BSc Thesis in Communication Science

Leadership and Communication: What leaders say and employees understand

A qualitative study

by

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Keywords: leadership, leadership communication, communication, organizational leadership, sensemaking

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Abstract

Although leadership is an extensively research topic, the communication perspective seems to lack attention. In most of these studies, communication does not take a major part nor is leadership viewed from a communication perspective. Less attention was paid to the sensemaking of leadership communication. Therefore, this study investigates sensemaking of leadership communication from employees by using the critical incident technique. The interviews consisted of questions regarding their sensemaking of critical incidents, how they relate it to communication, whether those incidents changed their views on the leader or job and of questions regarding their general of perception of leadership including the communication part. By doing so, this research aims to find out how and in which ways the sensemaking takes place and what exactly it influences. The data was collected by interviewing 20 participants by using Skype, who were recruited by the convenience sampling method. The participants had to be employed at the time, show a minimum working experience of one year and be located in Germany. Gaining a deeper insight into the employee's sensemaking, this study provided results which demonstrate that employees make constantly sense of leadership communication and that the critical incidents had an impact on the perception of the leader and of the job. However, further research needs to conducted to conclude commonalities and differences between employee's sensemaking to find out whether there are differences to this study when the participants experienced critical incidents with the same leader. This study recommends that leaders should improve their communication skills to minimize misconceptions and thus, possible reduction of commitment and motivation of employees and increase the transparency, loyalty and commitment of employees.

Keywords: leadership communication, organisational communication, leadership, sensemaking, communication

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1 Introduction

Leaders are present in almost every situation. Sports teams have their coaches. The ship crew has their captain and even a circle of friends has its leader. However, when speaking of leaders, most people think of organisational leaders. Without a doubt, for businesses, leadership is an essential function (Deanne & Paul, 2013) which can be decisive for success (Müller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2011). Leaders take risks when they face challenges for the company. They are capable of improving their employees' motivation and performance (Webb, 2007). In most of the cases, they take over the primary responsibilities, because their decisions and actions have not only significant impacts on the organisation itself but also on the organisational environment. Being researched by many researchers, leadership is viewed from multiple perspectives, for instance when investigating on leadership styles (Bogler, 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990) or the development of leadership (Avolio, 2010; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Day, 2000). However, one element seems to be neglected: Leadership communication.

Those researchers, who studied the communication aspect of leadership, claim that it is a crucial skill for leaders (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Savolainen, Lopez-Fresno, & Ikonen, 2014). Some researchers even value the importance of communication in leadership as vital and essential. They argue that communication and leadership are interdependent and one is the premise for the other (Barrett, 2008; Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Considering that the communicative constitution of organisations regards communication as "the essence of organization" (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009, p. 1) , leadership communications seems to be even more important. However, when leadership is viewed from a communication perspective, it is important to find out how employees understand and perceive leadership communication. Do employees relate communication to leadership or is it just an academic perspective which is insignificant for real-life settings? If they do it, what do they interpret into behaviour and communications of their leaders? When the communication between employees and leadership are bringing an organisation into life, it should be clear how employees make sense of their leaders' communications and what the consequences are. Therefore, the following research question was chosen:

How do employees make sense of leadership communication?

By investigating this question, this paper will merge leadership theory with a communication perspective to extend the current literature. Additionally, the sensemaking aspect of communication will be studied. As a thesis, this paper will provide a recommendation for leaders helping them to be more productive by adopting a communication perspective and considering a communicative approach to leadership.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Leadership

Leadership is an extensively researched area. Eddy and Van Der Linden (2006) state that it is as plentiful as diverse. In order to lead people, there needs to be an organisation, employees and a goal. However, since researchers have not agreed on one specific definition for leadership, this study will make use of the term leadership as a position which allows an individual to influence people for aiming towards common goals and sharing missions and visions with its followers as defined by (Weick, 1995). In addition, this thesis views leadership from Bennis' and Nanus' (1985) perspective, which differentiates between managers and leaders. Important to note, managers in organisations are not leaders per se, nor do they have to possess a leadership position. To them, "managers are doing the things right and leaders are people who do the right things" (p. 31). This why managers, who are being put in positions to lead and fail, can feel uncomfortable because they do not possess the required social skills (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). A manager can be employed, whereby a leader needs to own specific social skills.

Communication is significant for effective leadership (Tourish & Jackson, 2008). Some scholars claim that "leadership could not exist without communication" (Salacuse, 2005, p. 23) and that "leadership is enacted through communication" (Barge, 1994, p. 21). The best leaders regularly interact with their employees and followers (Bass, 1990) to create a healthy and harmonious relationship with them (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1998). They seek feedback from employees to demonstrate that they care about them and how they and the leader can improve on contributing to the organisations' success (Cusella, 1980). Transparent communication from the leader enhances organisational success (Rogers, 1987) builds better relationships and maintains these (Kay & Christophel, 1995), and it sustains higher levels of

trust (Vogelgesang, Leroy, & Avolio, 2013). Notably, a two-way type of communication is more effective (Woodward, 2000). Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), who viewed leadership from a communication perspective, stated that communication is central, defining and constitutive of leadership. They claim that six attributes are crucial for effective leadership communication:

- transmissional and meaning-centred
- relational, neither leader-centric nor follower-centric
- inherently power-based
- a diverse, global phenomenon
- alive with the potential for reflexivity
- influential acts

Hackman and Johnson (2013) stated that "leadership is best understood from a communication standpoint" (p. 2). By neglecting communication or applying weak communication skills, the leader becomes ineffective when keeping up the relationship to their followers whereas strong communication skills let leaders motivate, direct and develop followers.

Leadership "modifies the attitudes and behaviours of others to meet shared goals and needs" (Hackman & Johnson, 2013, p.11). Elsass and Graves (1997) conclude that leaders need to be emotional and possess social intelligence and thereby, is someone who can manage their followers (Goleman, 2009). Speaking of emotional intelligence, which encompasses self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy, self-motivation and social skills, research shows that leaders who can manage their emotional state and those of their followers are better leaders (Robbins, De Cenzo, & Coulter, 2016). Because it is so important to be emotionally positive and leaders are capable of establishing both positive and negative feelings, some leaders implement the sandwich-feedback method. This method allows the leader to provide negative and positive critics by minimizing the risk of hurting an employee emotionally.

