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LEADERS' TOOLS FOR INTERNATIONAL TEAMS IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

Master's thesis

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently

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have been properly referenced and the same paper

has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 13,986 words from the introduction to the end of the conclusion.

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ABSTRACT

New environmental changes challenge leaders to constantly take decisions to address the issues and achieve established goals. There is a lack of understanding of and recent research on how leaders make decisions by applying specific international team tools to different changes. There is a requirement to research theoretical frameworks to present practical application of aligning the most appropriate practices. Functional leadership (Hackman & Walton, 1999; Adair, 1998, 2015) or tools (Stacey, 2012) are one way to study the phenomena, as this theoretical framework's essence is behind the freedom of the leader to decide how to act after assessing contextual situations.

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to explore and understand leaders' decision-making process of applying specific leader tools to achieve certain goals of international teams in concrete contextual situations, and align theoretical knowledge and practical applications in reality nowadays. Master's thesis questions:
How do leaders apply tools to team performance in international teams nowadays?
How do leaders perceive context to take decisions or further actions?

The author conducted seven semi-structured interviews with experienced practitioners managing international teams in Estonia.

As a result of the study, leaders' tools are universal, and there is no difference in tooling for international teams. Tools are applied automatically to achieve a certain goal. The major difference in how it is done lies in the leader's team members' personality assessment depending on the situation. Decision-making is a process of assessing the context, checking alternatives and finding the solution for the aim.

Keywords: functional leadership, tools, context, performance, teams, cultural difference, decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Management and leadership is an emerging topic as managers and leaders are needed in any sector and any organisation; they are the key element that connects people with the organisation and helps to follow the path to the directions. According to some researchers, there are over 66 leadership theories or frameworks (Dinh *et al.,* 2014), and the interest continues to grow.

Witzel (2016) wrote that we are living in complex environments; thus, leaders need to work simultaneously for different perspectives and be able to notice interrelations, requiring new skills. As explained by Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017), it is about interconnections of other factors, which cause complexity, which also lies inside the organisations due to interactions of different parties; and the leader is a part of that (Tourish, 2019). Complex environments are only one part of the context, which is a time-related and dynamic process; thus, Oc (2018) mentioned "omnibus context" and "discrete context", which impact leaders today. Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018) added that one of the leader's challenges is to help the teams and organisations to adapt to those changes. Due to continuous internationalisation, a lot of companies have international teams. Leaders need to address those complexities caused by external and internal factors.

In contrast to other leadership theories, the essence of the functional leadership theory (Hackman & Walton, 1986, 1999; Adair 1998, 2015) considers context; thus, the leader is achieving targets via performing certain functions, a team-centred problem-solving concept. Leaders' task is constantly assessing (monitoring) the context (external and internal) and acting accordingly. Leaders have freedom, keeping in mind "objectives", "aims", "purpose" changes challenge (Adair, 1998). Based on functional leadership, Stacey (2012) elaborated on the term "tools", which is interrelated with functions. Thus, the author of the Master's thesis considers that tools have connotations of some active actions.

Thus, considering the leader's challenges and constant problem-solving issues, studying leadership based on the leader's tools (functional leadership) is a very promising attempt. It is a simple, agile, and systematised way to study phenomena in an international team setting. At the same time, the

list of tools is comprehensive and covers the major parts of leaders' tasks in significant business areas.

Therefore, the purpose of this Master's thesis is to explore and understand leaders' decision-making process of applying specific leader tools to achieve certain goals of international teams in concrete contextual situations, and align theoretical knowledge and practical applications in reality nowadays.

This thesis tries to answer the following questions:

How do leaders apply tools to team performance in international teams nowadays?

How do leaders perceive context to take decisions or further actions?

The author of the current thesis applied the qualitative method (semi-structured interview) to study in-depth leaders' tools and decision-making process phenomena. A non-probability, self-selection sampling technique (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 303) was applied to collect data from the potential interviewees with previous experience leading international teams. The author compiled a questionnaire, including primary research topics (tools, team, performance, context, culture, and decision-making). Interviews with experienced practitioners from Estonia were conducted. Among this sample are leaders with international team leading experience from 3.5 to 20 years; different team size experience from 6 to 110-person teams and in various business areas. Interviews were recorded, then transcribed by Otter application, and cleaned (see Appendix 8). For coding, the author applied directed content analysis (in the final stage, initial codes were adjusted).

