through an objective lens.

Since this study is based on an interpretivist epistemology, the researchers' active role while processing knowledge is acknowledged. While the research is built on an understanding of social phenomena through participants' experiences and perceptions, the interpretation of the empirical insights is inevitable. Additionally, research is jointly shaped by both the researcher and respondents since the interactions during the interview, such as the nature of the questions and the researchers' presence, can influence the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 49–52; Fook, 1999). Given the inherently subjective stance of the study, reflexivity has been applied throughout the research process to critically assess the researcher's influence, ensuring the credibility of the findings. If there was any ambiguity in the respondents' answers during the interview, clarifying questions were asked to ensure a correct perception of their answer.

3.2 Data Collection

The data collection involved gathering large amounts of data from a small sample, which aligns with the qualitative research design (Hox & Boeije, 2005). The primary data, referring to data collected for a specific research problem, was gathered through in-depth qualitative interviews.

3.2.1 Study Sample

The sampling strategy aimed to support the study's purpose of developing a theoretical framework reflecting the complexity of leadership in hybrid projects. The study sample consists of eight participants, across five different companies, whose roles involved project management. While not all held a formal title of 'project manager', their roles included such responsibilities of a project manager. For consistency, all participants will be referred to as project managers in this study. The participants were selected based on their current or recent roles involving leadership responsibilities in hybrid project management, thus making them suitable respondents for this study. This aligns with the use of purposive sampling as a part of qualitative research, which aims to select participants relevant to the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 406). More specifically, the specific type of purposive sampling strategy called criterion-based was applied, where participants are chosen due to the match with a predefined criterion (Patton, 2002, p. 238), which in this study was: leadership roles in hybrid projects.

Furthermore, to ensure diversity of perspectives, the sampling strategy also incorporated variation by selecting project managers from different companies. While the study sample was not randomized, thus not allowing generalization of the population (Bryman and Bell, 2018, p. 406), the aim was to provide rich, in-depth insight into different leadership experiences in hybrid projects, consistent with qualitative research principles (Sandelowski, 1995).

Due to the study's scope and time limitations, the research design partly relied on convenience sampling, using suggestions of relevant participants. Nine project managers were interviewed, although one was excluded from the study for not meeting the predefined criteria. Two were randomly contacted through LinkedIn, based on their

roles as project managers, while the remaining seven were reached through a contact person in the field of project management. The latter reflects aspects of chain-referral sampling, where initially selected individuals suggest other participants, who in turn do the same (Patton, 1990, p. 237; Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 411-412). This was used due to limitations in our network of potential respondents.

There is no adequate sample size in qualitative research, but rather context-based to the study, along with a balance of large enough to capture variations, but small enough to allow depth (Sandelowski, 1995). Hence, this study followed Sandelowski's (1995) guidance by aligning sample size with the study's aim and methods, focusing on exploring leadership in hybrid project management through participants' experiences and perceptions, while assessing the quality of collected data. Each of the interviews consisted of one single project manager, allowing an in-depth understanding and capturing various perspectives of leadership, while still focusing on the central research questions and not becoming too broad. This scope was assessed to obtain theoretical saturation, where new data no longer provide additional insights to the themes being explored (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263). Overall, the method for the study sample aimed to support the study's purpose and research question by ensuring the selection of participants with relevant experience in hybrid projects, enabling an exploration of how they navigate leadership tensions and why they adopt certain approaches.

3.2.2 Interviews

Qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview study designed to gain in-depth data from a purposive sampling. Qualitative interviews promote detailed and comprehensive responses (Bryman and Bell, 2017, pp. 452-453), aligning with the study's aim of investigating individuals' experiences and perceptions to address the research questions. Given the multiple respondents, a certain level of structure was necessary to ensure consistency, and facilitate the identification of patterns and data analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 452-456). Thus, to support the nature of this study, semi-structured interviews, combining structure and flexibility, were used (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 454). While core topics were pre-defined as guidance, respondents were free to elaborate on broad questions, and the interviewer could adapt the set question order and ask follow-up questions beyond the guide.

The interview guide (see Appendix 1), was developed based on this thesis's theoretical framework, aimed at understanding whether the project manager's leadership is agile, traditional, or hybrid. The questions were formulated in alignment with the research questions, exploring what leadership tensions that project managers experience in hybrid projects, how they navigate these and why they adopt particular approaches. The interview was structured into two main themes: project management, aimed to provide a context about the project, and leadership, divided into task, team, and individual, based on Adair's (1973) emphasis on three core leadership responsibilities. This separation aimed to capture project managers' experience in leading these aspects, giving a solid foundation for identifying themes and patterns.

In response to feedback during the interviews, some questions were refined to improve clarity. As the interviews progressed, we learned which questions and follow-ups to prioritize when time was limited. Additionally, the final question: "*Is there anything you would like to add…?*" served multiple purposes. While it allowed the respondent to move beyond the predefined themes, offering space for open reflection, it also provided an opportunity for clarification of previous answers and to naturally summarize their overall perspective of leadership. In turn, it offered useful findings for comparison to their previous responses in the more structured questions, which enhanced the findings's accuracy.

Since this study relies on personal experience and perceptions, it was important to create a safe and open environment to encourage honesty and real responses. To achieve this, several steps were implemented to establish trust and comfort. At the start of each interview, we presented ourselves on a personal level and described the interview as a conversation. In addition, we always had the camera on in the digital interviews. Moreover, we introduced our study, clarifying the aim was to focus on their experiences with leadership, rather than evaluate whether one's leadership is good or bad. The participants were also encouraged to ask questions before starting with the structured questions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow repeated and detailed examination of the data, enabling the collection of additional information or clarifications, facilitating the analysis (Heritage, 1984, p. 238). Notes were also taken as a complement in case of technical problems with recording material from the technical tool, Microsoft Teams. Although time-consuming, both researchers were present during all interviews, allowing one to act as the prominent interviewer and the other to take more extensive notes and assess the overall development of the interview (Bechhofer et al., 1984). The passive interviewer ensured the interview guide was covered and filled in with supplementary questions if needed. This approach was well-suited for this interview with open-ended questions requiring flexibility. To ensure consistency and improve overall quality, the same person conducted all interviews, allowing the interviewing skills to improve over time.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis adopts an inductive approach, implying that our findings were developed from the data rather than guided by predefined theories (Azungah, 2018). This approach was chosen as it allows developing theories based on our observations (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 45), aligning with the study's purpose of creating a theoretical framework. A thematic analysis of the empirical findings was conducted in two phases: identifying themes and identifying patterns. Following Braun's et al. (2022) guidance for thematic analysis, the first part began with a familiarization with the data to gain a broad understanding of the data in regards to identifying themes. During this phase, the initial reaction and different takes on the data were discussed. Secondly, a more thorough and systematic approach to the data was undertaken, continued in alignment with Braun's et al. (2022) steps. Specific codes were established to capture the understanding of different segments of the data and relate them to our research questions. This created clusters of codes which were categorized, compared, and related to each other. Such an approach was suited for our study since it allows determining relationships between concepts and comparing them across data from different interviews. The identified themes with the supporting quotations is presented in Chapter 4, together with certain relationships between them, namely tensions.

The coding process of the data was designed to uncover leadership tensions, directly addressing RQ1. This was followed by identifying patterns in choices of leadership approaches and the underlying logic behind these choices, thereby addressing RQ2 and RQ3, which explore how project managers navigate leadership tensions and why they adopt certain approaches.

However, a common challenge when analyzing qualitative data is fragmentation (Bryman, 2022, p. 311), where the separation of data into distinct categories or themes risks a loss of context and narrative flow. Therefore, this study paid close attention to the context of each participant's project, aiming to provide rich, descriptive explanations of the underlying reasons behind the leadership behaviors. This approach acknowledges the importance of context influence on the individual, enabling understanding of one's behavior and opinions (Bryman and Bell, 2017, p. 386).

Furthermore, the second part of the process, which related to finding patterns, involved a comprehensive review of the empirical findings. Each project manager's stance was analysed and related to the theoretical framework. This process exposed variations within the data, which were thoroughly analysed in order to explain what created these variations. This was done by identifying recurring patterns across the data, allowing us to draw meaningful connections between individual perceptions and the broader theoretical concepts. This analysis is presented in Chapter 5, together with a visualized framework for project managers in hybrid projects.

Ultimately, the analysis aimed at generating theory out of the identified themes and patterns. Since the analysis is rooted in empirical data, it aligns with the principles of grounded theory. Accordingly, grounded theory is achieved in three out of four key aspects: First, as noted, the analysis is data-driven, meaning that theoretical insights emerge from the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 542). This allows openness to patterns and themes that naturally arise from the data, rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Second, theoretical saturation was sought by ensuring a sufficiently large study sample and conducting thorough coding, where no new insights arise after analysis. Third, the data has continuously been compared with emerging findings throughout the analysis process, ensuring that our interpretations

remain closely linked to the data and that no significant indications are overlooked (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 543). However, theoretical sampling was not fully employed for the interviews, meaning that grounded theory methodology has not fully adhered to.

3.3.1 The Gioia Methodology

This section provides an overview of the coding and categorization process, aiming to clarify how themes have emerged. The analysis followed the systematic approach inspired by Gioia et al.'s (2013), consisting of several stages. First, relevant descriptions and quotations were identified from the raw empirical material. These were then coded as short descriptions, forming the first-order categories, while maintaining faithfulness to the respondents' terms. Next, the first-order categories were transformed into second-order categories guided by theory, involving a more interpretative and theoretical lens. The second-order categories were further grouped into broader aggregated dimensions, serving as the core theoretical contributions to this study.