Leadership, for this thesis, goes beyond the view of it being a distinct form of communication - as a crucial skill for a leader (Savolainen et al., 2014). It takes the view of

Tuhovsky (2015), who states that there are seven characteristics of effective communication of leaders: Understanding of others, a clear expression of oneself, imposing an influence on others, active listening, asking open and detailed questions, taking care of our own needs and goals during conversation and exchanging opinions in a non-conflicting way.

2.1.1 Leadership theories

Trait Theory

The trait theory claims that specific characteristics determine leaders. Those, who own the characteristics, can become leaders and those who do not, cannot develop those characteristics to eventually become one (Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, & Johnson, 2011). So, either are leaders born with it and thus, are privileged, or they were not born as leaders and are not able to gain the necessary skills. This theory was derived from Thomas Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory from the 19th century (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). Trait theories try to explain why and how characteristics and personality traits are the reason for born leaders. However, research shows that there is no consistency in traits among leaders (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). A few traits were similar, but not enough to differentiate between a born leader and a follower. Interestingly, Jiang, Chen and Dai (2015) found out that leaders are good communicators. Furthermore, they proved that not everybody who possesses typical leader traits like high self-confidence and extroversion becomes a leader. In fact, they argue that those traits become noticeable when an opportunity for leadership arises.

Situational Theory

The situational leadership theory was first introduced by Fiedler (1967) after multiple researchers tried to explain leadership by traits (Zaccaro, 2007). He claims that leadership does not only consist of traits but also depends on the situation. His contingency model describes success as being dependent on leadership style and the leader's situational control. Basically, the effectiveness, respectively ineffectiveness of one specific leader, can be constrained by the situation they encounter. Another key point, Waters (2013) concluded from the contingency model that a leader cannot be successful in all situations. A leader acting according to a certain leadership style can be successful in a situation but can fail in

another situation using the same leadership style (Jago, 1982). According to Stogdill (1948), leadership itself depends on the situation. He argues that people who have proven themselves as effective leaders in a situation do not necessarily have to remain an effective leader in another situation. However, Zulch (2014) found out that effective leaders are able to act adjust their leadership styles in order to handle the current situation as best possible. Although, the way of communicating differs from leader to leader, communication is essential to leadership. Finkelstein, Hambrick and Canella (2009) suggest that the leader should be chosen according to the situation.

2.1.2 Leadership styles

Transactional leadership

Contrary to the transformational leadership style, the transactional leader focuses on the role of supervision, organisation and group performance. One key element of this style is the use of punishment, respectively reward (Bass, 1999). The leader focuses on positive reinforcement through rewards like pay raises when the set goals are achieved, or the leader wants to keep up the work. On the other side, punishments as negative reinforcements like suspension are given when the set goals are not accomplished, or the quality of the work does not meet corporate standards (Bass & Bass Bernard, 1985). Another distinction to the transformational leader is the aim to keep the things the same as they are. Transactional leaders are not interested in change. Also, they regularly check on their employees (Hoogeboom & Wilderom, 2019) whether they work accordingly (Bono & Judge, 2004) and seek for employees' faults (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999). Leaders using this style in their jobs are effective in crisis and emergencies and when specific tasks need to be executed by the subordinates.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leaders focus on their employees' motivation and innovation in particular (Pantouvakis & Patsiouras, 2016). Bass (1985) defined this style as an exchange of information between leaders and employees, leading the team to change by creating a vision. This type of leader pushes his followers and employees to higher levels through the right use of communication and influential actions (Wang, Chontawan, & Nantsupawat, 2012). Due to

the strong will of elevating his or her followers, transformational leadership is correlated with employee well-being (Zwingmann et al., 2014). Moreover, leaders applying this style are increasing employees' performance (Cavazotte, Moreno, & Bernardo, 2013). By pushing followers, gaining their trust, improving employees' self-confidence and lastly, enabling them to identify with the leader, task and contextual performance is increased as well (Stump, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, & Mater, 2016). Transformational leaders focus on the personal development of their followers. Often leaders motivate them to acquire new skills or enhance existing ones by offering them to visit advanced training courses (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). Nevertheless, not only the professional development of employees is essential to this type of leaders. The leader is shaping the team in a way that they take care of each other's interests and work toward the achievement of the team's goal (Bass, 1999)

2.2 Organisational Communication and the CCO

Organisational communication is an extensively researched topic from multiple perspectives. One of those perspectives was the communicative constitution of organisations (CCO). The CCO is not the first approach claiming that "communication is the essence of organizations" (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009, p.1). But CCO scholars argue that organisation is an effect of communication and not its predecessor or as Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen and Clark (2011) put it: "communication is the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed and sustained" (p. 1150). Furthermore, the CCO perspective argues that communication not only expresses reality but also creates it (Schoeneborn & Vásquez, 2017). There are three major views of the CCO, which all agree on the aspect of communication creating social reality and thus, organisations. There are several reasons to incorporate this proposition into this study: First, since an organisation is being talked into existence, the communication between leader and employee is crucial for the organisations' existence. Second, without communication, there would not be an organization. Moreover, bad communication between leader and employee can result in weaker organizational and individual performance (Snyder & Morris, 1984). Therefore, it is crucial to demonstrate the vitality of employees and communication within organisations.

The Montreal School of thinking, as the first perspective, defines communication as the recursive articulation of interaction and discourse. In their paper, Taylor and Van Every (2000) referred to those two as text and conversation. In this context, text means

materializing human sensemaking. The text does not have to be written as on paper. As long as it creates meaning, it is possible to be considered as text, whereas conversation refers to an interaction between two or more people where text is created. In short, "an organization emerges in communication as described in text and realized in conversation" (Schoeneberger & Vasquez, 2017, p. 6). In this context, through conversation, the organisation comes into existence, because individuals are engaging in interaction. Therefore, at first, sensemaking is the process of understanding what happens, and by having conversations, it elevates the individual to a collection of individuals. Also including that individuals or collectives are then speaking from the organisational perspective.

For the Montreal School, communication includes the participation of non-human elements. Those are, e.g. policies, rules or norms. According to Cooren (2010), employees use those in daily business. They act according to those rules and norms. In short, this is how organisations are spoken or written into existence – which is called "ventriloquism" (Cooren, 2015).