This Master's thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the literature review of the leader's role, functional leadership and tools, connection to team performance, international teams and culture. Despite the long history of leadership research, many concepts do not have a unified notion. Results are fragmented, concentrating only on specific angles (e.g., a correlation between certain leadership styles on performance). The chapter ends with a simplified visual of the leadership decision-making process in contextual environments; their international team could be considered as a part of the context (based on Lord *et al.*, 2001; Hackman & Walton, 1986, 1999; Adair, 1998, 2015; Stacey, 2012).

The second chapter describes the methodology, sampling, the research aim, method and analysis. The choice of the method was derived from the topic and aim.

The third chapter is divided into three parts – interview analysis, discussion, limitations and directions for future research. Among the major limitations are the sample size and representation, which do not allow generalised conclusions. In the discussion part, some comparisons between the literature review and interview analysis are brought; the interviews presented insights and practices from experienced practitioners about the tools' application in international teams to support and motivate teams and improve performance. In addition, it provided some more contextual issues and possible present challenges faced by leaders, which could become a foundation for future exploratory research areas.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

During the 20th century, researchers concentrated on studying leadership, which remains an emerging topic. In recent publications, researchers have pointed out that around 66 leadership theories or concepts have been identified since 2000 (Dinh *et al.,* 2014). Focal theories became a basis for the stem of new contemporary approaches, while neo-charismatic theories (transformation, charismatic etc.) are among the most applied strategies in research over the last 20 years. (Gardner *et al.*, 2020)

At the same time, Meuser *et al.* (2016a) have pointed out that leadership theories lack "compartmentalisation", thus, frameworks are not fused, or results are correlated studiously. This could be partially explained by Antonakis *et al.* (2019) conclusion that leadership is widely used in all spheres of life, and advancing this area will help resolve multiple problems; at the same time, it brings a new challenge – the risk of fragmentation (Tuncdogan *et al.*, 2017). Thus, it requires multi-level, structural, diverse, in-depth and complex research.

In this chapter, the author will review the main leadership terms, choice of focal leadership theory – functional leadership, the leader's role and functions, the core concept of teams, tools, context and cultural aspects from the lenses of the current Master's thesis purpose.

1.1. Management and leadership terms

Researchers have disputed over the difference between management and leadership and have proposed their definitions. Some researchers believe that leadership and management are tremendously different roles.

In general, in the literature, management is linked to planning, structuring, and order, while leadership is linked to bringing team vision and motivation, both are important to run the business (Liphadzi *et al.*, 2017; Wajdi, 2017).

Some researchers describe leadership as "...a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2017, p.3). In general, both concepts are interconnected to achieving goals and improving performance. An alternative view has been proposed by a group of researchers (Azad *et al.*, 2017) who stated that management and leadership are a "single construct", interoperable concepts which are inseparable and entwined as the same person performs the functions of a leader or manager if organisations want to adapt and act effectively in constantly changeable conditions. In addition, hiring only managers or leaders is also challenging, as both functions are required nowadays, and it is difficult to cut a clear borderline or separate them.

In the concept of the current Master's thesis the author will use the term "leadership" and "leader(s)" as (1) the aim of the research is to explore and understand decision-making in a general way and not connected to specific positions or name of the role, (2) discussion on the difference between managers or leaders is not in the scope of the current paper, (3) leadership encompasses a wide range of both functions (functionality, visuality, interpersonal relationships) and the requirement for leaders to constantly overcome changes in the environment and to adapt and enhance effectiveness.

1.2. Functional leadership, functions and tools

Northouse (2022, p. 22) concluded that the leadership concept is broad and might include some aspects researched earlier – viewed via inner capabilities such as "traits", gained "skills", "behaviour", "ability", "relationship", or "process".