Table 1: The Gioia Methodology

First-order category	**Second-order category**	**Aggregated dimension**
The team expects clarity: when, where, and how things should be delivered. The project manager is the coordinator. The team expects security.	Providing security and clarity	Structure
The project manager is putting up the structures for how the work should be done. Communicating a direction, a goal, and then creating a structure to work in.	Creating guidelines to lean on	
The more people who are involved, the more structure is needed. People need guidelines to lean on when doing their work.		
A need to be flexible, that is, have the ability to take on today's problems and find a solution. Project managers cannot be squared in their thinking, they need to be innovative.	Flexibility to test different solutions	Flexibility
In development, the project needs freedom to test different things to find a way forward - that is where flexibility is needed.		
A project manager must be able to deviate from the process, to look at the situation and decide if the routine procedure is best suited or if flexibility is needed.	Deviate from routine procedure and find adaptive solutions	

Freedom to operate within a framework. Give them space to do their job.	Allowing the team to be self-governing.	Autonomy
The team takes the project goals and formulates them into a work description for themself.		
Less independent teams require more support, reminders, and push.	Controlling the team through close management	Control
A project manager needs control over the project to always have an answer.	Controlling the project through involvement	
To make sure everything that needs to happen happens, and everything that can't happen does not happen.		
To understand why, to have a purpose, to give the team a context	Motivate through purpose	Transformational motivation
Build visions and an idea of where we are heading.	Motivate through vision	
A vision answers why things are important to do, what one contributes to.		
The team members gain recognition and potential benefits if they perform well	Motivation through reward	Transactional motivation
Let the team present in front of the managers so they can show themselves off		
Include everyone to avoid creating a division among people	Facilitating connections and creating a space for collaboration	Collaboration
Everyone is on the same level		
The team has a discussion when making decisions. Include several perspectives on a problem.	Shared decision-making	
The team members are specialized in one area and should be focused on their area of expertise	An individualistic approach focused on individual expertise	Individualism
Adapting behavior based on team needs in the current situation	Situational and adaptive leadership	Dynamic
Adapting leadership based on personal relationships	Flexible leadership depending on the follower	

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The principles of good research practice presented by the Swedish Research Council (2024) have been considered in the designing and implementation of this study, ensuring that it upholds ethical integrity while contributing to the credibility and reliability of academic research. In an attempt to align the work with an ethical mindset, this study has followed four requirements for science research as presented by the Swedish Research Council (2024), including interest in research, protection, openness, and trust. The research is centered on conducting high-quality and relevant studies that generate valuable knowledge. To fulfill this purpose and be justified based on research interest, the research must be reliable, in line with the ALLEA Code's principle of reliability. Furthermore, the researchers take full responsibility for protecting those involved in or affected by our research. This interest is prioritized in every step of the process, ensuring that the interest of our research is not violating any rights or values, nor exposing anyone involved. This applies even when the impact is indirect or results from the broader consequences of the research, in line with the ALLEA Code's principles of respect and responsibility. Furthermore, we will ensure openness by documenting our findings and being as transparent as possible without sharing sensitive information. This is also regulated by several legal frameworks, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which governs the handling of personal data and imposes strict requirements on data security, consent, and transparency. Lastly, trust concerns the confidence in research and those responsible for conducting it. It is therefore crucial to balance the interest of protection with the interest of trust and openness to ensure that research remains independent to serve its role in society. Consequently, no findings that can contribute to the research will be hidden or ignored, as long as they do not violate any rights or values.

Additionally, as this study is based on data collected through interviews, the Swedish Research Council's (2024) ethical guidelines on how responsible research is conducted was also taken into consideration. The guidelines emphasize the importance of obtaining informed consent and using collected data responsibly. This means that participants must be fully aware of the study's purpose and how their data will be handled. In line with these principles, all participants were informed about the purpose

and methods of the study before participating, through the consent form (see Appendix 2). They were also informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. Moreover, participants and their organizations' names remain anonymous, and all collected data will be deleted when the study is completed. Thus, in the empirical findings and analysis, respondents were assigned aliases with actual names in an alphabetical order.

3.5 Qualification Criteria

This thesis is conducted within the field of business and economics, where the prominent qualification criteria include reliability, replication and validity (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 68-69). Reliability refers to the consistency of findings over time, replication involves the ability to reproduce the study using the same methods, and validity concerns the credibility and accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the data (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 68-69). However, based on qualitative research and the underlying assumption of the possibility of multiple descriptions of reality, Guba (1981) introduced alternative criteria tailored to qualitative research: trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Aligning with the nature of this study, Guba's concept will be adopted to guide assessment of research quality.

Credibility, similar to internal validity, assesses the trustworthiness of the results (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 70). To strengthen credibility, both researchers were present during all interviews and collaboratively processed the data to enhance the accuracy of interpretation. Moreover, the interview's final question allowed for confirmation of the accuracy of the respondent's term. In addition, the interviews were recorded, providing access to raw data throughout the process. This mitigates risk of misinterpretation or inaccurate recollection (Heritage, 1984, p. 238), further supporting credibility. Several peer debriefing sessions were conducted contributing objectivity throughout the process of the study, a technique establishing credibility (Guba, 1981).

Moreover, transferability corresponding with external validity determines to what extent results can be applied across contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 70). Hence, a description of the respondents and their contexts was provided, an approach that

facilitates the reader's assessment of applicability to other contexts (Drisko, 2024). The study employed purposive sampling, supporting transferability by ensuring participants were selected based on relevance to the research topic, thereby enabling the collection of data that can inform similar contexts (Guba, 1981).

Furthermore, dependability builds on reliability (Guba, 1981), emphasizing a complete and comprehensive process of the study process (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p. 70, 380). Accordingly, the methodology chapter accounts for a detailed description of the process. Finally, confirmability, implying an objective perspective of research not affected by the authors' personal biases or assumptions (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp. 382-383). This was also addressed by the methodology providing motivations for decisions and choices, along with conclusions well-grounded and motivated by theory and empirical evidence. In addition, peer debriefing sessions contributed to objectivity of the study, providing opportunities for external critique and feedback throughout the process.

3.6 Limitations

Several limitations have emerged throughout the research process. Limitations in time have influenced our ability to conduct a larger number of interviews, and our network of contacts limited the potential participants to a narrow and close area. As a result, perspectives from other regions or cultural contexts may not be fully represented, which should be considered when interpreting our conclusions.

Given that our study is based on a small sample of eight interviews, no generalization claims about a broader population can be made. Instead, this thesis' focus is on theory building rather than theory testing, meaning that the purpose of our research is to develop new conceptual insights rather than to validate existing theories (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The selection of our sample is therefore not intended to be representative of a larger population but rather chosen to provide in-depth data that can support the development of theoretical frameworks. In qualitative research, particularly when using thematic analysis, the emphasis is on capturing meaning, patterns, and relationships rather than on achieving representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

However, having a small sample group can present a limitation, as conducting additional interviews could have provided a better foundation for theory building. A larger sample size may have allowed a wider range of perspectives, strengthening the reliability of theoretical insights. According to Langley (1999), the process of theory building has limited predictive power. Nonetheless, the sample size is assessed to be large enough to achieve theoretical saturation for the scope of this thesis.

Acknowledging the empirical insights builds on subjectivity, where experiences, perceptions and perspectives are central. Accordingly, the findings must be understood as the participants perceived reality, implying it is not necessarily an complete or objective description of reality and all factors. Hence, there is a risk of absence of perspectives that have not been drawn attention to during the interview opportunity. However, the analysis relies on the assumption that, while several participants raise similar perspectives, it increases the credibility to make a point of it.

3.7 The Use of Generative AI

The use of generative AI has served as a supporting tool for language corrections and editing. Additionally, AI was employed when translating quotations from six out of the eight interviews, as they were conducted in Swedish. AI was used to ensure neutral translations and minimize the risk of the authors unintentionally influencing the data outcome through their own interpretations. The translations were carefully reviewed to maintain the original meaning.

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of this study. It begins with an overview of the participants' profiles, using assigned aliases to present each project manager. Following that, five leadership tensions that have emerged from the data are described, providing an in-depth understanding of how the project managers navigate contrasting demands in their leadership. These tensions represent emerging themes that were identified through an inductive approach with a systematic coding process of the interviews (see 3.3 and 3.3.1 for a description). Finally, the chapter explores the dynamic nature of the project leadership, providing insights into influential factors that shape the logics used when project managers' approach their leadership.

The empirical data reveals how leadership practices are performed, based on the responses of the interviewed participants, while also exploring how they perceive and interpret situations and the cause-and-effect relationships of their leadership behaviors. This dual perspective provides a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the actual leadership practices and underlying perceptions that shape its dynamics, forming a foundation for the subsequent analysis.

4.1 Profiles

Adam: Adam is currently working as a project manager for a smaller company, where he has worked for over 15 years. He leads both internal projects within the firm and external projects for other companies. The projects concern smaller initiatives, often involving smaller teams who are working part-time on the projects. Due to the nature of these projects, his teams consist of experts with deep knowledge in their areas.

Bonnie: Bonnie is working in the field of software development as a product owner at a large manufacturing company. As a product owner, she is responsible for leading one product area, which includes several software applications and services. By using project management and taking on the role as a project manager, Bonnie manages several projects simultaneously, which are often interconnected, overall including three teams consisting of over 20 people.

Conner: Conner is a project manager at a global company in software maintenance, where he has worked for eight years. Moreover, he has been part of the global function for the last three years as a project manager and runs multiple connected programs, which in turn consist of several parallel projects in software solutions. There are also other projects not being part of any program, still, all of them share the same purpose.

David: David works in the software industry for a large manufacturing company. He has been employed by the company for over 20 years and has worked as a project manager for the last ten years. Davis runs several projects simultaneously, each with different teams. These teams, in turn, have different team leads, with whom he is working the closest.

Eric: Eric has over ten years of experience as a project manager in the software industry, working for the same global company as Conner. He is leading large projects, developing software solutions, and working on one project at a time. His roles include project manager, scrum master, and product owner for one of the products in his release.

Filip: Filip is a program manager with 25 years of project management experience. He is leading several projects that are all categorized under one program, which together involves hundreds of people distributed around the world. Filips' team consists of a number of project managers. However, he runs his program on a project basis.

Gabriella: Gabriella works as a senior project manager with over ten years of experience at a manufacturing company, largely working with product development. She is leading large-scale projects, running for several years, some of which are so expansive that she had shared the project management role with a colleague.

Henrik: Henrik is a project manager, who has been working for the same company for almost 15 years. He is currently leading two parallel scaling projects: one internal product development project and one external construction project involving subcontractors. The difference in nature distinguishes the two projects.

4.2 Structure vs Flexibility

All the project managers in this study balance structure with flexibility in their projects. Aspects such as planning, deadlines, and coordination were recognised for their importance and therefore required a structured approach. Gabriella highlights that to facilitate teamwork, it is crucial to ensure a shared direction and to make sure all pieces fall into place at the right time. This coordination requires heavy planning, a clear division of responsibility, and continuous adherence to deadlines. Eric states that as a project manager, it is beneficial to plan in such detail that you can visualize the release in advance to minimize surprises along the way.

According to Conner, seeing his team members executing according to the plan and delivering within the set timeframe is the most rewarding part of being a project manager. To support them throughout the project, Conner provides his team with documentation regarding the timeframe and deliverables, which they can lean on in less structured times. Instead of using documentation, Filip suggests that verbal follow-ups are equally effective in providing structure in his projects. In turn, Henrik argues that providing this type of structure will encourage flexibility within the team, ultimately resulting in a balance between the two.

> I believe, or rather I know, that they [the team] expect clarity – when, where, and how things should be delivered, more or less. [...] My job is coordination; that's the expectation they have of me, and to create that sense of security. Having freedom to operate within a framework, so they feel that this is a space where they can do a great job. – *Henrik*

Similarly, all project managers emphasize the importance of flexibility, suggesting that simply following the project plan is not enough. Even though the structures act as a support for the team, a project manager can not be too rigid when it comes to making necessary changes for the project outcome. However, their attitudes towards flexibility and adaptation differ. Filip views the overall project set-up as fixed, whereas flexibility is applied at a detailed level in planning, specifically in how to navigate deviations. This kind of flexibility is more feasible in smaller projects or in settings with fewer constraints and dependencies, such as lower number of people involved. Eric argues

that flexibility is a key characteristic for a successful project manager. This applies particularly in problem solving, where a solution from yesterday is not a guarantee for today's problems, therefore, innovative thinking is crucial. The flexibility is required throughout the entire project, particularly in the design phase.

> You always need to be flexible, that is, have the ability to take on, what problem do we have today and how do we solve it? You can not be squared in your thinking, but you need to solve the problem. [...], you need to be innovative.
> – *Eric*

However, Eric argues that surprises should be avoided and that changes to the original plan hold risks. Bonnie suggests that in simple contexts, operations can be standardized and routine, however, when the context changes into a complex setting, one goes into the experimental field. Henrik thinks that changing circumstances might hold unforeseen opportunities as they often require innovative solutions. In a similar manner, Adam advocates for innovative workshops and opportunity management as he states that novel thinking allows for long-term solutions.