The second major concept is called the Four Flows approach and was first introduced by Robert McPhee. From their perspective, the four flows are constituting organisations. The first flow is the membership negotiation. This flow describes that interacting individuals within organisations are creating boundaries. These boundaries are getting revised when new employees enter the organisation. The new employee has to socialize with the colleagues. By doing so, he or she gets part of the organisation and as a consequence, the new employee is allowed to speak on behalf of the organisation. When somebody speaks on behalf of the organisation, he or she constitutes it. Secondly, self-structuring determines the way of how an employee can represent him or herself as part of the organisation. This representation grants the employee collective coherence, which in turn constitutes the organisation. The third flow is about the adaptation through the interaction of co-workers. Given that an organisation changes and thereby, tasks, roles, expectations can also change, the employees adjust to each other to fit the current situation. In this case, the interaction carries the constitutive role. The fourth and last flow consists of positioning the organisation. By interacting with external stakeholders such as the public, customers or competitors, employees shape the organisation and attach an image, which is again constituting the organisation. Important to note, those four flows are only constituting when all four flows are actively happening.

The Social System Theory, as the third perspective, describes organisations as social systems constituted through ongoing and recurring communication. However, in the social systems theory, organisations are distinct from other social systems. Thereby, other forms are explained as interactions on smaller and bigger occasion like a conversation between two people or a group of multiple thousands. Organisations differentiate from them by communicating decisional. So, organisations emerge from decisions and their consequences. Those decisions happen over time and are recurring events with a start and an end. Basically, by making decisions and having to accept and communicate according to their consequences, organisations are interconnected communication events. People who argue for an organisation become a collective. In turn, this collective is becoming the organisation and a reference point to it.

Apart from the CCO scholarship, putting the importance of communication on top, outside of this approach, other authors mention communication as equally important. According to Harris and Nelson (2008), for instance, communication is one of the most dominant and essential activities in organisations. McKenna (2012) even stated that „communication is the lifeblood of the organizations". The success of an organisation is connected to the quality of communication. In the advisory, conciliation and arbitration service (ACAS) booklet (2005), organisational success, decision-making, commitment of employees, contribution to organisational improvement and job satisfaction was found to be increased by communication. Besides, Berger (2014) states that communication is the root of growing relationships. He further claims that those relationships are the reason for the functioning and survival of an organisation. Communication enables individuals and groups to plan activities in order to achieve goals. Additionally, it is crucial regarding "socialisation, decision making, problem-solving and change management processes" (Berger, 2014). Since organisational communication concerns everybody within an organisation, failing to have great organisational communication influences an employee's sense of belonging and shared ownership (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009). Besides, previous studies have shown that organisational communication amplifies organizational goals and development (Price, 1997).

Concludingly, this paper views organisational communication as more than an exchange of information between an organisation and its members. It "consists of various message sending and receiving phenomena affecting formal social units in which individuals work toward common goals" (Greenbaum, 1974; Miller, 2008). However, this study considers

organisational communication as a more complex construct: as a dynamic process influencing the construction of meaning leading to sensemaking (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011).

2.3 Verbal and nonverbal communication

Communication can be divided into nonverbal and verbal communication: verbal communication covers all written or spoken language and sounds to express oneself, and nonverbal communication is defined as "the transmission of messages without the use of words" (Greenberg & Baron, 2008; Hamilton, Parker & Smith, 1982) including facial expressions, gestures or voice. While it is possible for humans not to talk or to write and thereby, prevent verbal communication, it is impossible for us to not communicating nonverbally (Argyle, 1972).

Considering the verbal aspect of communication, there are four major concepts (Krauss & Morsella, 2000). The first of them is the encoder-decoder model, which describes the process of conveying a message encoded in symbols. Receiving that message means decoding it. Although this model is the most common and known definition of communication, by targeting the listener's awareness to the literal meaning of the message, it is not always possible for people to decode the message. In that case, the intentionalist model is used. This model includes the intended message by communicating. By using this model, the encoder selects the best message that will accomplish the goal of sending the intended message. The perspective-taking model implies that people view the world differently. Therefore, people engaged in communication create a shared point of view. The fourth model, the dialogic paradigm, views communication as shared success between people communicating, who collaborate to achieve certain communicative goals. However, even more important than communicating verbally, is nonverbal communication (Ekman, 1973).

Nonverbal in the context of communication means sending messages without the use of words. Often referred to as body language, nonverbal communication encompasses more. It includes touches, use of voice, physical appearance and distance. First-ever to draw attention to nonverbal communication was Mehrabian and Ferris (1967), whose study identified that 93% of the attitudinal message was sent through nonverbal communication. Furthermore, in 1983, Woodall and Folger claimed honesty as being questioned by the receiving people when the nonverbal cues were not concordant. Those cues can include

alterations in voice, gestures or mimics. According to Addington (1971), humans become unsure about credibility when they detect decreasing voice changes. But voice changes are not the only way people can get suspicious about encounters. The eyes of humans are critical regarding one's honesty and credibility. Even positive verbal messages can be perceived negatively in case of gaze aversion. Additionally, it can lead to antipathy, superficiality and an increased lack of trust (Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams, 2010). In order to detect those nonverbal cues, people need to be aware of their existence and of course, what kind of information they disclose. In a study conducted by Graham, Unruh, and Jennings (1991), it became clear that the importance of nonverbal communication increased equally to perceived decoding ability. Participants, who claimed to pay attention to nonverbal cues and are aware of them, thought they could successfully detect supervisor's incongruency in verbal and nonverbal communication. Plus, the same participants believed that facial expressions revealed the most accurate information about the true meaning of the intended message. While their counterparts paid more importance to the voice level and tone. According to McKenna (2012), detecting cues and interpreting the information can be taught and improved by absolving communication trainings. Speaking of supervisors, humility, steepling and community hands, as shown in below, created more intimacy between leader and employee (Talley & Temple, 2015). In accordance, Lewis (2000) stated that a leader's emotions can affect followers.

Four main characteristics can be attached to nonverbal communication (Liliweri, 2017). The first one includes the rule of unavoidability which describes that humans are not able to not to communicate, especially when it comes to nonverbal communication. Remaining silent does not cut the communication to someone. This kind of behaviour sends messages just like words that people use to convey a message. Considering sign language and how people communicate by using it, communication does not only take place when words are heard. Signs and symbols are as communicative as language and sounds. Secondly, it expresses feelings and emotion, which can be observed in sports, for instance. A team who scored looks and sounds happy, whereas the team conceding the goal looks different than that as shown. Third, it reveals more explanation than verbal communication which is observable when looking at pictures. Fourth and lastly, it is sometimes more reliant than verbal communication. Research shows that nonverbal communication can reveal more information than spoken verbal language. For instance, a lie can be exposed by reading an

individual's body language (Vrij, Hartwig, & Granhag, 2019). But nonverbal communication reveals more than lies. It can make an individual more confident and persuasive, but it is also capable of exposing one of untrue information or deceptive actions (Olney, 1995).