Rejuvenated traits theory was listed among the first five most commonly used focal approaches during 2010–2019 (Gardner *et al.*, 2020); but was criticised for the lack of context consideration influencing the situation and not providing a link between traits and effectiveness. (Northouse, 2017, pp. 15–27) Contingency theory considers the context and possesses the best suitable leader styles, criticised by difficulty to apply in practicality and lack of reasoning of the effectiveness of one style in specific situations (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019, pp. 25-26). Witzel *et al.* (2016) added that Western-centred leadership theories are based on Taylorism to find the best approach to leadership. Adair (2015, pp. 115–117) concluded that any style, ability or skill should not become

a "straitjacket" for any leader, adding that one of the core aspects of leaders is the ability of self-awareness, own strengths and weaknesses and to act at maximum capabilities.

Compared to some classical theories functional leadership considers context and freedom of the leader to act accordingly, without following a prescribed way of working (behaviour or style). This theory has a long history. One of the first functional theory researchers, McGrath, proposed an idea in 1962, postulating that crucial functions should be performed; thus, this is a leader's core task to assert it (Hackman & Walton, 1999). The researcher listed the acquired skills and knowledge a leader should conduct to perform monitoring and execution of tasks internally in the group setting and externally. (*Ibid.,* 1999) Same researchers added that this model gives the leader freedom to accomplish tasks or functions in multiple ways in the given context without prescribed behaviour (Hackman & Walton, 1999).

A different perspective was proposed by Adair (1998), whose concept also lies in the belief that the leader adapts to the contexts and performs to meet the values and needs not only of the groups but also of individuals and tasks ("objectives", "aims", "purpose") at the right time or with applying necessary behaviour. Those areas overlap, and the leader conducts functions to support achieving shared targets and contribute as a unit while developing each member. (*Ibid.*, pp. 33–61) The functional theoretical framework is vivid even nowadays and has become a basis for new, more practical concepts – e.g., Leadership in a Team (Meuser *et al.,* 2016b).

Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999) elaborated on McGrath's theory to an approach from the leader's perspective. They also emphasise that a leader's primary functions are (1) to monitor conditions, performance, and team results, notice changes that might affect the undertaking and notice opportunities and threats, and (2) to take necessary actions to improve conditions to favourable (*Ibid.,* 1986, 1999). Hackman & Walton (1999) also indicate that those two main functions actioned toward five main spheres: providing guidance, the structure of the team, accessibility to information in the organisation, incorporated training and reward system, coaching and helping to work effectively without unnecessary losses, resources (in terms of staffing, tools, place).

An alternative list of six general leadership functions is proposed by Adair (2015), which are essential to fulfil the task, developing each individual, and helping the team to enhance: "planning" (setting the team's goals and directions based on available information), "initiating" (refers to guidance, advice, clarification and implementation of procedures, explanation of purpose),

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"controlling" (controlling and adjusting tasks, ensuring that process and tasks performed according to standards of effectiveness, speed), "informing" (feeding with a plan, information exchange, suggestion proposals), "supporting" (helping, motivating and keeping up an emotional level, easing tensions, encouragement) and "evaluating" (task, performance assessment, help the team to self-assess against standards). The author mentions that some functions are required at different stages or could not be practised by all leaders; some could be delegated to team members but lie on the leader's responsibilities (*Ibid.*, pp. 117–120).

Later, Morgeson *et al.* (2010) enhanced the team-centric leadership approach, proposing 15 team leadership functions and a "Team Leadership Questionnaire" for assessment. They offer to split functions according to the two phases, respectively, with a focus on the formality of leadership and "internal" versus "external locus":

- "transition", which is described as the period of (1) team composition, (2) mission establishment, (3) establishment of goals with expectations, (4) composition of the structure, (5) team development, (6) teams sensemaking process, (7) feedback providing;

- "active" is the period of team activities to achieve the goals through (1) team monitoring, (2) setting boundaries, (3) providing challenges to the team, (4) intervening and performing team tasks, (5) problem-solving, (6) providing missing resources, (7) team empowerment for self-manage, (8) fostering a climate in the team; among the main conclusions, researchers mention that the effectiveness of functions could vary depending on some factors (external factors, team size). (*Ibid.,* 2010)

Klein *et al.* (2004) research was conducted in the context setting – leadership in a trauma resuscitation team with different authority settings, and leaders viewed as individuals with behavioural patterns and unique traits. They grouped and renamed the functions of the predecessor researchers to "strategic", "direction", "monitor", "hands-on", and "teaching" *(Ibid.*, 2004).