Additionally, Conner explains that it is better to deliver high quality with delay than on time with lower quality. However, strict time requirements may limit this flexibility. As he puts it: *"It is better to have something working rather than something that follows the plans. [...] Flexibility when it applies right*". To navigate the risks that flexibility holds, such as missing deadlines, going over budget, or not achieving the set scope, Gabriella argues that at least one of these three must be flexible.

> We always talk about the project triangle. That's a common tool for balancing scope, time, and cost. These are the three variables you can work with. In our projects, we define a project triangle as part of the actual project definition. [...] And then you need the freedom to adjust at least one of those variables. [...] If everything is fixed and something unexpected happens, you are stuck.
> – *Gabriella*

Several project managers also highlight the importance of adapting as new insights emerge. Eric argues that this way of working is especially valuable during the product design as it allows the product to develop and adapt to new circumstances. As Henrik puts it: *"Highlight what goes well and use setbacks as lessons"*. Similarly, David describes how the team uses to reflect over such occasions as a learning opportunity for the team. However, in order to adapt to emerging insights, Bonnie makes sure to plan for flexibility by allocating a bit of slack in every project. Gabriella, who is running big projects that can go on for several years, suggests that incorporating flexibility in these types of projects is crucial for their success, as it simply is not possible to know how circumstances might change.

Adam has another approach when it comes to balancing structure with flexibility. In contrast to the others, his focus is on the project effect, rather than providing structure through plans, coordination, and deadlines. He suggests that having a clear picture of the project's purpose is the primary framework that is needed for a project to succeed. By communicating 'why' the project is needed, providing everyone with a context, the team can lean on that shared direction when making decisions. Similarly, several project managers including Filip and Henrik agree with this approach, also stating that a clear purpose functions as a structure the team can find support from, while still balancing this with a framework consisting of plans, timelines, and deadlines.

> If you don't know where you are going, it does not matter what road you take, and that applies to every project. We have to understand why we do it, because if we know that, we can always use it [the purpose] as guidance when choosing what road to take, [...] so that is where you need control in a project. – *Adam*

4.3 Control vs Autonomy

The leadership behavior, in terms of opting for control or providing autonomy for the team, differed between the project managers in this study. While some argued control is necessary to make the project stay on its course, others suggested that autonomy is a more effective solution.

As a project manager, Adam describes how he has the main responsibility for the entire project, which is ensuring the project goal is achieved. He has the strategic overview and works with the team to make it actionable. When Adam works with senior team members in software development, he usually delegates tasks to team members that transform their individual goals into activities in a self-governing way. Eric describes his role as a project manager as being responsible for driving the projects forward and for their results, but also responsible for all members' well-being. While Eric has the ultimate responsibility for the project, the team has their own responsibility for their deliverables as long as they know what is expected in terms of work methods and tasks.

Adam values the freedom to define his own work, and he therefore extends the same autonomy to his team members. Gabriella's standpoint on this aligns with Eric and Adam's, however, she emphasizes that for this approach to be effective, she needs to trust that they will come to her if they encounter any problems.

> I don't like the word control because we work from the assumption that everyone does their job properly. [...] It is a guiding principle: how we work, you trust that everyone delivers. [...] If everything is going well, then I don't want to know, I don't need to know. I assume things are fine unless I hear otherwise. But if there is a deviation, that's what we want to catch. – *Gabriella*

In a similar manner, Eric trusts his team's ability and willingness to do the work, which allows him to focus on more pressing matters rather than supervising them. Moreover, Eric and Henrik underscore the importance of giving their teams trust and confidence to manage their work rather than micromanaging, as they think it is important for them to feel empowered. However, Henrik suggests that a level of control can, in fact, provide the team with even more autonomy. By clearly defining their roles and decision-making mandate, he aims to create transparency around their responsibility rather than restricting their independence. This empowers the team members to take charge and allows them to act without having to ask for permission. However, this empowerment requires psychological safety, as it comes with a lot of responsibility.

This was evident in David's case, as he shared that his team often avoided responsibility as they were afraid of being criticized: *"Some teams do this [take responsibility], but others are a bit paralyzed in that sense, as they have resistance to take responsibility when there is a risk of receiving criticism afterwards"*. Even though they have an open culture where everyone can share their opinions, the team prefers to escalate the decision-making to a higher instance to avoid taking responsibility. In contrast, Conner and Gabriella state that the goal of a project manager is not to be needed by the team.

> A project manager is needed the most when something goes bad. The goal is to not be needed, that is the goal of a project manager. You should be able to back away, and everything will function by itself. If that is the case, then you have succeeded. – *Gabriella*

Furthermore, Conner thinks that if he were to act as a supervisor, controlling every aspect of the operation, his team would cut him off. He argues that if he instead uses this time to support the team by removing obstacles and facilitating their work, they will not only feel more empowered but also become more productive and engaged. "*For me, the [key] word is always 'supportive'*", he explains, emphasizing as long as he is adding value to the team, they will accept him as a leader. Adam has a similar approach, describing himself as a servant leader. He is constantly searching for ways to support the team instead of taking command, as he trusts the team and their expertise.

> There is also the aspect of supporting others by identifying and removing obstacles that stand in the way of their success. This is particularly important when working with senior employees, as most of them are experts in their respective domains and do not need to be told how to do it [their jobs]. – *Adam*

However, Filip argues that for some, taking command and giving them directives can be a form of support if that is what they need when they are at a standstill. In an unclear situation with many unknowns, letting the project manager, who has a holistic perspective, take control can be both beneficial for the project as well as reassuring for the team. Similarly, Bonnie likes to be hands-off when the team feels secure and to be more hands-on and present when they feel uncomfortable or insecure.

David explains that his earlier, more directive leadership style suited the previous waterfall setup. However, he finds it less effective in today's hybrid projects, combining waterfall planning with agile teams, as he states that this context requires a balance between control and autonomy. Although the teams are self-organized, he still needs to follow up to ensure progress and delivery, thus, he sees a certain level of control as necessary to keep things moving.

> It's not always easy when you're working in a hybrid setup: partly with waterfall, and partly with teams having a more agile way of thinking. You often have to remind people and really take the initiative to push things forward. Some teams are more self-organized, while others need more support. That is probably the main challenge for me, to keep pushing because they are not always independent in these projects. – *David*

4.4 Transactional motivation vs Transformational motivation

Most project managers emphasized the importance of having motivated teams, however, they had different views on how to motivate and engage their teams, primarily being either transactional or transformational. The project managers who chose a transactional approach mostly focused on rewarding the team and its members for their achievements, ultimately giving them a motive to strive for higher performance. Rewards can include recognition in the company, such as Conner inviting his team to present to management with him.

> Sometimes, when you know you have to communicate to a crowd, like a factory manager or regional manager, I like that the person in the factory presents the plan. So, we will do something we agree on. I say this is the plan, do we agree? Yes. Do you want to present? Because usually, they like it because it's one way that they can show themselves to the management. – *Conner*

Similarly, Eric shares team members' achievements with their managers, not only to give them visibility but also to help them gain recognition and potentially benefit from their accomplishments, such as receiving a raise. At the same time, he wants his teams

to feel proud about their work, which is usually a motivating factor for them to drive their work forward independently. In doing so, he supports motivation in multiple ways.

> Something is off if their performance has no weight; no matter how good I am, I only get a 3 [grade on a scale of 1 to 5]. It is very important since we use it as a basis for their salary. [...] If someone performs well, I usually tell their boss so they have a chance to get rewarded. – *Eric*

Moreover, none of the project managers used punishment to motivate their teams. In fact, Adam argues that punishment has an opposite effect on the team's performance, as it will make them feel inadequate.

> I remember a long time ago, I had a developer who worked with me on a release. [...] The release was on a Thursday, and he had gone to bed around 4 or 5 am the day before. He was in no good shape. [...] If I had screamed at him all day long, it would only have made him feel worse, and we would not have come anywhere with solving our problem. [...] Will he ever come this way to work again? No. Will he be able to see me in the eyes again? Absolutely. – *Adam*

Instead, several project managers used a transformational approach, focusing on articulating visions to their followers. Gabriella thinks it is easier to get her team motivated if she gives them a purpose and a vision. Similarly, Filip argues that the team members have to understand why their work is important and how it contributes to this purpose to feel motivated.

> To understand why [they do something] is incredibly important, and to give the people a context, to give them a goal, and tell them 'that is why it is so important [to do the work]'. [...] To give their small tasks a purpose. – *Filip*

Adam shares this view, arguing that a well-functioning team has a shared goal and a drive to accomplish it. Therefore, he strives towards engaging his team by communicating a uniting vision. Furthermore, Adam describes himself as an inspiring leader, motivating his followers by visualising how their work can contribute to a lasting impact. Additionally, Eric also adopts a transformational approach, but with a

more situational focus. In contrast, he emphasizes clarifying the task effects in the workflow, where ‘why’ is communicated to support collaboration and understanding.

Henrik has noticed his approach to motivation differs between his two current teams. The external team consists of subcontractors from various firms, each hired to complete specific parts of the project and paid per delivery. In contrast, the internal team includes internal employees with a set salary, whose performance does not directly affect their compensation. In Henrik’s experience, the external team tends to be more results-driven and proactive, while the internal one can require more coaching and follow-ups to maintain pace and focus.

> You have to make them [the internal team] prioritize your project, as they usually are a part of a number of other projects as well, so it comes to create an environment motivating them to deliver on time. [...] For them [the subcontractors], it is very harsh, they do not get paid if they do not deliver. It is a tougher reality, and they are more dependent on the creation of a shared success. – *Henrik*

Furthermore, Henrik explains his leadership approach depends on the team members’ backgrounds, such as previous work experience and understanding of the project’s impact. To motivate his team members, Henrik adopts a transformational approach by providing context. He clearly illustrates how their contributions fit into the bigger picture, as he aims to get them genuinely interested in the work.

Additionally, several leaders integrate their followers’ personal goals and visions into their projects, further engaging and motivating them. Bonnie, for example, sets a series of one-on-one meetings to get to know the team members personally. By knowing what motivates them, where they see themselves in the future, and what they enjoy doing, she forms a better understanding of them. For example, she states that most developers want to develop personally, either through expanding their knowledge or specializing in one area, and therefore, she gives them the margin to research. Although this is a drawback for the project as they spend time away from their job, they will return more motivated and with an increase in competence.

> I firmly believe that when we talk about the project [and resources], we usually have a set scope and set time [...], but I think that instead of cutting from the scope [...], you can grow the human bits. Because if you have motivated teams that develop, then you have sort of suddenly more resources, even if you have the same headcount, same hardware, but motivated people deliver much more value, and the working environment is simply great. – *Bonnie*

David has experience with employees lacking motivation as they do not find their work to be fulfilling. As he puts it, *"Some you just know – they know what it [the job] is about. They do not think it is the most fantastic job either, but you know they will do it."* He admits his team is demotivated, but instead of taking an individualistic approach to motivating his team members, he seems to accept their lack of engagement and relies on them to just do their jobs. However, he also believes that engagement and motivation can be fostered through empowerment, particularly for teams working directly with clients. For example, engaging in a dialogue with the clients allows the team members not only to get to know their client's operations but also see how their delivered product works in practice. Nonetheless, David chose to focus on the task, rather than motivating his team, as he trusts that they will do their job, even though it is without enthusiasm.