2.4 Sensemaking theory

The process of giving a situation or event a meaning is called sensemaking. Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) defined it as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (p. 409). According to Barnard (1938), who viewed sensemaking from a CCO perspective, without communication there would be no organisation. An organisation comes into existence when there are people who can communicate with each other, are willing to contribute to action and do those to achieve a shared goal.

There are seven distinct characteristics within sensemaking theory. First of all, sensemaking is based on identity theory. Through the need for self-efficacy, self-enhancement and self-consistency, people create their identity. Secondly, sensemaking is retrospective which includes that one believes something only when they said it. The third characteristic describes that sensemaking happens in environments where actions and cognition are interconnectedly creating the environment. Sensemaking explains how something is created without interpreting further into it. The fourth characteristic of sensemaking claims that communication is social. Where identity is the internal meaning, sensemaking is the shared meaning. This shared meaning comes from the interaction with the social environment, which is enabled by cues. Furthermore, as the sixth characteristic, it has no starting or ending point. Next, sensemaking is about plausibility. There is too much information in social processes that it is not possible to gain complete information. This also includes that sensemaking is not about being accurate. Lastly, by aiming for a plausible shared meaning, it is an ongoing process.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

To conduct this study, a qualitative approach was used to find out how employees make sense of leaders' communications.

In total, after receiving the approval from the ethics committee, 20 semi-structured online interviews were held to gain information about employees' sensemaking of the communication of their leaders. Given the circumstances of the coronavirus, the interviews had to be conducted through a video-chat platform. This method prevented putting the participants and researcher at risk. The semi-structured interview was used because it allows the researcher to immediately react to given answers by asking participants unplanned questions and thus, explore potential new topics.

The data were collected by using the critical incident technique (CIT). Woolsey (1969) defined the CIT as a technique which "consists of a set of simple interview procedures for collecting information from people about their direct observations of their own or others' behaviour." (p.243).

According to Flanagan (1954), who invented this research method, with the help of this technique "one may collect specific and significant behavioural facts". By enabling the participants to tell about incidents that they view as critical (Flanagan, 1954), this approach ensures that no participant is lured into predetermined topics. Also, the CIT method allows the researcher the gain in-depth information about the events. Both of these properties make the CIT very suitable for finding compelling experiences of the participants and how they make sense of their leaders' communication, as Zwijze-Koning (2016) showed.

3.1.1 Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of eight open-ended questions aiming to reveal critical incidents and its potential consequences (see Attachment C). To avoid the term *incident* because it is negatively connotated ("incident", n.d.) and could lead the participants only to recall negative incidents, they were asked to talk about events by using their style of language (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997). Furthermore, to make sure what kind of events were asked for, the researcher reminded the participants of events being able to be positive or negative.

The interviews started with the introduction of the researcher and the participant. Those were followed by questions regarding their profession (1), what their working environment looked like (2) and how much working experience the participants had (3). Beginning an interview with topics making participants feel confident, a comfortable setting was built (Opdenakker, 2006). Eventually, after remembering the participant that events could be both positive or negative – the same definition as above was used, but using the

term *event* instead of *incident* - the researcher asked the interviewee to recall and tell about a specific, rather recent event with their leader (4). In order to gain rich data, the researcher encouraged the participants to give detailed information about those events. When necessary, the researcher asked some additional questions to unveil all vital information about the event. Those questions addressed different aspects:

- What did happen?
- Who was involved?
- Were there any consequences afterwards?
- To what extent does this relate to communication?
- Did the event influence the way you view the leader?
- Did this change your attitude towards your job or leader?
- What did you learn from this?
- What kind of consequences have you drawn from this?

When a participant completed explaining an event, the interviewer wrapped up the story and asked if he missed something and thus, asking for verification. After that, the interviewer asked whether the participant could mention other events. This process was repeated until the participants were no longer able to share more events. At the end of the interview, the participant was asked what they think of leadership (5) and how they value the importance of leadership (6). Furthermore, they were asked what they think what makes a good or bad leader (7). Lastly, the interview was closed by asking the participants what they think are the communication aspects of leadership (8). Those questions were asked to gain an insight into the participants' view on leadership.

3.2 Procedure

The interviewer and interviewees spoke via a video-chat platform. The interview started with an explanation of the purpose of the study and how they (the participants) were chosen. During the interview, there were no other people connected to the conversation on the video-chat platform, nor where there any other people at the respective locations of the participants and researcher. Accordingly, they were enlightened about anonymity and the permission to record them was first obtained orally and at the beginning of the interview. Everybody permitted the request. The interviews vary from half an hour to about one hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed eventually. The informed consent form

and research introduction document are in the attachments at the end of this paper (Appendix A & B).

3.3 Participants

The participants in this study are from different organisations and departments. All of them are in positions in which they have someone superior in the hierarchical structure of the organisation. In total, 20 people participated in this study. The sample represents various backgrounds from participants working in financial and marketing departments, as well as working in human resources and engineering. The industries differ too. Some participants worked for companies in the healthcare and technology industry, whereas others were employed in construction businesses. Regarding demographical information, the participants were from Germany.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Current employment	Employed for (in years)	Previous experience (in years)
1	Male	30	Legal trainee	1	3
2	Male	42	Branch manager	2,5	24
3	Male	23	Text creator	1,8	3
4	Male	24	Customer Support Service	1	2
5	Male	28	Supply teacher	1	2
6	Male	25	Technology manager	2	2
7	Female	25	Interior designer	2	2
8	Female	29	Sales manager	4	5
9	Male	30	Sales staff	3	8
10	Female	25	Dental assistant	0,3	5
11	Male	28	Requirement manager	1,75	1,8
12	Male	24	Investment banker	1,5	1,5
13	Male	25	Car salesman	3	4
14	Female	24	Marketing staff	2,6	2,6
15	Male	36	Warehouse manager	4	17
16	Female	33	Sales staff	17	17
17	Male	27	Construction engineer	1,2	2,2
18	Female	26	Kindergarten teacher	4	4
19	Male	31	Head of Marketing	0,5	12,75
20	Male	29	Marketing staff	5	5
	M = 14/ F = 6	Ø = 28		Ø = 3	Ø = 6,2

Using a snowball sample, every participant was asked to recommend another potential participant in the study. They were then contacted and asked to participate if they matched the inclusion criteria. Besides living in Germany, having a working experience of at least one year and being subordinate to someone at work, there were no other criteria to take part in this study.