Stacey (2012) tried to provide a more practical approach to the theory and proposed six prominent managers' (the author does not distinguish leaders from managers) tools and techniques of "instrumental rationality" and one for leaders. The author's notion of tools concept – an "artefact" to enhance human capabilities to achieve individual and group goals rationally and analytically (*Ibid.,* 2012). Stacey (2012) emphasises that such tools should be used consciously in the specific situation, often relying on leader expertise. However, the researcher proposes the option to overcome the following: "...through using the 'right' ones in a more flexible manner, continually

reassessing assumptions and goals so as to maintain alignment and increase the speed of response" (*Ibid.,* pp. 58–59).

Santos *et al.* (2015) went even further – they proposed a "Functional Team leadership scale" based on the three main functions (strategy and context explanation, coordination process of the team); thus, according to their results, after the training leaders of those functions, the performance of leaders and their teams improved.

Based on Morgeson's and researchers' paper, Maynard *et al.* (2017) studied the functional leadership's "active phase" after a leader's change. They found that necessary "human capital quality" (personnel's knowledge, skills, and abilities) is augmented due to an active leader's engagement, adding that for permanent replacement leaders, in some cases, more empowerment and less engagement could be considered, which should be evaluated by the leader depending on the member's role and general goal (*Ibid.,* 2017).

Researchers have studied specific leaders' functions and their impact on team performance. However, results are fragmented without providing a clear and complete picture of the entire leadership concept (Santos *et al.*, 2015) or due to the expansion of research in different domains and lack of unification (Tuncdogan *et al.,* 2017); conclusions relying upon small sampling, biased and built-in artificial settings, and causality, mentioning that the organisation's positive evidence is not publicly shared due to confidentiality issues. (Stacey, 2012, pp. 50–51)

The author of this Master's thesis notices commonalities between McGrath, Hackman & Walton's functional leadership concepts, functions listed by Klein and Adair and tools by Stacey. In the scope of this work, the author decided to exclude Morgeson *et al.* (2010) functions, as the distinction between "transition" and "active phase" is theoretical, overlaps with other theories and functions, and overcomplicates the entire concept. An overview of the main functions and tool categories is listed in Appendix 1.

The author bases her Master's thesis on the functional leadership theory, as this underpins the essence of leadership and achieving goals via performing necessary functions and considers the team as a group and individuals, the core purpose of this existence is the context. Leaders need to evaluate internal and external factors and, according to such contextual triggers, keep in mind groups, individuals and some task needs (seen as team-centred and problem-solving). Despite

complex environments, during turmoil periods, leaders still need to concentrate on targets and how to achieve team goals. Moreover, the author will focus on the list of practical tools proposed by Stacey (2012) and use the term "tools" as this has a more practical connotation (i.e. that leader performs active actions at least to assess the reality and then, takes meaningful decisions (cognition) to improve or address the context) compared to functions. This framework does not eliminate the leader's and follower's aspects and cultural differences or prescribe a specific leadership style. Stacey's list of tools is comprehensive and covers significant factors in the scope of this Master's thesis.

1.3. The role of leader, teams, and performance

According to Cortellazzo *et al.* (2019), a conclusion based on the literature review, in the digital era the leader's role is to enhance members' skills, establish relationships, work collaboratively with various stakeholders, and motivate and engage with team members. Witzel (2016) concluded similarly that leadership is about dealing with people, where the leader is to help his followers to reach their internal goals or wishes.

Thus, the entire concept of leadership is connected to interaction with a team on an individual or group level to achieve set goals or directions. Teams have multiple different notions, a broader concept defined by Kozlowski & Bell (2003, p. 334; as cited in Bell *et al.*, 2012, p. 860):

"two or more individuals who (a) exist to perform organizationally relevant tasks, (b) share one more common goals, (c) interact socially, (d) exhibit task interdependencies (i.e. work flow, goals, outcomes), (e) maintain and manage boundaries, and (f) are embedded in an organizational context that sets boundaries, constrains the team, and influences exchanges with other units in the broader entity".

Adair (2015, pp. 5–7) elaborated that teams can acquire an aspect of shared group awareness and feeling of belonging, common identification.