4.5 Short-term vs Long-term

Whether the project managers used a short or a long-term perspective in their leadership differed. This became evident when they defined project success, as some argued that project success depended on whether the project objectives were reached or not, whereas others suggested that success extends over the project closing. Furthermore, many project managers emphasize the importance of team members' well-being throughout the process of achieving objectives, viewing it as a key criterion for defining a project's success.

Adam explains that it can be difficult to determine whether a project is truly successful, as success often becomes clear only after the project ends. In the past, he has delivered advanced products that were completed as planned but failed commercially, making the evaluation of success ambiguous. In contrast, he considers projects successful when the

results are used over time and create a lasting impact. He notes a shift in how success is defined, from timely delivery to long-term impact, and emphasizes that he values both short- and long-term perspectives in his work, with a stronger focus on the latter.

> But the most successful projects I have been part of are the ones where the results are used in some way over time and make a difference in the long run [...]. In the 90s, one was talking about a successful project as something delivered on time. 25 years later, we are past that, now we are talking about something that made an impact, the created goal made an impact somewhere else. – *Adam*

According to Henrik, success is defined as when the impact goal is accomplished, and refers to the project's purpose being reached. This means that the project outcome is used and works according to its purpose. He implies the product may not possess the precisely defined characteristics, instead, it is the impact goal that is the focus. Hence, Henrik's perception of project objectives moves beyond delivering a product and completing a project. Additionally, Henrik also highlights how the process must contain a smooth journey for the team, otherwise, it is not seen as a success with a broken team.

> We are going to buy a dishwasher that cleans glass bottles. The impact goal is not to have a dishwasher installed but to get glass bottles to be cleaned in the correct amount and correct 'cleanness'. [...] [People] should also know how the dishwasher works and be able to use it. [...] One should think about it as a whole rather than just installing a dishwasher. – *Henrik*

Similarly, Bonnie explains how many think of project success as delivering a product. However, she states that introducing the product to the users and continuous maintenance are just as important. Furthermore, Conner states that while delivering according to the project requirements regarding scope, time, and cost to the right quality is important, it remains secondary to ensuring the final outcome is meaningful and functional.

In contrast, some project managers have a low emphasis on the long-term perspective. Eric describes himself as a goal-oriented person and defines the goal as "*releasing [products] to the market and generating revenue for the company*". He underscores how he is fixed around the release date, seeing the time frame as a definition for a successful project. While he has a strong dedication to his project's success, he acknowledges the importance of considering the team members' well-being along the way. Similarly, David says, "*personally, I am very result-driven*", and he strives for his team to deliver to a hundred percent, and preferably a little bit more if possible. However, it is a balance of how much you can push your team to perform. The delivery should maintain a high quality and be within the time frames. At the same time, he emphasizes the importance of seeing the results when the project is delivered, particularly in terms of customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, Gabriella simply states that success in projects is when the team has reached the intended goals together. She also places an emphasis on well-being in the teams, where it is a balance for her as a project manager. However, Filip determines project success as relative, as doing something good considering the conditions given. He highlights how success in projects contains many aspects, such as achieving a variety of objectives, solving issues between people, but also delivering the demanded result of a project as defined from a supplier's perspective.

4.6 Individualism vs Collaboration

All project managers have a clear focus on collaboration. However, the complex environment in which they operate demands the team members to be experts in their respective fields. Due to the highly specialized knowledge, it becomes hard for the team members to relate to one another and collaborate. Yet, instead of accepting individualistic teams, the project managers put more emphasis on creating an environment where their teams can collaborate despite their knowledge divide. For example, both Bonnie and Adam suggest that investing in employee development to broaden their knowledge fosters collaboration as it creates a team with overlapping perspectives, ultimately creating a better understanding of one another.

Additionally, according to Filip, a well-functioning team is collaborative**,** where everyone contributes to the solutions, and has reasonable demands on each other, creating a sense of drive. Additionally, the project managers include their team when making decisions, both regarding the team and the project. Accordingly, Eric states: *"I include everyone in the meeting if the time allows, [...]to avoid creating a division of people who are needed or not"*. Adam uses his team's expertise when making decisions concerning the project, giving them the necessary information and letting them do the analysis. Bonnie has a similar approach, she includes the team, and when she has gathered many perceptions, she starts to get a perspective on the problem.

> I know it is my decision in the end, most likely, but I act as a team member; we have a discussion. I personally start listening. [...] And then again, after I get so many opinions on the topic, then I am able to confirm a decision. – *Bonnie*

When new conditions or unexpected changes arise during the project, Filip emphasizes that the first step is to identify who primarily needs to be informed. Once relevant people are informed, the focus shifts to collaborative discussions on how to respond. This approach enables the chosen team members and Filip to collectively break down the situation, determine potential adaptations and changes, and make decisions about when and how to communicate the information to the rest of the team.

Furthermore, it is important for Eric that his team members feel needed and appreciated. However, their collaboration is tested when things go wrong, and he carefully avoids a blaming approach and instead adopts a constructive mindset focused on problem-solving and positivity. He encourages a forward-thinking mindset, as people tend to search for someone to blame, which only drains energy from the project.

> I usually avoid doing things like, for example, saying: 'But I told you we were supposed to do it this way months ago, and you did not listen – look where we are now'. That is kind of the wrong approach as I am creating a negative atmosphere [...], [instead,] forget about what has happened and solve the problem, and try to maintain a positive atmosphere. – *Eric*

When problems arise, Filip expects his team members to primarily reflect on it and seek support from relevant team members, and secondly, bring unresolved issues directly to him or during a project meeting so they can find a solution together. Additionally, when Adam's team members encounter a problem, he helps individuals find suitable support by leveraging both his internal and external networks to find the right competencies to solve it. He considers problem-solving a team responsibility, avoiding blame, which he believes only inhibits the process and is not beneficial for anyone. Similarly, Gabriella shares how her previous project included a lot of difficulties, and a key component for accomplishing it was transparency and honesty, which was welcomed by the company culture. This aligns with her personality, as she describes herself as very extroverted and transparent, focused on building relationships.

> You should welcome it [deviations] and consider it a good thing, because it is a learning opportunity. [...] it is better that we identify it than the client does because now we can still manage it and make necessary changes. – *Gabriella*

Henrik handles issues by identifying underlying reasons, viewing deviations and learning opportunities rather than failures. It is important to be transparent in both successes and difficulties, to encourage accomplishments, and to make lessons learned from setbacks. He stresses the value of openness, fostering a culture where mistakes are seen as a collective experience and raising concerns is encouraged, something he considers his responsibility. To support this, he facilitates weekly project meetings, tracking progress, where reflection, mutual support create an environment where vulnerability and communication are central. Drawing from past experience in less forgiving environments, he emphasizes transparency and shared accountability over blame.

> One starts to look at what has gone wrong. Why has it gone wrong? [...] It should be good to make mistakes and dare to raise concerns about it, that should be rewarded. [...] Raise what is good and make lessons learned from difficulties. – *Henrik*

In contrast, David adopts a more structured approach, where he values receiving explanations when things deviate from the plan or earlier reports. This transparency is important for him in order to communicate further. He expects early identification of issues so teams can respond on time, and he can adjust resources if needed. While this process usually works, he handles escalating situations by seeking external support from his network. Flagged issues are later analyzed to support learning and improvement for the team.

> Then you need a reasonable explanation for why. Why do you [a team member] check off items, but maybe we are not completely done with them? Because it is also about me possibly needing to go back to my project group with the stakeholders and be able to clarify why things turned out the way they did. – *David*

Furthermore, task distribution reveals how responsibilities are allocated within the teams, either individually or collaboratively. David explains that teams are assigned certain tasks based on their function. Similarly, Conner adopts an individualistic approach, where he argues that responsibilities should be defined in a narrow way, guided on the team's expertise.

> The people inside the project, they are the experts. I mean, we have experts in each area and when we assemble a team, we always get the specialists for that specific area. [...] They should be focusing on their expertise, so they need to be focused on only what is technical. Everything else, they should not be involved. – *Conner*

Filip describes that, in large teams, certain responsibilities will apply to different people naturally due to their roles or titles. However, there is always a significant “grey area” of responsibilities that could apply to several team members. In Filip’s current team, the division of these tasks often happens organically in various ways, as team members feel a sense of shared responsibility. According to him, this collaborative sense of work in regards to task distribution is a key indicator of a well-functioning team.

> And that work of distributing tasks is a great indicator of how well a team functions, because someone has to do it [the work that is in the grey area]. And if it is a natural process, where you do not feel that some [team members] are avoiding those kinds of questions, then you have a well-functioning team.
> – *Filip*

The idea of a well-functioning team emerges across several project managers' reflections, each offering nuanced perspectives that highlight collaboration and trust as crucial factors. Similarly, Bonnie has experience with a high-performing team possessing competence and deep trust in each other, allowing them to manage and naturally distribute all tasks. In addition, she describes how experience and time in a particular team configuration constitute the third significant factor for a well-functioning team, alongside competence and team orientation.

> They basically had such trust in the team and such competence that they could rely on that they were able to tackle any task. Even if innovation came over and they did not have the competencies, they were able to quickly develop it while splitting the tasks organically. – *Bonnie*

Adam emphasizes how establishing psychological safety early on is a key factor for well-functioning teams, as confident teams deliver results. He explains how he leads by example to foster this environment, and how trust is created when the conversation between team members goes beyond work, as knots can continuously be untied.

> The teams that I have and that work the best [are] those ones where I have managed to create a sense of safety, for the one I am and for the one I dare to be. [...] I feel safe admitting when I do not know something without being judged. If I can establish that kind of atmosphere early in the team, then the team will always succeed. – *Adam*

David offers a related view, emphasizing teams where members feel a sense of responsibility, engagement, and the courage to raise concerns. He strives to lead by example through openness and vulnerability: "*You are better at that than what I am,*

and being honest with that, while simultaneously being open with it in return so they understand they can turn to me if there is something [they need]". This openness, he argues, builds trust, fosters collaboration, and enhances knowledge integration.

Similarly, Gabriella stresses that her behavior is important to reflect what environment they want to have, particularly in how she positively meets setbacks. Furthermore, Henrik reflects on lessons learned from his career in project work, emphasizing that leadership is not something that can be acquired through reading or checklists, but it is rather shaped by the leader's ability to create a sense of safety. However, Bonnie offers a different perspective, acknowledging she is "*personally not too trusting of a person*". Still, she underlines the importance of the team's trust in its leader, which emerges gradually through consistent, transparent, and reliable behavior.