The participants had working experience between 2 years and 24 years with an average of 6,2 years. Fourteen participants were male and six were female. With an average of 28 years, the age of the participants range from 23 years old to 42 years old.

3.4 Analysis

Having all interviews finished and transcribed, they were coded according to the open coding method. The critical incidents were attached to different codes depending on the description and content. In total, 34 incident were disposed (Table 2). Two authors independently coded two interviews differently to reach a sufficient Cohen's Kappa. Afterwards, the author of this paper coded the remaining interviews.

3.4.1 Reliability

In order to reach intercoder reliability, the coding was done twice. The first time the researcher did the coding. The second time, an independent judge familiar with the critical incident method was asked to place 10% of the incidents into categories. This was an open coding process. Encountered differences were cleared up having a discussion and coming to a consensus by agreeing on a jointly named code. The thirteen categories which were determined during the coding process cover all incidents.

All the categories were checked on reliability. Starting with the coded critical incidents, exceptional incidents, recurring incident and situational happening, the other categories were checked using the Cohen's Kappa. Eventually, the last category of the communicative elements of leadership was checked on reliability. *Table x* shows the results of the calculations. All of the reliability checks were done by figuring out the Cohen's Kappa.

As shown in *Table x*, all categories reached a value above 0.61 which means that the coding process accomplished reliability.

4 Results

Table 2. Total amount of incidents

	Total	Exceptional incidents	Recurring incidents	Situational happenings
Number of incidents	34 (100%)	23 (68%)	4 (11%)	7 (21%)

In total, twenty interviews were facilitated. The participants who took the study were all working in different companies and thus, no incident was referring to the same leader nor did it take place within the same company. Those twenty participants described 34 critical events which result in 1.7 events per participant. Twenty-four of those incidents were negative and ten were positive. Furthermore, out of those twenty-four negative incidents, twenty-one had a negative impact on the view of the leader and fourteen influenced the perception of the job in a negative way. The positively evaluated incidents also showed impacts on the job and the leader. Out of these ten events, eight participants stated that it had positively impacted their job and all participants reported a positive consequence on the view of their leaders. Furthermore, 68% of the reported incidents were categorized as exceptional incidents. An exceptional event consist of one unique moment as one participant mentioned in an interview:

"We got together and then he gave a little speech and you just really kind of thought that we're going to be the biggest education start-up in Europe next year or something. It was so very inspiring, he could talk really easy and you thought we were going to be the next big thing. Which actually worked really well to motivate us." (Interviewee 19)

Although, some of these incidents were not restricted to a specific time or place as the CIT suggests, the reported incidents are still in compliance with the CIT's method. However, one incident reported by the participant was about a longer period. The longer time

period was also the fundament of that specific incident. The following citation is part of that incident:

"The same company [as before] but a different CEO. Strangely enough, they started with three and in the end there was only one left. That was the time when I quit my job because I had received another very, very good offer. Then I had a final conversation with the CEO, who was insanely angry. I would ruin the Christmas business. They also would not fire someone at this time. It must have been early December. Then he didn't speak to me again until my last day of work, middle, end of January, and ignored me in the office. He was just angry because I quit." (Interviewee 19)

The second major group of incidents in this study was categorized as recurring events (11%), which involves a specific event as asked for. But these events were not unique. They were periodically happening. Recurring events consisted, for instance, of regular praises, how leaders avoided personal contact or ignored participants, which makes them different from the exceptional events, although, they both comply with the CIT method. Interviewee 11 described:

"To name a specific case, one day it was like this. So he always asks questions to which he already knows the answers. So basically, he just wants to expose you if you don't know the answer. In that case, he immediately said that to you. You can't do that. You can't expose people in front of customers. You're at work, then he comes and asks you extra loudly and if you don't know it, then he says it to your face and then kicks you're a** in front of the customer. That really happened. So here's what I think. If we were alone, that would be okay. Then you can tell me that it was wrong. But you can't yell at your employee in front of everyone. Once he came in when I was on the phone, so it was on speaker, the customer and I were just talking about his delivery, and he comes in, asks me extra loud, really extra loud, if I knew whether the goods have already arrived from our supplier. I'm not responsible for this, but I knew anyway, the company is not that big and you know what's going on. I then answered him and said that I was in a customer meeting, he just said "Ok" and then left again. Can't he ask me later? Does it have to be now?" (Interviewee 11)

The rest of incidents were identified as situational events (21%). Those events are, however, not in compliance with the CIT method since they focus on regular and daily issues which are not decisive for the reason for success of failure of a specific incident (Flanagan, 1954). Situations rather focus on atmospheric issues or usual occurrences such as disagreements or job-related minor problems. Most likely, the participants who reported those wanted to describe or explain their regular business from day to day without being able to mention a specific incident.

Table 3. Codebook

Category	Subcategory	Example
Leadership related learnings	Whether be like or unlike leader	"What kind of leader I want to be in the future."
	Leaders misuse their power	"Yes, that even prosecutors are only human and they too can be prejudiced. Although, from a purely legal point of view, they are not allowed to have any
	Leaders are just humans and make mistakes	prejudices, he has some and that showed me that they are only human beings."
Leader related learnings	Speak up to leader when you feel like	"That next time I would definitely want to say something about it, if it came to that."
	Leaders influence workforce	
Job related learnings	Jobs are not safe	"Yes, so once, that's definitely quick you can get
	Rewards pay off	fired. Even if I say that in my opinion it took too long,
	Leave out emotions and remain professional	in retrospect it was actually quite quick."
		"Yes that I stay calm when something like this happens. That I at least remain professional. But then say clearly and calmly what the problem is and I can clarify it."
Positive impact on leader	Increased loyalty	see table 4
	Increased trust	
	Increased respect	
Negative impact on leader	Distanced from them	see table 4
	lost respect	
	questioned skills	
Positive impact on job	Increased motivation	see table 4
	felt more valued and important	