Teams can be classified according to their impact on members, general mission, procedures and processes: "functional operating", "cross-functional", "self-managed", "self-defining", and "top executive teams", and nowadays dispersed (geographically distanced) teams. (Yukl, 2002, pp. 306–307) Some researchers claim that teams are the "building blocks" of any organisation, as they combine different knowledge, expertise, skills and competencies to bring information-sharing in the organisation and enhance response to changes. (Bell *et al.*, 2012)

Leadership has often been studied via the lense of its impact on team effectiveness, in other words, on performance in academic settings or company settings, e.g. remote leadership and the effectiveness of transformational and transactional leadership styles in Information and Technology Company (Saaron-Juhanson, 2019); leadership styles on work performance and work stress of IT companies' staff (Kirs, 2022).

This complex concept lacks a unified matrix for assessing leadership effectiveness. In their work, Mathieu & Gilson (2012, pp. 913–917) propose a broad type of team effectiveness classification as "tangible outputs of products of team interaction" and "influences on team members". Some researchers (Madanchian *et al.*, 2017) tried to group the recent most used measurements:
1) Leader assessment through concrete outcomes, e.g. teams' completion of common tasks and objectives, employee assessment, work contentment, commitment by an experienced subordinate, enhanced performance of subordinates and/or a team, decision making;
2) Leader's effectiveness assessment by a subordinate(s), e.g. evaluation by subordinates of team leader/leader/pastoral leader influence of effectiveness, their sense of humour, evaluation of leaders in specific industries (hospitals), etc.

Yukl (2002, pp. 9–10) agreed with the difficulty of effectiveness assessment, indicating that effectiveness results might have a prompt or postponed effect, adding that leaders influence the same criteria or measurement for the short and long term, and might be consistent or inconsistent.

In this Master's thesis, research will be based on broad teams (functional operational, cross-functional, and/or international, i.e. including members with different cultural backgrounds/nationalities) with more than two team members, supervised by the assigned leader whose task is to monitor, motivate the team, and foster effectiveness in achieving set goals. Due to the lack of a unified measure of team and individual performance, and additional aspects of provisional effects of influence, performance will be suspected as observable by the leader and relied on their elective cognitive evaluation.

1.4. Culture

Due to massive internationalisations, more and more companies have cross-national or international teams. Thus, more and more leaders should acknowledge the cultural aspect,

commonalities and differences among team members, and cultural diversity. Culture is "collective programming", consisting of value programs, a core element of culture (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 6), and is layered to national, regional, gender, generation, social class, and organisations. (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede *et al.,* 2010, pp. 17–18)

Among the first researchers of culture was Hofstede, with his "cultural dimensions" framework. The researcher emphasised that the most significant difference between cultures is behind the values ("invisible") (Hofstede, 1994, p. 236), adding that countries and groups also differ by some "visible factors" – identity (language and religion) and rules of organisations (Hofstede *et al.,* 2010). Hofstede (1994) attempted to classify cultures into dimensions: "power distance", "masculinity-femininity", "uncertainty avoidance", and "individualism-collectivism". Later added new dimensions: "long-term versus short-term" and "indulgence versus restraint" (Hofstede *et al.,* 2010). Hofstede *et al.* (2010) added that organisational culture differs from "national values". By then, personalities join with their learned and cultivated firm values from childhood; the corporate core values are superficial; and concluded that corporate culture depends on C-level management decisions of the balance of "strategy", "structure", "control", and "culture" (*Ibid.,* pp. 371–372). Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner's (2020) idea is a bit different; they write that the core differences of culture are rooted in the perception of (1) time and (2) the environment and five are connected to (3) relationships with other people ("universalism/particularism", "individualism/communitarianism", "neutral/emotional", "specific/diffuse", "achievement/ascription"). Moreover, researchers have studied the impact of culture on corporate culture from two main perspectives: cultures oriented to people or accomplishing the task, and equality versus the organisation's hierarchical structure, and have distinguished four different types of corporate culture: "Eiffel Tower", "Guided missile", "Incubator", and "Family", and those types might be mixed with one prevailing. (*Ibid.*, 2020)

Kakabadse *et al.* (2000) concluded that no single C-level leadership style exists in Europe. Researchers indicated four main types in the region with some cultural exceptions ("consensus", "towards a common goal", "leading from the front", "managing from a distance"), and the most prominent is a relation between top management behaviour on teams and the company's performance. (*Ibid.*, pp. 184–195) Alternative massive research studying the relationship between culture and leadership in 62 countries is the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) project. GLOBE researchers have identified six global leadership dimensions consisting of dominant layers: "participative", "human-oriented", "autonomous",

"self-protective", "charismatic/value-based" and "team-oriented"; it is noteworthy that the latter two are considered universal. (Dorfman *et al.*, 2012) Moreover, researchers write that national culture indirectly impacts leadership due to societal dogmatic leadership expectations (*Ibid.,* 2012).