> Everyone can run a project with a project goal, but the leadership aspect is about who you are as a person [...] A leader is someone you naturally want to follow, [...] someone who creates safety and makes you feel seen. – *Henrik*

4.7 Dynamic Leadership

4.7.1 Context and Situation

The project managers agree that leadership must be dynamic to enable adaptability according to several factors. Bonnie emphasizes the need to adapt one's leadership to each specific project context. Her team initially used a waterfall setup, but she found it ineffective when the requirements were unclear, prompting a shift towards an agile approach. She argues that in projects with simple settings consisting of clear requirements, a structured and rule-based approach is preferred, while projects in complicated contexts with uncertainties require an agile approach fostering adaptiveness and innovation. Some projects included a combination of both contexts, which she refers to as a complex context, requiring a blend of structure and adaptability. While acknowledging some leadership practices are fundamental, Bonnie adds that leadership is largely shaped by the individual: "*I can only give it my flavour*."

> [A simple setting] was like a breeze, and it was nice to have something that is more regular rule based and [when in a complicated setting], we went into innovation, it was the experimental field. – *Bonnie*

Similarly, Henrik emphasizes that different project management approaches require distinct leadership styles. While one of his projects is more traditional, following a predefined process, another is very agile with cross-functional input, ongoing problem-solving, and adaptability. As he puts it: "*That is two different leadership styles, so to say.*" David shares Henrik's perspective, describing how the nature of his project changed from traditional to hybrid, so did his leadership. In previous projects with waterfall-setup, he leaned towards a more directive and decision-oriented approach. However, the current hybrid project requires a more balanced approach of control and autonomy. Thus, their experiences illustrate the need for leadership flexibility adapted to the project's context.

Furthermore, several project managers emphasize the importance of adapting leadership to both contextual circumstances and the evolving nature of the project for the given situation. Gabriella and Adam both become more direct and authoritarian in their decision-making under pressure, while otherwise preferring encouraging discussions with the team if time allows. Nonetheless, Henrik highlights how his leadership shifts throughout the project, as early phases require creation of a shared direction, while the closing phase tends to demand more detailed involvement. Moreover, Eric describes how the project's situation determines his leadership approach. While he adopts a more passive approach following the progress when things run smoothly, he becomes more involved during setbacks to coordinate and support the team.

> Of course, if [the project] is not going well, you can not just sit and laugh at your desk. It does not work; you need to fix the problem, and that requires more work for me. – *Eric*

Additionally, Filip and Gabriella underscore that the level of structure in project leadership is determined by the project's context, particularly its scale. Filip argues that in large-scale projects, the need for structure through control, follow-ups, and planning is essential, as the large number of people involved need clarity in what, how, and why.

> [If there is a lack of structure], people do what they think they should do instead of how it actually works. You need to understand the context. You need to understand why you, as a constructor, need to do something at a given time.
> – *Filip*

Bonnie not only adapts her leadership to different project contexts, but also within the flow of a single project in a specific situation. As she puts it: *"[...] for me it was really key to have the situational leadership and to analyse the situation and adjust my behavior based on what the team needs right now."* She explains how even between meetings, her approach may shift, from providing structure and a hands-on approach when the team faces uncertainty to stepping back when they are confident and informed.

4.7.2 Relationship Dynamics

A couple of project managers change their leadership depending on their relationship with the individuals they are leading, prompting a demand for flexibility in leadership to meet the different needs. Henrik and David highlight how familiarity in the leader-follower relation and project duration shape the leadership style. David's communication style shifts depending on his relationship with the receiver. He describes a more cautious approach towards stakeholders, whereas he can lead with more confidence toward his internal team members, as he knows them much better. Along the same lines, Henrik describes how a shorter project implies building quick, surface-level, and more homogenous relationships with the team members. The focus is on shared understanding and getting work done by using a casual encouragement style. In contrast, longer projects allow more personal connections, where Henrik shifts towards a more individualistic approach tailored to each member.

> [In one of my projects], I work with employees who might stay for two months and leave again. Naturally, you do not develop as deep a personal relationship with those team members compared to longer projects that last two or three years [...]. [With them], you get to know how they are at home, you understand them more personally. So, it is very different, and it also affects how you lead them. – *Henrik*

Furthermore, Henrik describes his formal authority and ways of working as differentiating between the external team, consisting of subcontractors, and the internal one. The external team working in an agile manner is driven by contracts and monetary incentives, and therefore is more result-oriented. In contrast, the internal team works routine-based with structure in their setup.

> [In the project with the external team], if I am not happy with one of the team members there, there is a power dynamic that is completely different to the other [project with the internal team]. [...] They still have their employment security. They still get paid regardless. – *Henrik*

4.7.3 Individuals

Several project managers emphasize the importance of tailoring leadership to individual team members by first getting to know them. Gabriella learned the value of complementing leadership styles when sharing the project manager role with someone whose approach contrasted with hers. They divided the tasks based on which leadership style suited the team members best, allowing the team members to be naturally drawn toward the leader whose approach matched their needs and preferences. This experience taught Gabriella to be more flexible and adapt her leadership based on different needs and requirements.

> We shared the leadership responsibility, [...] which was an important tool. [...] We complemented each other, my strengths were not the same as my colleague's strengths, so we learned from each other. [...] In those very different personalities, we found a better balance. – *Gabriella*

Additionally, as Gabriella puts it: *"You need to adapt your leadership to the different personalities and the needs they have, so you always need to get to know the people first to understand them."* Since everyone is different, it can entail that communication must be done in several ways to suit each individual. Similarly, Filip values ongoing conversations to get to know his team members personally, as he believes these insights into personal circumstances help him to understand them and their behavior in a professional setting.

Eric also values recognizing individuals' uniqueness. "*One person might enjoy making jokes, and never take offense, while another might get upset, so you need to have some sense for people as well", he explains.* Accordingly, Eric reflects on emotional intelligence as crucial to navigate through people dynamics, alongside situational judgement that develops over time through experience. Gabriella further adds, leadership is also shaped by the leader's own personality.

> You have to have yourself as the starting point, always. I can only be me. [...] You can always develop your bad qualities. But I need to be me to be successful. – *Gabriella*

Furthermore, some project managers highlight the importance of adapting leadership based on an individual's competence and motivation. Henrik implies these factors are shaped by an individual's previous experience and understanding of the project's holistic perspective, requiring different levels of guidance and support. David describes how his leadership shifted from being more hands-on to a hands-off approach as the competence level of his teams increased.

In addition, while Adam's default style is based on coaching and servant leadership, reflecting both his personality and its proven effectiveness with most people, he acknowledges that it is not always sufficient. He argues that some individuals require a more controlling and delegating leadership approach, often due to a lack of competence or motivation. He stresses the importance of identifying these needs early on, something he admits has failed with the past. His experience highlights the need for leadership flexibility, particularly when individuals deviate from what he considers the standard.

> I always start with a coaching and servant leadership style. My failure in leadership or with people is when something else is needed, and I start to realize that more and more with age. [...] I have failed because I needed to be much more controlling, as the people I worked with did not really have the competence as I thought they had. Or the drive or motivation. – *Adam*

Filip, contrasting with other project managers, states that his leadership style is consistent regardless of the context, whether it is a traditional, agile, or hybrid project. This applies especially for his soft skills, as people's personal needs are rooted in human nature, such as preferring structure and details. Instead, he believes leadership flexibility is driven by differentiation in people's needs, personalities, and group dynamics.

> It still comes down to letting people know what, why, and when to do things and give them the conditions to do so, and make them feel good. It does not matter what the organization looks like. [...] There is a difference in individuals, but the individual as such has the same needs, no matter how the project is organized.
> *– Filip*

4.8 Summary

To summarize, while most project managers share a fundamental way of practicing and perceiving their leadership, notable nuances and occasional opposing perspectives create a divergence. Thus, there is a clear recognition that leadership needs multiple balancing acts. All project managers balance structure and flexibility, however, their approaches differ noticeably. Their stance regarding control and autonomy differs, nonetheless, tendencies towards both sides are evident. Moreover, motivation is largely driven by an inspiring approach, while others have elements of rewards. While most define project success by long-term impact, some emphasize short-term delivery. Finally, individualism is the foundation for all project teams, however, all project managers strive to balance it with collaboration. When navigating these tensions, project managers have dynamic leadership that switches styles or combines different ones in order to accommodate the different needs, where context and situation, relationship dynamics and individuals are influencing factors to their approaches.

5. Analysis

This chapter will analyze the tensions between structure and flexibility, control and autonomy, transactional and transformational motivation, short-term and long-term perspectives, as well as individualism and collaboration. Following that, the dynamic nature of leadership in hybrid projects will be analyzed, ultimately providing an explanation of what logics project managers use when navigating these tensions. The purpose is to present a leadership framework building on the theoretical frame of reference. While the five tensions are treated as contrasting poles that the project managers balance, dynamic leadership is distinct in nature as it serves as an overarching theme over all the tensions, and thereby shapes the structure of analysis.

5.1 Navigating Leadership Tensions

The empirical findings reveal several emerging leadership tensions experienced by project managers in hybrid projects. Consistent with previous perspectives on tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011), the tensions identified in this study entail contradictory and interrelated elements. This is evident in how project managers enact their leadership, as they must navigate contradictory demands that require fundamentally different leadership approaches.

Firstly, all project managers balance structure with flexibility in their leadership. They highlighted thorough planning and adherence to deadlines as crucial, which led them to emphasize communicating structures and following up on team progress. Previous research has highlighted these practices as vital for maximizing efficiency and minimizing wasted efforts, characteristics which align with traditional leadership (Norrie & Walker, 2004; Shenhar, 2004). Similarly, coordination was also seen as a key leadership function, with managers stressing the importance of synchronizing tasks and aligning team efforts. This structured approach shows how the project managers leadership encompassed traditional aspects, while still allowing room for flexibility.

All project managers agreed that flexibility is required in their projects. While some argued it is only necessary in minor aspects, such as fine details or task adjustments, others emphasized its role in adapting to major shifts in project direction or scope.

Regardless of whether the focus is on minor details or major shifts, project managers create flexibility by advocating for innovation and novelty within their teams. This aligns with prior research on agile leadership emphasizing adaptability and responsiveness to change (Beck et al., 2001; Rialti & Filieri, 2004; Rigby et al., 2018). For instance, Bonnie allowed her team to follow routines in simple contexts, leaning on previously established structures, and encouraged innovation in complex contexts, advocating for flexibility in her projects. This approach aligns with Tushman's et al. (2011) view that one should embrace the tension between existing practices and novelty. However, it deviates from Argyris and Schön's (1997) statement that managers should attend equally to both sides, as the leadership is clearly dynamic, changing approach depending on the context. Nonetheless, it reflects a hybrid leadership approach as it combines structure with flexibility by balancing exploitation with exploration.

Secondly, the project managers did not fully agree on how to manage the tension between control and autonomy. Several project managers such as Adam, Bonnie, Conner, Henrik and Gabriella argued for team autonomy by allowing teams to be self-governing rather than supervising every detail. This reflects agile principles, promoting autonomy, a short chain of command (Denning, 2016), and self-governing teams (Rigby et al., 2018). Bauwents and Cortellazzo (2025) argues that leaders should adopt an empowering approach to enable independent teams. However, Gabriella and Eric, emphasized that autonomy requires trust in that the team has both the ability and willingness to do the work, and is open about problems or mistakes.

In fact, Filip, David, and Adam argued that control is essential, as they are ultimately responsible for the project's success. They viewed control as a form of support that offers direction and clarity, aligning with Pigeau and McCann's (2002) view on control and command. However, Pigeau and McCann (2002) argued that authority, responsibility and competency is required for effective command, which was not highlighted as key capabilities in this study. Instead, empowerment, support and guidance was emphasised, aligning more with the coaching capability of agile leadership (Rigby et al., 2018).