	increased commitment	
Negative impact on job	Decreased motivation	see table 4
	Felt useless and superflouss	
	Afraid of making mistakes	
	Looked for alternatives	
Verbal leadership communication	Speaking to team	"It must strike the right note so that the person
	yelling at employee	opposite feels comfortable. She has to be
	acknowledging work	authoritative and this goes hand in hand with good
	tonality of language	language. Someone who can't come up with a
		sensible sentence doesn't deserve my respect."
Nonvebal leadership communication	Introverted and withdrawn	" […] no matter whether you have closed the office
		door, greet each other every morning or regularly do
	body language and appearance	things with your colleagues. All this communicates
		care and openness."
	avoiding personal contact	
Perception of leadership	Setting framework and goals	"So for me leadership is connected with
		communication. He must be a pioneer. Not someone
	Taking risks and responsibilities	who just tells me to do this or that. But to actively
		work with the employees to find a way to be
	Role model	successful."
	Gets most of employees	
Good leader	Provides guidance	"In other words, a good leader who doesn't always
	seeks innovation	just talk and let the boss hang out. But also does it
	Good communicator	himself. Also listens to many ideas of his
	Caring about employee	employees."
	Taking risks and responsibilities	
Bad leader	Ungrateful treatment	"Colleagues who meet with the boss in private
	Egoistic	sometimes have a bonus. I think that's not allowed.
	Degrading employees	It's not competent."
	Focuses on performance	
	Bad communicator	
Communicative elements of leadership	Transparent communicator	"For me, leadership means taking the greatest part
		of the responsibility of the whole. For me, leadership
	Frequent interaction with employees	stands and falls with communication."

Choice of communication
media

Body language and
appearance

Sensemaking

Every participant was able to evaluate the incident. No incident was evaluated neutrally. Out of the 34 incidents that were collected during the interviews, twenty-four of them were negatively evaluated and ten interviews were positively evaluated by the participants. While disclosing information about the incidents, they also explained how they perceived the incident and what it meant to them. Some of the participants even started the explanation of incidents by mentioning whether it was a positive or negative experience with their leaders:

"I'll have to think about that. I haven't had anything negative yet. Oh, I have one. […] But instead of him saying something when I told the construction workers that they had to make one wall according to certain specifications and they didn't take me seriously, the project manager just wiped through my hair. Just like parents do with their children when they don't know something, for example. That got me so upset. Instead of supporting me, he supports the construction workers and humiliates me in front of them. It almost took away my authority." (Interviewee 7)

Since this study is about to find out how employees make sense of leadership communication, the researcher categorized the incidents according to specific sensemaking processes: positive impact on job (80%), positive impact on leader (100%), no impact on job (32%), no impact on leader (9%), negative impact on job (58%), negative impact on leader (88%). Participants who reported incidents which did not have any impact on their perception of and view on the leader and/or job were emotionally affected by the incident itself, but, however, did not made sense of it whatsoever. This means that a participant was e.g. angry about an incident or the leader but when being asked, the participant did not explain an influence on the perception. For instance, as a non-sensemaking process, a leader yelled at

the employee for sharing information about his quitting, although they did not agree on keeping it as a secret for a while:

"Not him in particular, because he was always a decent boss. That's one of the very few things. I can't think of anything else that didn't work really." (Interviewee 9)

Whereas a participant who made sense of a specific incident, reported impacts on the views. This is how she made sense of the incident indicating how demotivated and disappointed she was:

"Yes! Funnily, one week later we had received a questionnaire from our senior management about how we evaluate our manager. That turned out to be quite negative for her. It also demotivated me, I have to say. I worked my a** off and I still do. I have three countries and work 16 hours. I do as much as other coordinators do in a 40-hour week. I do a sick job. My motivation really went down the toilet. I'm doing such a sick job here. I didn't even get any praise. The only thing is, all you ever get is negative feedback. If there was feedback, always negative. It just su****. She went down in my estimation. I worked at my normal pace for two or three weeks and afterwards I only did what other people did, too." (Interviewee 14)

The researcher differentiated between job-related learnings, leader-related learnings and leadership-related learnings. The first classification contains learnings from incidents which directly concern the job itself or future jobs. Participants explained that they realized how easy it is to lose their job, what they would consider when applying for a job next time and that cultural fit exists. The leader-related learnings include perceptions about the relationship to the leader and what the leader is capable of. On this, participants named examples which showed how leaders can influence the entire workforce, how important it is to speak up to the leader and how important obligations between leaders and employees are: *"Next time, if it comes to that point again, I would definitely say something."* (Interviewee 18). Comparing leadership-related learnings to this, they consist of learnings are at the core of leadership. Hereby, for instance, participants explained what kind of leader they want to be or not want to be, different styles of leadership are applied or that *"prosecutors are just humans and can have biases, too"* (Interviewee 1).

When being asked about the relation to communication regarding the event the participants shared, none of them stated that the incident is not related to communication. In fact, every participant was able to tell and specify that the incident was related to communication. Some even stated that events could have been prevented from happening by using a different communication. The participants had a rich view on communication and went into detail by providing information about the type of nonverbal communication, what kind of meaning they derived from it and how they felt. An open door to the leader's office made them feel more welcome and comfortable, rewards and praises were made sense in a way which motivated them and registering an employee for further education demonstrated how much the leader values him as an employee.

"To be honest, this plays a big role here, because this kind of behaviour has shown us both that he doesn't respect us and that he doesn't meet us on equal terms. To have put these feet on the table is just a sign of ignorance and degrading. It's just more repulsive than welcoming. Then nobody needs to say a word, that speaks for itself. So the non-verbal communication has already been enough to show or say what he thinks of us." (Interviewee 8)

Table 4. Impacts of critical incidents

Impacts of incidents	Amount of total incidents causing impact	Example
Positive influence on job	8 (80%)	"Yeah, so you saw there's something in it for you, and something's coming back. Then you try harder."
Negative influence on job	14 (58%)	"There is no point in hiring someone if you are not interested in giving him guidance and educating him about organizational structures. I felt a little bit offended and out the line. It felt more like I was hired for a student job whose presence and work is not that crucial."
Positive influence on leader	10 (100%)	"Yeah, definitely. So even though I didn't have any formal mentoring with him, I eventually saw him as an informal mentor. I thought that was totally impressive."

Negative influence on leader	21 (88%)	"Yes! One week later we received a questionnaire from our senior management about how we evaluate our manager. That turned out to be quite negative for her."