Raithel *et al.* (2021) pose that the core of understanding a team's cultural diversity is based on the leader's previous diversity experience, which is a superior skill of leaders to skilfully manage culturally diversified groups. In addition, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2020) proposed a way how to assess "intercultural competence", which consists of four parts (1) "recognition" – this is about self-awareness and understanding connections between and impacts by other societies, (2) "respect" – for different values with considerations, (3) "reconciliation" – competence to find a solution of working with people with different values (4) "realization" – competence to enhance effectiveness of finding ways to work in collaboration.

Hence, the cultural aspect (i.e., cultural diversity) of the team members and leaders' company's culture should be carefully considered, as otherwise, it could cause additional disruptions, conflicts, or a decrease in the general performance of the international team.

An additional factor – a layer of the individual propensity of contemporary reality – was discovered by Anderson *et al.* (2017), who claim that Millennials have different expectations towards their leader's role of work and how to be lead (i.e., organisational culture in general).

1.5. Context and leader's decision making

Leadership concept, whether viewed from traits, behavioural or situational framework, does not appear in a vacuum. This process happens in a specific situation, in a particular context, environment, and results from internal and external factors. Even though a leader might neglect a decision or decide to hold on with any active actions, this still has a particular impact, which could bring fruitful results or a new curve of changes.

Oc (2018) concluded that context is a dynamic, time-related notable trigger of leaders impacting or shaping processes. The researcher tried to systematise the results of the leadership context phenomena and define the "omnibus context" (where/who/when) affecting process and leadership

results (e.g. organisational or national culture, crises, economic situation) and "discrete context" (task/social/physical), e.g. teams, tasks, deadlines, and "temporal context" – cycling of the stage of teams, communication disturbance impacting more outcomes. (*Ibid.,* 2018)

Thus, some authors propose that in complex environments nowadays, leaders must work simultaneously for short- and long-term perspectives, dive deep and see the bigger picture, and interrelation between views (Witzel, 2016, p. 159). On the same note, Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018) denoted that the crucial challenge for leaders nowadays is to foster adaptation to the teams and organisations' precariousness of a dynamic environment, especially in a state of emergency. As to complexity, Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017) explained that this phenomenon is about the "rich interconnectivity" of factors, which makes it impossible to return to its original, albeit requiring an adaptive leadership response. Tourish (2019) complemented that idea, adding that organisational complexity lies in the interaction between different members. Leadership is an element of that complex process (as leaders might resist some changes or delegate some part of the responsibility to other counterparts, causing some tensions). (*Ibid.,* 2019)

Recent research by Stoker *et al.* (2019) revealed an interesting conclusion that the context (e.g. the 2008 financial crisis) impacts leadership; as in such circumstances, leadership enforced to become more directive (providing more clarity and directions and guidelines to perform tasks according to instructions, close supervision), especially noticed in machinery sectors, and high-degree power distance countries. Thus, according to Westaby *et al.* (2010), context-specific triggers impact leaders' intentions to act, attitudes, and norms, i.e. leaders consider reasoning while performing decision-making.