This observed variation, where some project managers prefer autonomy while others argue for control, can be explained by the level of independence in the team. According to the project managers, teams that are motivated and experienced, or at least possess a holistic understanding of their context, are more independent. In such cases, autonomy is favourable, as the leader can share responsibilities and focus on more pressing matters. In contrast, less independent teams require more control and guidance. Overall, the project managers demonstrated both traditional and agile leadership tendencies, but instead of combining them, they preferred to switch between them based on team independence. This variation can be further understood through the concept of acceptance. Rather than resolving or eliminating the opposing demands of autonomy and control, the project managers acknowledge and explore them. This aligns with Poole and Van de Ven's (1989) notion that paradoxes are not problems to be solved, but conditions to be engaged with. In this way, the managers' ability to shift between competing demands reflects a form of acceptance, enabling them to adapt without becoming paralyzed by contradiction.

Thirdly, the project managers had different standpoints when it came to motivation. Most emphasized the importance of communicating a clear vision and purpose, either by showing the lasting impact of the work or how each role contributes to the bigger picture. These findings reflect the earlier concept; transformational motivation (Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987). In turn, this approach aligns with agile leadership, which stresses vision, meaning, and purpose (Rigby et al., 2018). However, this study reveals a contrasting perspective where a few project managers, including Conner and Eric, mentioned reward as a motivational tool and found it effective. This reflects traditional leadership, which advocates for reward as a suitable method for motivation, allowing focus on supervision and performance management rather than active team engagement (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Misbahuddin & Maarif, 2025).

The case of Eric and Conner deviated from the rest of the project managers who favored transformational motivation. They may therefore be considered exceptions within the overall pattern. Notably, both work in the same organization, which could indicate a shared cultural influence on their transactional approach. While this may help to explain the variance, the findings advocate for agile leadership to be best suited for the overall

hybrid project environment. Since the project managers did neither combine nor switch between agile and traditional leadership, they solely accommodate one side of the continuum. In fact, this analysis suggests that there is no inherent tension between transformational and transactional motivation in hybrid projects, despite such tension seemingly emerging from the data. According to Smith and Lewis (2011), focusing solely on one aspect of a tension leads to negative outcomes. However, this study's findings do not show any negative responses related to this agile approach indicating that the expected tension between transformational and transactional motivation may not exist within hybrid projects.

Fourthly, in regards to the tension between short-term and long-term perspectives, project managers differed in their views on short-term versus long-term goals, especially when defining project success. Similar to Adam, who aims to create a lasting impact, Henrik, Bonnie, and Conner emphasized that real value emerges when products are in use, beyond project completion. This reflects long-term orientation (Shenhar, 2004), which in turn constitutes a part of the agile approach (Rigby et al., 2018). These findings support prior research on servant leadership, advocating for benefitting all stakeholders rather than solely the shareholders with one's outcome (Eva et al., 2019).

In contrast, Eric, who describes himself as goal-oriented, focuses on product release and revenue, aligning with Shenhar's (2004) view of traditional, short-term leadership that prioritizes time-to-market, and value for shareholders (Denning, 2016). Similarly, David values project completion and describes himself as result-driven. While his emphasis on timely delivery reflects a traditional view, his attention to customer satisfaction after delivery suggests that some emphasis is still put on what happens after project completion.

This variance, where some focus on long-term success and others, such as Eric and David, argue for short-term objectives, can be explained by their personal traits that shape their leadership, as they identify themselves as focused on results. In contrast, Adam, who sees himself as a visionary leader, using vision communication as a motivational tool, adopts an agile approach (Rigby et al., 2018). These differences

suggest the project manager's mindset is rooted in their personality and can significantly influence their leadership approach.

Finally, regarding the tension between individualism and collaboration, the project managers clearly prioritized collaboration. However, all teams are inherently individualistic due to their narrow expertise, which suggests that the emphasis on collaboration is an attempt to balance the contrasting demands. Individualism aligns with the principles of specialization presented by FW Taylor, which form the foundation for traditional leadership, and later evolved into an operational mindset that prioritizes efficiency (Norrie & Walker, 2004; Shenhar, 2004). Nonetheless, all project managers emphasize the importance of collaboration and team effort to compensate for the individualistic approach. Many describe their teams working collaboratively, sometimes even involving stakeholders. For instance, Adam, David, and Filip rely on their networks for support and problem-solving, which according to Denning (2016) is a central principle of agile leadership (Denning, 2016).

Additionally, several project managers, including Eric, Adam, Gabriella, and Henrik, avoid blaming individuals, instead emphasizing shared responsibilities as a team effort. Moreover, Filip and Bonnie's teams showcase collaborative task management, with responsibilities shared and organically distributed. This aligns with the well-established agile principle of self-organizing teams (Beck et al., 2001; Rigby et al., 2018; Denning, 2016; Cooper & Sommer, 2016). Bonnie attributes this success to competence, trust, and experience in working together as a team. Additionally, Adam emphasizes the importance of psychological safety, trust, and teamwork for effective collaboration. In contrast, David's approach leans toward individualism, with task allocation following functional divisions and team leaders managing the distribution of responsibilities. While not fully hierarchical, this structure aligns with a more traditional leadership style with clearly defined roles (Bolman & Deal, 2003). An important argument in earlier research is that collaboration is essential to the agile approach (Beck et al., 2001; Lawong & Akanfe, 2025). These findings reveal how most project managers similarly emphasize collaboration, indicating practice of agile leadership.

The influence of company culture emerges as a significant factor in shaping the work environment in hybrid projects, reinforcing Rigby et al. (2018) and Zasa's et al. (2020) findings that cultural change is crucial when adopting an agile approach. A transparent and supportive culture, for instance, encourages the open management of mistakes and deviations, as seen in Gabriella and Henrik's approaches, which aligns with the company's emphasis on collective learning. These insights suggest that company culture significantly impacts the creation of trust, psychological safety, and collaboration. However, David's experience contrasts with this, as some of his teams avoid responsibility due to fear of criticism, despite the organization promoting an open culture. This finding underscores prior research emphasizing the difficulties with a cultural shift towards agile (Zasa et al., 2020; Rigby et al., 2018).

However, it is clear that the project managers also seek to influence and shape this culture by leading by example, which aligns with servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), thus, also agile leadership (Lawong & Akanfe, 2025). Adam, for instance, believes that high-performing teams thrive when psychological safety is established early, and he fosters this by demonstrating vulnerability. Similarly, David emphasizes trust, responsibility, and engagement, acknowledging his limitations while lifting others' strengths. Gabriella focuses on fostering a learning environment where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth, while Eric uses mutual respect and humor to create an open atmosphere. By embodying these behaviors, these leaders aim to create teams where trust, transparency, and collaboration are foundational, aligning with the principles of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), thereby adapting their leadership with the cultural values they wish to instill.

In this case, regarding the tension between individualism and collaboration, it becomes clear how the project managers navigate the tension by addressing both sides while using a hybrid leadership approach. Rather than falling for the tendency to go down the path of least resistance as described by Birkinshaw and Gupta (2013), which in this case would be to keep the individualistic approach inherent to hybrid projects, they override it by emphasizing collaboration. As a result, they avoid the negative responses that could appear from neglecting a demand as suggested by Smith and Lewis (2011).

5.2 Dynamic Leadership

The empirical findings show that there is no fixed leadership style for each tension. Instead, the project managers require dynamic leadership that can change and adapt according to different influential factors of leadership, including context and situation, relationship dynamics, and the individual follower. The project managers identify the needs based on these factors and adjust their leadership accordingly. Hence, there is a need for hybrid leadership, being either a combination of the styles or switching between the two (Meyer & Meijers, 2018, pp. 232-233, 256).

Firstly, the project managers highlight the need to adapt their leadership based on the project's context, which they describe as ranging from simple to complex or chaotic, consistent with the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Bonnie, Henrik, and David distinguish between traditional setups as simple and predictable, and agile setups as more complicated due to uncertainty. Furthermore, they state that a combination of traditional and agile, in other words, a hybrid project environment, is complex, requiring an innovative way of working. This aligns with Snowden and Boone's (2007) definitions of the different domains, advocating for its suitability in hybrid projects.

Beyond the context, situational factors also influence leadership adaptation. Gabriella and Adam adopt a more authoritarian style in high-pressure situations, resembling the chaotic domain in the Cynefin framework, where control is needed to restore order (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Additionally, Filip and Gabriella imply that the scale and scope of the project determine the degree of structure. Large-scale projects are inherently more complicated due to including a greater number of people and parts, requiring greater coordination, control, and directness in procedures. Hence, this type of project aligns with the complicated context in the Cynefin framework, where multiple interconnected elements require further analysis and clarity (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Several project managers also adapt their leadership depending on the project's situation. Eric, for instance, illustrates situational responsiveness, as he adopts a more hands-off approach in stable phases but becomes more hands-on in challenging situations, reflecting the adaptive logic in the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone,

2007). His shift aligns with Fiedler's (1972) Contingency theory, which suggests more control in unfavourable contexts to impose order and structure. However, his passive approach in favourable situations does not fully align with the theory, which would still suggest task orientation even in stable environments. Nonetheless, his consistent task orientation indicates a partial alignment.

Secondly, two project managers illustrate how leadership also requires flexibility to manage different relationship dynamics. Henrik adjusts his leadership depending on whether he works with internal or external teams. Using Fiedler's (1972) Contingency model, the external team reflects weaker trust and clarity due to poor leader-member relations, while the internal team shows the opposite. Furthermore, the task structures are clearer in the internal team, however, he holds a stronger position-power in the external team. Similar to which leadership style the theory suggests, Henrik adapts his leadership to be more or less task-oriented and relationship-oriented. Although the model assumes a fixed leadership style, Henrik's case challenges this by demonstrating situational adaptability. This highlights the model's usefulness in mapping situations, but also its limitations in explaining dynamic leadership in practice.

In addition, both Henrik and David adjust their leadership depending on the closeness in the relationship between the leader and the follower. In particular, Henrik's motivational approach differs, affected by the length of the project and previous experience of working together. While he uses an individual-oriented approach in closer relationships, a more standardized style is applied in less personal ones. Similarly, David's communication style varies with his familiarity with the audience, shifting between caution and confidence depending on whether he addresses external stakeholders or internal team members. These findings elucidate how different types of relationships demand different leadership approaches, rather than considering leader-member relations as an assessment of more or less favourable, as Fiedler (1972) suggests.

Lastly, several project managers, including Henrik, Gabriella, Filip, and Eric, emphasize how leadership needs to be adjusted to the individuals they are leading. Hence, they propose that it is necessary to get to know each individual personally to identify their specific needs, personal traits, as well as situational personal circumstances. This deeper

relationship allows them to better tailor their leadership according to each individual. The project managers illustrate how emotional intelligence, situational judgement, and understanding personal differences are significant components of effective leadership that is flexible.