Leadership

Participants had concrete conceptions about leadership. According to them, leadership brings many responsibilities with it. Apparently, leadership facilitates the atmosphere, is responsible for the success, the reproduction and works as a role model for employees. Leadership represents the company and employees follow that. Interestingly, no one related leadership to a specific position like a managing position or any other position. Furthermore, participants characterised leadership as the *"ethical and moral compass"* (Participant 2), *"leadership is communication"* (Participant 14) and ability to adjust the leadership style to handle every employee. Also, leadership was described as knowledgeable and that employees can walk up to ask for advice:

"For me, leadership means taking the greatest part of the responsibility of the whole. For me, leadership stands and falls with communication. Not only verbal, i.e. how do I pass on tasks, see what my colleagues are doing, that is also very important. But also something like, how do I listen to my colleagues? What kind of prompt feedback do I give? And very important: Do I live it? This role modelling for me is the ultimate. That doesn't mean constantly living it, but rather, when faced with challenges, for example, showing that colleagues will continue to do so or even continue from the very beginning. A manager who doesn't set an example, especially in sales, and doesn't work together because we work crosswise and are really a team, must set an example. There is no other way to do it."
(Participant 2)

When the participants were asked about the importance of leadership, no participant declined the importance of it. Participants rather indicated that leadership is very important, for some even so important that a company could not be successful without it, which makes sense considering the responsibilities they remarked:

„I believe that every company needs leadership and that without leadership you are stuck. Everybody would do what he wants, nobody would have any framework in which to work and nobody would care about how to deal with colleagues and what to achieve together. Therefore, I think that it is very, very important and that without leadership a company cannot be work." (Participant 10)

Regarding the conceptions of a good and bad leader, participants were very clear about their attributions and qualities. Taking into consideration that the question about defining a good and bad leader was asked after questioning them about the meaning of leadership, it becomes apparent that the vast majority of elements they mentioned at first, were also visible in the description of a good leader. Interestingly, the participants were aware of how a leader should be (good leader) rather than how a leader should not be (bad leader). Hereby, they determined a considerably higher amount of factors to the good leader. As an example, a good leader cares for the employees, puts the company's success at the top and gives meaning to work, while a bad leader is someone who is not able to lead, who is unfair and takes the employees and effort for granted:

"Bad is someone who thinks only of himself and completely ignores or neglects his employees. The company will not benefit from this either. Bad leadership is also when you have no idea what to do. Just like now during the pandemic, that you keep a cool head and the company doesn't fall apart. You have to be able to hold it together. Someone good looks to his employees to get further and train themselves. They will appreciate it and pay it back in the form of good performance and work. Good leadership also means treating everyone equally. No matter whether woman or man, or whatever religion or skin colour. He only has to see the employee and people, nothing else." (Participant 7)

Lastly, in terms of the communicative elements of leadership, few participants were first overwhelmed by it and needed further explanation. The participants had a broad view on these elements. So, communication in the context of leadership was very much related to behaviour, actions and appearance. They also stated elements of verbal and nonverbal communication such as the ability to implement a proper language and being rhetorically educated. When concluding the aspects of communicative leadership and comparing the

result to the connection of the incidents with communication, it becomes clear that the factors identified as communication-related appear in the communicative aspects of leadership. Interestingly, participants give those communicative elements a meaning. A certain kind of behaviour or action communicates to them:

"So a leader actually always communicates. Everyone does. That's why, no matter whether you have closed the office door, greet each other every morning or regularly do things with your colleagues. All this communicates care and openness. The opposite would simply be a communication of closeness. So everything you do somehow communicates something to everyone." (Participant 7)

5 Discussion

This study aimed to find out how employees throughout different organisations and industries make sense of leadership communication by using the CIT. The researcher examined the impact of different incidents on changes in the perception of the leader respectively on the job. Moreover, this study investigated on the evaluations of those incidents and questioned the participants for their personally drawn consequences and learnings. Eventually, this research also explored the general conceptions of leadership and how participants conceptualize a good and bad leadership. Lastly, this study sought information about how the perception of communication and its relation to leadership is being viewed by the participants. Although, the total amount of incidents is comparatively low to other studies (Zwijze-Koning, De Jong, & Van Vuuren, 2015), the CIT allowed to collect data about this specific topic and gain useful insights.

Sensemaking

The research question cannot be answered by a simple sentence. At first, the results of this study confirm that employees make sense leadership communication, but depending on the incident, it resulted in very different processes of sensemaking. Considering the positive incidents and those of them, which were categorized as exceptional incidents, positive incidents in which e.g. participants were praised or rewarded for their efforts and work, increased the motivation and commitment of the participants. They felt more valued and

important, not only for the business but also for the leader. There is a pattern in this process of sensemaking. When the leader complimented them on their work or they were rewarded by invitation to dinner, their motivation to work harder and to pay it back elevated. Participants indicated feelings of happiness and acknowledgment. However, multiple studies already show that rewards and praises are able to increase motivation of employees (Alonso & Lewis, 2001; Hansen, Smith, & Hansen, 2002). When analyzing the results of this named pattern, there is one participant (2) who is not motivated by the praises his leader gave him. In fact, he stated that at his state, he does not need any further complimenting to be motivated and he is aware of his actions and capabilities. Therefore, neither did it change his view on the leader nor his view on the job. By looking at his background, the age, previous experience and position might be an indicator for his standpoint. It could be the case that due to his much higher experience (24 years) than the average of the participants (6,2 years), he is already at a stage of development where the curve of developing gets flatter so the experience he makes does not influence him any further.

Another point which participants made positive sense of which contain communicative actions by their leaders. All of the participants reported that it made them feel better at work, feel more welcome and strengthened the connection to the leader and the joy experienced at work. Those actions were, for instance, that the leaders' door to the office was always open or that the leader frequently asked the participant whether he was experiencing any failures or has questions and concern which he would like to talk about. Important to note here, these incidents were recurring incidents. It was the general conception of the communication and leadership. There is also a pattern in these incidents. The leader in both cases appears approachable and thereby, the participants make sense of the leader as a grateful, genuinely interested and supportive one. Participants indicated that they appreciate this kind of behaviour and feel welcomed. Interestingly, as shown in table 4, each positive event had a positive impact on the leader, but only 80% of the positive events had a positive impact on the job. It seems to be that employees view their leader and the job as distinct. So, the leader and the interactions with the leader do not necessarily take a great part in the job. One could argue again, keeping in mind the professional background of the participants (2 & 9) who reported the incidents having no impact on the job, that the experience level and industry respectively position can be an indicator for their non-sensemaking.