Jeleva *et al.* (2017) mention different aspects of decisions: frequent/standard "routine" where the leader can rely on a standard approach and previous experience, or novel situations "non-routine", requiring unique decisions based on careful context/info gathering and mapping alternatives; or decisions according to the level of importance (e.g. operational – daily, tactical – how to proceed with certain aspects, strategical – about general company directions). The researchers summarised that the decision-making process is a complicated process demanding from the leader's knowledge, detail orientation and time; hence, there is still a risk that leaders make irrational decisions due to factors (power, internal agenda, incorrect data or non-proper alternatives considered). (*Ibid.,* 2017)

Meanwhile, Schwarber (2005) concluded that for good decision-making, leaders should consider three main elements, which start with the goal, review options and end with the risk assessment, emphasising that this systematic approach works at any organisation, highlighting the importance of involving proper people in correct time with the appropriate method, and keeping people in the loop. According to Van de Calseyde *et al.* (2021), in recent research results, team members are more likely to cooperate and/or reward their leader who seems more honest if the latter is quick to involve team members in the decision-making process. Zaccaro *et al.* (2018) concluded that context or a concrete situation impacts leadership, mentioning that individual layers (cognitive/social/motivational/personality attributes) structure how leaders react to those contexts. Moreover, they noted that environmental triggers require leaders to make more sense, plan for the team members, and motivate them during resistance or turbulent times (*Ibid.*, 2018).

Lord *et al.* (2001) proposed a framework of leadership model allocation in flexible and rapidly changing environments based on the connectionist model. The focal idea was based on the fact that cultural, organisational, task, social and other constraints constantly impact leaders, who are required to flexibly adjust to a new context (*Ibid.,* 2001). Based on the connectionist leadership model (Lord *et al.*, 2001) and functional theory (McGrath; Hackman & Walton, 1986, 1999; Adair, 1998, 2015), and the concept of the proposed tool (Stacey, 2012), the author of this Master's thesis suggests a theoretical implication from leaders perspective Figure 1.
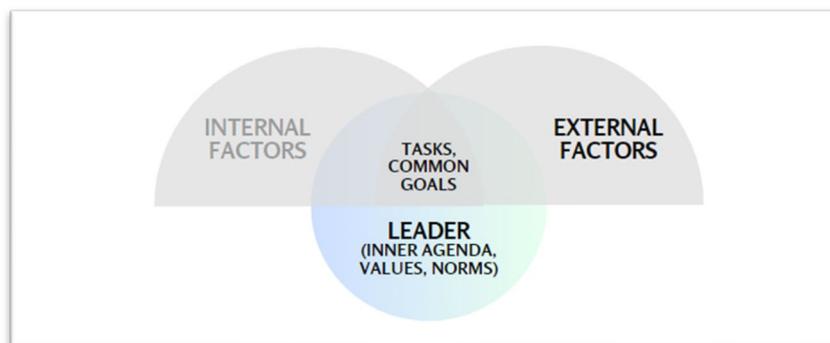
Figure 1. Simplified visual of leaders' reactions and decision-making to various triggers.
Source: Created by the author based on Lord *et al.*, 2001; McGrath; Hackman & Walton, 1986, 1999; Adair, 1998, 2015; Stacey, 2012.

A leader is an overlapping centre that must (1) monitor changes in internal and external aspects. According to various triggers, leaders need to (2) prioritise the needs/urgencies of different stakeholders (external and/or internal with their hidden agenda, values, and norms) and compromise with an inner plan, values, and norms (3) make a decision (consciously or

subconsciously) about tools application and (4) act accordingly. Meanwhile, new triggers might affect this process, and the leader needs to readjust and compromise swiftly to a new reality. It is noteworthy that those external and internal environments could impact each other without the leader noticing and acknowledging this fact.

Despite the considerable interest of researchers in leadership, phenomena are often studied in a fragmented way or non-consistently, looking at it via specific lenses (traits, styles or only one domain of phenomena).

Regardless, according to the literature review, it is evident that an important role is given to the organisational leaders, whose role is to enhance the productivity or performance of an assigned team of people on a group and individual level and keep their motivation. This concept could be studied from a functional theory point of view, namely, via tools. This concept allows the leader to assess the context and apply the most relevant tool(s) or functions to achieve a common goal. Context (environment) is one of the crucial constraints which could impact the leader/team/organisation via external and internal factors, frequency or mutability of environment (multi-faceted), influencing the leader's decision-making process. An international team could be considered part of the more significant context concept and additional complexity.

2. METHODS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

The current section describes the research objectives with an aim, sampling technique and reason for applying a specific research method – semi-structured interviews with experienced practitioners, as this qualitative method provides the possibility to research more in-depth complex phenomena of leadership tools in international teams in a specific context. Gardner *et al.* (2010) mentioned that there is a need for qualitative research to enlarge the understanding with essential acumen of complicated leadership phenomena.