Furthermore, the empirical insights strongly prove Situational leadership theory's (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, pp. 160–170; Blanchard, 2007) effectiveness, which emphasizes adapting leadership based on followers' competence and motivation. Several project managers describe their leadership as dynamic and responsive to team development. Adam highlights how his default coaching and servant style is generally effective, but in cases of low competence or motivation, he adopts a more directive approach. David similarly shifts from hands-on to autonomous leadership as team members grow more capable. Henrik adds that individuals' prior experience and project understanding influence how much guidance they need. These examples underscore that effective leadership requires consideration of individual readiness, making adaptability essential for aligning with and supporting each team member's growth.

In fact, Filip states that he solely takes the individual's needs and the group dynamics into account when determining what leadership style to adopt. He also states that the project management approach, being either agile, traditional, or hybrid, has no impact on his leadership. This statement does not align with this study's findings, as a clear connection between project management approach and leadership was established in the analysis of the contextual demands. The project management evidently differs, and therefore, the teams' needs will differ somewhat in terms of requiring different leadership styles. However, even though Filip's statement does not align with the findings, his stance that people's fundamental needs and personal characteristics do not change with the project approach may be correct. On one hand, Filip is centered around leadership for the human fundamental needs, while on the other hand, other project managers emphasize aspects such as the project's external context, scope, or phase. Accordingly, there is a variance, arguing for project leadership as a complex concept, with different aspects requiring different approaches in adaptiveness.

Finally, this study's findings indicate that project managers leadership in hybrid projects does not reflect pure agile or traditional styles. While theory outlines these ideal types on which the opposite leadership approaches are built on, the empirical findings suggest they are unattainable in practice, as hybrid projects demand a more balanced approach to manage leadership tensions. Building on previous research on leadership tensions, these findings suggest that leadership is complex, requiring close attention to the requirements of different tensions. In contrast to Argyris and Schön's (1997) suggestion of ambidexterity, advocating for equal attention to both sides on a continuum, this research shows that this approach will not work in a hybrid project. Instead, the findings align with McKelvey and Boisot's (2003) "*law of requisite complexity*", arguing that the complex system of hybrid project management requires equally complex leadership systems. Additionally, this research aligns with Denison et al.'s (1995) findings that leadership tensions require both cognitive complexity and behavioural complexity, which this research has proven by identifying that leaders both acknowledge the contrasting demands as well as adjust their behaviour accordingly.

5.3 The Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects

5.3.1 The Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects II

Building on the theoretical model outlined in Figure 4, illustrating a leadership continuum for hybrid projects, the empirical insights and analysis presented in this section contribute to refining the model by grounding it more firmly in both theory and the study's findings. Five leadership tensions have emerged between structure and flexibility, control and autonomy, transactional and transformational motivation, short-term and long-term, and individualistic and collaboration. These in turn entail different leadership approaches as some require hybrid leadership through combining traditional and agile simultaneously, some require hybrid leadership by switching between the two flexibly, and some solely require one singular leadership style.

Furthermore, the analysis of the project managers' dynamic leadership has resulted in several emerging logics used to determine where on the continuum to position oneself. These logics describe either what style to adapt depending on different influential factors, or to what extent one should combine traditional and agile leadership. As stated,

leadership in hybrid projects can be visualized through a leadership continuum ranging from traditional leadership to agile leadership. This suggests there are various combinations of them both, some leaning more toward one style and less toward the other.

In order to map what logics are used when determining where on the leadership continuum for hybrid projects to position oneself, an in-depth analysis was carried out. Since only two project managers highlight relationship dynamics as an important influential factor, theory can not be built on whether relationship dynamics impact leadership in hybrid projects, due to the lack of empirical support. However, the alignment when it comes to context and situation, a followers' individual perspective, leadership personality, as well as company culture and team dynamics suggests otherwise. Based on the findings in the analysis, a model describing how project managers navigate emerging tensions and what logics they use to do so has been created:

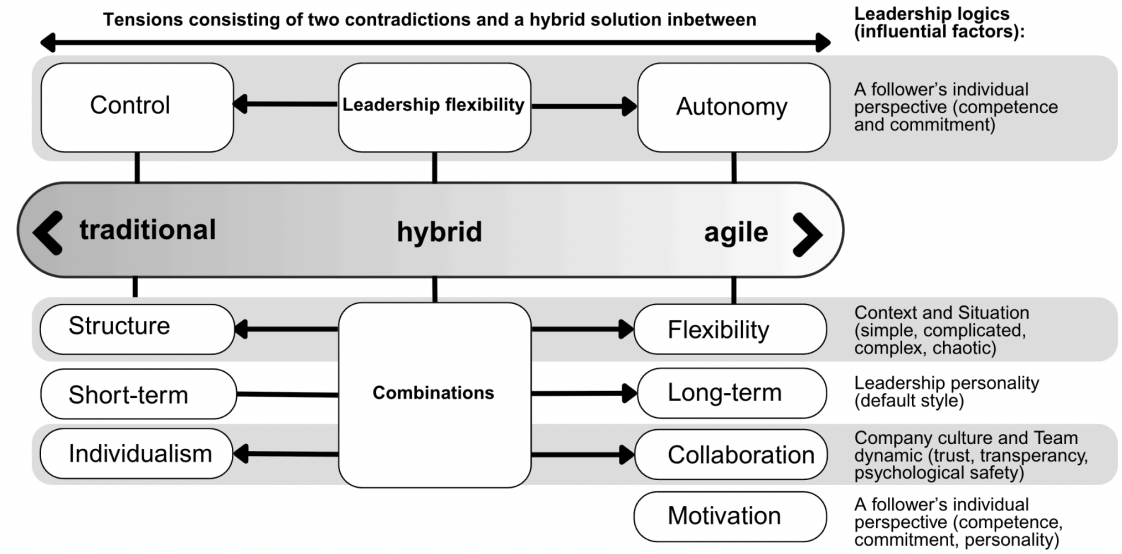


Figure 6: The Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects II

Firstly, the tension between control and autonomy requires a flexible leadership style, where the leader adopts traditional leadership when control is needed and agile leadership when autonomy is needed. The logic that is used is based on an individualistic perspective, taking follower competence and commitment into consideration. Secondly, the structure and flexibility tension requires a combination of

traditional and agile leadership, where structure aligns with traditional leadership and flexibility aligns with agile leadership. Whether a leader should lean more towards traditional, agile, or adopt equal parts of them both depends on the context and the given situation. Thirdly, in regard to the tension between short-term and long-term perspectives, all project managers are inherently short-term oriented as the completion of their project is in their interest. However, depending on their personality, they can combine their short-term perspective with a long-term perspective by becoming more visionary. However, they can not solely have a long-term perspective, which explains the visualization of the arrow only pointing in one direction.

Furthermore, the tension between individualism, aligning with traditional leadership, and collaboration, aligning with agile leadership, also requires a combination of traditional and agile leadership. The level of collaboration depends on company culture and team dynamics, including the influential factors of trust, transparency, and psychological safety. Lastly, motivation in hybrid projects appeared to be solely transformational, aligning with agile leadership due to its visionary nature (Rigby et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the findings suggest there is variance in how the leaders apply this approach. The logic they use in regards to how to motivate their followers is individualistic, taking commitment, competence, and the individual followers' personality into consideration.

5.3.2 The Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects III

In addition to the tensions captured by the Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects II, an additional dimension contributing to the understanding of leadership in hybrid projects has been identified, moving beyond the designed model in Figure 6, suggesting an expansion and more nuanced perspective to it. On one hand, the empirical insights illustrate how project managers' leadership is dynamic, moving from one side of the continuum to the other to respond to different demands. On the other hand, the findings indicate that their leadership was also shaped by the project managers' personality, as they described some leadership behaviours rooted in their personality. For instance, David and Eric's goal perspectives echo their description of themselves as being result-driven respectively goal-oriented. In contrast, Adam is a servant and coaching leader, reflecting his personality. Additionally, Henrik explicitly states that leadership is

about who you are as a person and your ability to attract people to follow you. Similarly, both Bonnie and Gabriella emphasize that leadership is shaped by the individual, highlighting the importance of being yourself.

This suggests that they have a default leadership style in which they feel more comfortable, as it matches their personal traits. This gives rise to an internal tension, described as meta-tension, referring to intrapersonal conflict between one's preferred leadership style and a hybrid, dynamic leadership that hybrid projects demand. This suggests that behavioral complexity is not just about recognizing external demands, but also about overcoming internal resistance. While authentic leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) stresses the importance of acting true to oneself, hybrid projects may require leaders to temporarily depart from that authenticity to meet project demands.

This meta-tension, though not a formal part of the Leadership Continuum for Hybrid projects II, acts as a higher level of influence that affects how other tensions are navigated. However, although a leader's personality may influence how they navigate these tensions, it does not necessarily disrupt the process, instead, it can facilitate it. Acknowledging the role of personality might provide insight into why some tensions are easier or harder to manage. By understanding their default leadership style, leaders can better assess where they need to focus their efforts to develop their leadership. In this regard, personality awareness becomes important. Leaders who recognize their personal traits can identify areas where they may need to stretch beyond their default style, particularly when confronted with hybrid project demands that require flexibility.

Further reflecting on this, particularly the tension between short-term and long-term perspectives highlights this internal tension. In this case, no clear or explanatory influential factor emerged that could explain whether a project manager should be short-term or long-term oriented. Instead, personality traits appeared as a logic, such as being result-driven or visionary. While each tension in the continuum is accompanied by explanatory logic, the absence of such logic in short-term versus long-term tension reveals a deeper insight: personality functions as an underlying dimension across all tensions, reflecting the inherent tension between a leader's personal authenticity and the adaptive demands of a hybrid project.

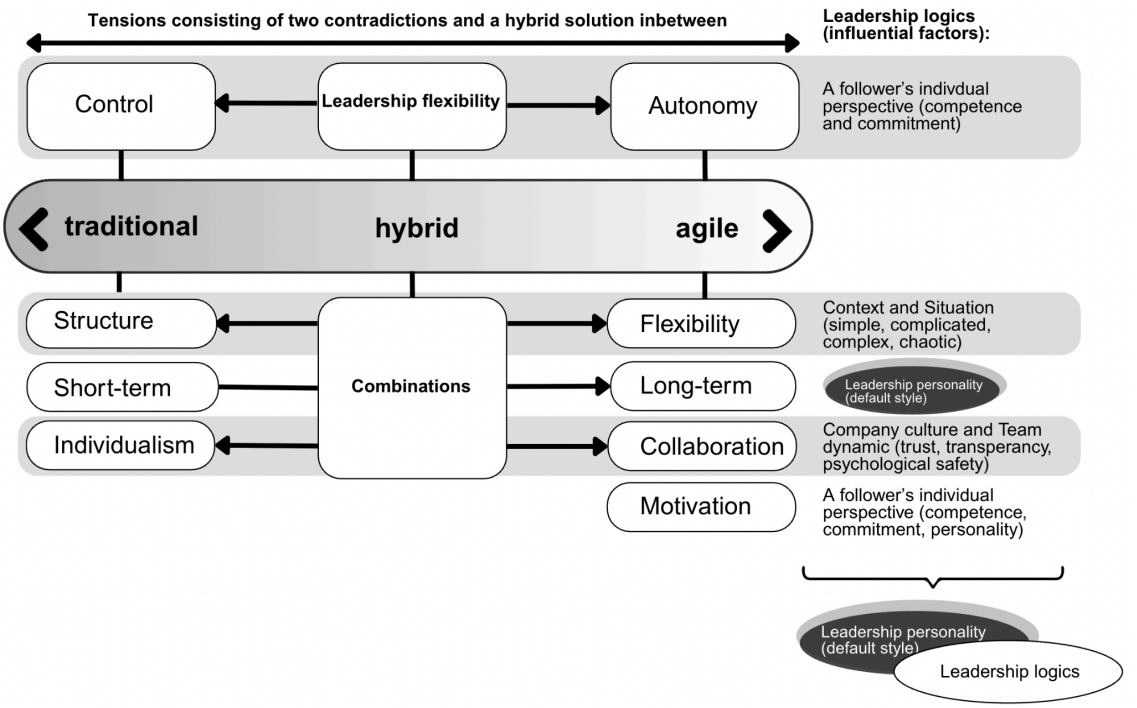


Figure 7: The Leadership Continuum for Hybrid Projects III

6. Conclusion

The conclusion summarizes the analysis, relating it to the purpose of this thesis. The chapter also includes the managerial implications of this study, as well as concluding thoughts on limitations and future research.