Reviewing the negative incidents, and comparing it to the positive incidents, two things become evident: there are more negative incidents than positive ones and the incidents had more negative impacts on the leader (88%) than on the job (58%). Regarding the first point, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) explain that bad events are easier to recall for humans than good ones and that those negative events are more powerful than good events. It seems to be easier for participants to recall negative events and derive meaning from it. The second finding, can be connected to the finding in the positive events. The pattern that participants are making more sense of the event in terms of more impacts on the view of their leaders than on their jobs is also visible in the positive events. Apparently, ignorant behaviour, ungrateful treatment and inability to lead let participants start to question their skills, lose their respect and decreased their motivation. A few even considered to change the job, because they were so disappointed by the leader. But participants also specified how they lost the joy in their jobs, how their trust in the leader dropped and that they stopped talking to the leader and distanced themselves. One approach to explain this kind of sensemaking is the statement of participant 19 who said that people *"do not quit their job but their leader"*. According to Lipman (2015) (un)successful management of employees can be the reason to keep them or lose them. This could be the reason why participants reported more impacts on the leader in both positive and negative cases and less impacts on their jobs. It seems like happenings or incidents at work are less impactful on the job itself.

Leadership and communication

When it comes to the conception of leadership, the participants agreed on certain aspects of communication within leadership unknowingly. Since they were not asked if leadership has communicative elements but which one's they think leadership has, by answering with attributes, they automatically accepted the fact that leadership is (at least) connected to communication or even that leadership is communication.

First of all, according to the results, participants are very well aware of how the incidents were connected to communication and they were also able to tell about details deriving meaning from it. To them, leadership behaviour, choice of words, body language, actions and reactions were all forms of communication. They derived meaning from simple

behaviours like leaders placing their feet on the table as soon as they walked in. Apparently, this communicates disrespect and makes clear that employees are lower in the hierarchy scheme. Having a more holistic view on this issue, one could argue that employees make sense of every leadership behaviour or action in terms of communication. It does not need to be a critical incident as the situational happenings show. Although, they did not consist of critical incidents, participants were not only able to specify the relation to communication, but also specified the meaning they receive from them. The second finding which is very crucial to note, participants connected these incidents to communication because they were asked but without further elaborating on the communication part. Meaning that participants responded to the question by viewing communication from their own perspective which, apparently, seems to be broad and fits the framework of this study. Lastly, looking at the framework of this study and comparing the leadership communication theory that it presupposes to the participants answers, they seem to support it. Their conceptions of communicative elements encompass more than simple behaviours. In fact, they have a deeper understanding of it. From their perspective, the communicative elements of leadership go beyond verbal communication, but also consist of language, tonality, approachability, the fact that the leader is just present, frequently interacts with them and prefers personal contact over digital contact are all parts of leadership (communication). They deduce meaning of those behaviours.

Another key point is the envisioning of leadership and the good leader. The descriptions of a good leader fit the transactional leadership style of the framework of this study. Besides four participants, who numerated elements which fit the transactional leader better, the majority listed characteristics which fit the transformational leadership style. In particular, the elements of motivating, empowering and setting a framework for achieving the goals while guiding the workforce to it are standing out. Interestingly, those four participants (2, 9, 15, 17), who described transactional leadership elements, were men and above the average age of the participants. This could be explained by the fact that these four participants are already partly in a leading position, have a higher working experience than the average and also, are older than the average participant. Furthermore, since participants did not mention that a human is designated to become a leader, it seems like they do not agree with the trait theory. The same applies on the situational theory. Their interviews do

not fit the situational leadership theory. Participants did not mention traits or skills that have to be inborn to (be)come a leader.

Practical Implications

After analysing the results, it can be said that employees are constantly making sense of leadership communication. There does not need to be a specific incident taking place. Leaders need to be aware of and should pay attention to their overall appearance as well as verbal and nonverbal communication. According to these participants taking part of this study, leaders are able to influence their employees in both ways, positive and negative. They are able to increase their own likability, trust and followership, but at the same time, they also can demotivate and decrease the commitment of the employees towards the job. Furthermore, leaders have to be aware of the fact that an essential part of employees view them as a role model and reproduce their actions and behaviours which in turn again influence the atmosphere and success at work. Accordingly, leaders could implement an open and transparent communication culture to talk about occurring problems and conflict. This could gain the trust of employees to open up about certain difficulties at work and could improve the atmosphere at work.

To be successful as a leader, leaders need to frequently interact with their employees, be open and transparent and give meaning to the work and most importantly work on their communication skills. As mentioned by the participants often, they have to communicate in an unambiguous way so that first, there are no misconceptions and second, every employee gets the same information and meaning. Leaders also need to acknowledge their employee's work and value it. In order to understand the employee's perspective, leaders could talk to their employees on a regular basis and ask them how they perceived a usual or specific situation and what kind of meaning they derived from it. Hereby, leaders and employees could adjust their communications towards each other and commit to a better understanding of each side and thus, increase the motivation, satisfaction and atmosphere at the workplace.

Limitations and further research

As limitations, this study provides a rather small amount of participants which could make it hard to extend the outcome to wider populations. Secondly, although it was paid attention to use the term leadership and not manager or management, it could have been the case for participants that they perceived the term leadership as the same as manager. So, there would be no distinction between them. The third limitation, at the same time an element which could be researched in future studies, is that the all participants had different leaders. Therefore, the sensemaking could not be compared to other colleagues to see whether there is a pattern or are differences throughout their sensemaking processes. The same applies to the division, company and industry. It could be investigated further on these factors to see whether there are changes between employees sensemaking throughout different types of organisations. Apparently, a major limitation for this qualitative research was the ongoing pandemic which inhibited the opportunity to interview participants in person. These circumstances could be a reason for participants to not take it as academic as they would have done in personal meetings due to entirely changed settings and the use of communication media. Lastly, regarding further research, researchers could design the requirements to participate more strict. They could restrict the requirement to certain ages and/or genders to conclude differences or commonalities in the sensemaking process.

6 Conclusion

All in all, this study resulted in useful findings as recommendations for leaders but also as a starting point for further studies in this area. As it has been reported by the interviewees, leadership is strongly related to communication, for a few even a requirement to be a (successful) leader. Also, participants were very well aware of the communicative elements and their incidents respectively the leader's behaviour in the incident were related to communication. This thesis showed that people are able to tell more about communication and view it from a broader perspective than the usual as it is often narrowly viewed. Communication played a huge role in the incidents and the participants could exactly tell what kind of a role it took. Therefore, leadership needs to be viewed more often from the communication perspective. Furthermore, the CIT was a very valuable method to gain deeper

insights into the sensemaking processes. It helped to answer the research question and find out in detail in what way participant make sense of leadership communication. As suggested above, this topic needs to be investigated with different design including the participants and their characteristics.

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