6.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to develop a practical and nuanced theoretical framework that reflects the complexities of leadership in hybrid projects. This study has resulted in a framework that highlights how project managers face multiple contrasting leadership demands, with all but one giving rise to leadership tensions. Instead of offering a one-size-fits-all solution, this framework contributes by illustrating the dynamic nature of hybrid leadership.

Regarding the leadership demands, the findings revealed several tensions in the project managers' leadership practices and perceptions, indicating leadership as a complex concept. The tensions expose contrasting demands between structure and flexibility, control and autonomy, short-term and long-term perspectives, along with individualism and collaboration. Similarly to how leadership is viewed as a continuum between traditional and agile leadership, the identified tensions were found to align with one or the other. Accordingly, structure, control, a short-term perspective, and individualism were consistent with traditional leadership, whereas agile leadership was identified with flexibility, autonomy, a long-term perspective, and collaboration. Furthermore, motivation was identified as a leadership demand where the majority of the project managers performed transformational motivation. However, it was not found to be a tension as their motivation solely reflected agile leadership, suggesting that in regards to this demand, project managers are not required to perform hybrid leadership.

Nonetheless, the findings suggest that the mentioned tensions require hybrid leadership in order to balance the contrasting demands in their leadership. This approach was manifested in two distinct ways: either by switching between leadership styles, demonstrating leadership flexibility, or by applying adaptive combinations that

integrated traditional and agile leadership simultaneously. However, in contrast to what previous research has suggested, this balancing act did not give equal attention to both sides. Instead, it requires a dynamic leadership approach where the leadership changes depending on several influential factors among, followers' individual perspectives, context and situation, company culture and team dynamic.

Adaptation of leadership, particularly where one positions oneself along the leadership continuum, depends primarily on the influential factors. Accordingly, the findings revealed that there is no single prescribed approach for navigating any given tension. Instead, project managers must assess the influencing factors in each situation and adapt their leadership style accordingly. This resulted in a number of leadership logics, providing guidelines for what influential factors to be aware of and what leadership style they should adopt in response to them.

While the leadership continuum captures how project managers navigate demands through different leadership tensions, our findings also reveal deeper insights. That is, a leader's personality as an underlying dimension that expands the framework and adds a new layer of understanding. This insight of an internal tension for project managers underscores the significance of personality as an additional dimension that influences how leaders approach different leadership logics. Rather than being disruptive, personality influences how leaders engage with and reconcile competing demands, highlighting the cognitive and behavioral complexities inherent in hybrid project leadership. This reinforces the idea that effective hybrid leadership is not only about adaptation when navigating the leadership continuum, but also about inherent personal flexibility, referring to the ability to move beyond one's default style when required.

These findings challenge the notion that leadership in hybrid projects can be effectively understood through binary models of agile or traditional leadership. Instead, they highlight the need for a dynamic understanding of leadership that embraces complexity rather than simplify it. The project managers in this study demonstrate both cognitive and behavioural complexity, navigating tensions through dynamic leadership rather than a fixed leadership style. This insight underscores the importance of developing leadership theories that account for a paradoxical perspective of leadership.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Based on the conclusion of this study, managerial implications are proposed for project managers and leaders working in hybrid projects. First, project managers should be aware of the complexity of hybrid projects, requiring equally complex leadership systems. Therefore, an implication of this study is that project managers should not rely on solely adopting traditional or agile leadership since that approach neglects the opposite side of the continuum. At the same time, equal attention to both sides of the continuum is not effective either, as the influential factors in hybrid projects require different extents of agile and traditional leadership. Instead, a dynamic leadership approach is required, as a project manager's leadership needs to adapt as the influential factors of leadership logics change.

Second, project managers in hybrid projects must be able to simultaneously combine opposite leadership styles and actively switch between them. This requires the project manager to be skilled in both traditional leadership and agile leadership, as well as mastering both cognitive complexity and behavioural complexity. In other words, they need to be able to understand situational cues and adapt their behaviour accordingly.

Lastly, the additional dimension found in this study suggests that being aware of one's default style could benefit their understanding of how this framework applies to them. This thesis acknowledges personal differences and argues that they impact how project managers navigate the leadership tensions. However, instead of allowing one's default style to limit what a project manager can do with their leadership, it should act as guidance on where a leader should put their efforts in regards to leadership development. By broadening their repertoire of leadership styles, developing skills in both traditional and agile leadership, they decrease the barriers that hinder hybrid leadership and facilitate the adoption of this study's theoretical framework.

6.3 Limitations

While the study's scope has been deliberately focused to align with its purpose, some limitations still remain. Relying exclusively on the project manager's perspectives introduces a risk of self-reporting bias, where participants may portray their leadership behavior in a favorable light, potentially affecting the objectivity of data. The number of participants was influenced by time constraints and accessibility. Although eight interviews provided in-depth data, the limited sample reduced contextual variation and generalization of results. Moreover, the use of a predetermined interview guide may have led to bias, resulting in constraining the emergence of insights to move beyond these boundaries. Lastly, given the limited scope, certain leadership tensions may remain unexplored, affecting the depth of the findings.

6.4 Future Research

Given the exploratory standpoint of this study, several directions for future research emerge. Firstly, future research should deepen the understanding of the tensions identified in this study. Although this study provided initial conceptualizations, more research is needed on how they interact and how they might differ in other hybrid projects.

Secondly, building on the limitations in this study, future research should consider conducting the same study but using other data collection methods, moving beyond solely one's perceptions. That could include techniques such as triangulation with observations, or by including team members in interviews. Comparative studies could reveal whether leadership in hybrid projects is perceived differently by various actors, or confirm the pattern found in this study. Of particular interest would be to explore individual follower's perspectives on individualized leadership, which in this study emerged as a common approach when navigating different tensions.

Thirdly, while this research method allowed for theory generation, future research should confirm the presented theoretical framework by testing it, using a quantitative research method. By applying the framework to a broader sample, research could evaluate its generalizability and potentially refine the framework.

Finally, as an additional dimension emerged in this study, regarding a leader's personality, future research should investigate where there is a true correlation between a leader's default style and how they navigate different tensions. Moreover, along with exploring this dimension further, future research may also study whether there are additional dimensions that influence the leadership continuum for hybrid projects, ultimately developing the model.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Warm-up

- Tell us briefly about yourself – who you are and what you do.
- How long have you worked in your current position?
- Can you tell us a little about the company you work for?

Project

- Can you describe what kind of projects you work on?
    - Do you work in several simultaneously?
    - Tell us about your current or most recent project.
- Which aspects require more structure or control in the project? *Why?*
- Which aspects require more flexibility or freedom in the project? *Why?*

Project Management Role

- Describe your role as a project manager.
    - What are your main responsibilities as a project manager?
    - How do you balance these areas?
- What is the most rewarding part of your role as a project manager?
- How do you define success in a project?
    - How do you achieve that?

Leadership

- How would you describe your leadership style? Why do you do it this way?

Team

- How is the responsibility divided within your team? How does it work in practice?
- What do your team members need from you as a leader?
- What do you need from your team?
- What is your role in conversations with the team? How does communication work?

- Describe how you define a well-functioning team.

Individual

- Describe your role as a leader of the individual team members.
- How do you adapt your leadership depending on the individuals you lead? Why?
- If someone in the team encounters a problem, what typically happens?
- What does the development of competence look like among the team members?

Task

- How do you go about getting the work started in the team?
- How do you usually act in situations where the team faces important decisions?
- How is the interaction between your project and other projects, or is it independent?
- How do you handle new conditions or unexpected changes during the project?

Closure

- Do you feel you need to adapt your leadership during the course of the project? Why?
- What are the main challenges of leadership in projects?
- What are the main lessons learned about leadership in projects?
- Is there anything you would like to add that hasn't been addressed in the interview, which would help us better understand leadership in projects?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Information for Research Participants

This document provides an overview of the project and what your participation entails.

What is the project about?

The purpose of this study is to explore leadership in hybrid projects, where both traditional and agile methods coexist. Currently, there is a lack of a deeper understanding of how the project managers' leadership balances the contrasting demands of both traditional and agile ways of working. Therefore, this report aims to

contribute valuable insights and expand the theoretical understanding of leadership in project management. The principal investigator for the project, responsible for the study, is Linköping University.

How does the study work?

Participation involves a semi-structured interview conducted at a scheduled time between March and April 2025. The exact date and location will be arranged by agreement. The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes.

Possible Consequences and Risks of Participation

The main consequence of participating in the study is that the interview responses will be analyzed and published in Linköping University's database. All data processing is conducted in accordance with Linköping University's guidelines and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which ensures that your personal data is handled securely and correctly. If you wish to modify your consent, you can contact the responsibles for this study project.

After the interview, the researchers may contact you until May 25, 2025, to ensure correct interpretation of your responses. No further inquiries will be made after this date.

What will happen to my information?

The project will collect and record information from the interview. The data will be processed confidentially, and unauthorized persons will not have access to it. Linköping University is the data controller for the study. Under GDPR, you have the right to access the information related to you, request corrections if inaccuracies are found, and request the deletion or restriction of the processing of your personal data. Only the responsibles for the project of this study will have access to the collected material. If you have any questions or wish to exercise your rights, you can contact the responsibles for the study project.

With your consent, the interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate analysis and documentation. The recordings and transcriptions will be deleted no later

than May 25, 2025. All other information will be processed within the same timeframe. All information about you and your company will be treated anonymously, except for your job title, which is relevant to this study, as well as possibly your gender and age. This information will not be linked to your name or company.

How will I receive information about the study's results?

As a participant, you will have the opportunity to access your personal data and how it is used in the study. However, there is no requirement for you to review the analysis or results. If unexpected findings arise during the interview, and they are deemed relevant to the study's purpose, they may be included in the analysis.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason. If you decide to withdraw, please contact one of the responsibles for the study project.

Consent

Consent is automatically given by participating in the interview but will also be verbally confirmed at the start of the interview before the recording and transcription begin.
To confirm your participation in the interview and your consent to the above terms, please provide written confirmation via email. By responding, you agree to participate in the interview and that your responses can be used in the academic research as described in the pre-information.

Responsibles for the study project

Alice Johansson alijo459@student.liu.se
Minou Larsdotter minla555@student.liu.se

Thank you for participating in our study.