2.1. Description of the research object

In this Master's thesis, the author assumes that interviews with experienced practitioners, namely defined leaders of international teams, help to gain the leader's perception of the decision-making process of tools application depending on the contextual constraints. The leader has a defined position and could have different names or functions, but their role includes some core functions – motivating and controlling the performance of dedicated teams to some extent.

2.1.1. Research problem, aim and questions

New dynamic complex environmental changes challenge leaders to constantly take decisions to address the issues and achieve established goals. There is a lack of understanding and recent research on how leaders make decisions by applying specific tools in international teams to different changes. There is a requirement to research theoretical frameworks to present practical application of aligning most appropriate practices.

As mentioned in the literature review in Chapter 1, leadership is a complex phenomenon, interconnected with multiple domains, but often narrowly studied, puzzled, and not providing a bigger picture of the concept. Leadership is often studied in connection with performance and correlation to one or two factors (in general and Estonia). There is a need to align and integrate different layers of leadership concepts (leader's functions/tools, performance, decision-making, context, international team, problem-solving) and research, as those domains are relevant and

somehow connected to each leader's core role aspect – to motivate and support the team, react to changes of context, problem-solving, and achieve common goals on individual and team level.

Therefore, the purpose of this Master's thesis is to explore and understand leaders' decision-making process of applying specific leader tools to achieve certain goals of international teams in concrete contextual situations, and align theoretical knowledge and practical applications in reality nowadays. In the scope of this current research, the tools are defined as the leader's activities, operations, and ways to process the functions to achieve goals on the individual or team level (e.g. improve or correct the team's (observable) performance), and decision-making is a cognitive reaction of the leader to specific triggers (external/internal).

Therefore, this Master's thesis research questions are:

How do leaders apply tools to team performance in international teams nowadays?

How do leaders perceive context to take decisions or further actions?

The results of the current thesis try to describe and explain how leaders make decisions and take actions with the reasoning of contextual impact on practice, which could provide ideas of their application by leaders in an international team to achieve goals, support the team's performance and generate guidance to leaders. In addition, it identifies leadership research challenges and becomes a foundation for future exploratory research areas. Conversely, results could align theoretical frameworks and practical applications by experienced practitioners performing tasks.

2.2. Sampling

The author applied non-probability, a self-selection sampling technique (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 303) to collect data, and approached potential interviewees with the proposal to participate in the research, disclosing the research topic and the interviewee's simple matching criteria. Such sampling allows approaching identified sampling groups – leaders, namely experienced practitioners who trust an interviewer from previous interactions and thus could be more eager to share in-depth insights to study phenomena. This option of volunteer sampling allows deciding whether the topic of research is relevant and whether the interviewees meet simple criteria: (1) the interviewee is (was) a leader, (2) the interviewee has international team managing experience, (3) the team size – two or more members.

In total, seven accepted an offer to participate in the interviews and are located in Estonia. Five candidates refused to participate for personal reasons (the company's strict policies to avoid participating in empirical research, tight schedule, and other reasons).

The interviewees represent different fields (advisory, cruise company, telecom, fintech, hospitality, banking, and telecommunication technology). This condition provides an additional benefit to comparing data and noticing possible similarities or differences in various areas. A link to an overview of the interviews can be found in Appendix 2.

2.3. Research method of data analysis

The author of this Master's thesis assumes that the qualitative method is the most appropriate method to study in-depth leaders' tools and decision-making processes in a specific context. As mentioned by Flick (2018), this method is: "...approaching the world(s) 'out there' …, (i)t intends to understand, describe, and sometimes explain social phenomena 'from the inside' in a number of different ways".

One of the dominant leadership study methods researchers apply is the quantitative method (Gardner *et al.,* 2010; Stentz *et al.,* 2012), namely surveys (Gardner *et al.*, 2020). The latter concentrate on the correlation of specific factors (e.g. leader's traits) on variables (e.g. performance); questionnaires could be easily applied (e.g. Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, leader-member exchange method LMX-7), but they do not provide context. Moreover, the survey approach in leadership is criticised due to multiple limitations (e.g. biased measurement and metrics, perplexed variables, and negligible results) (Antonakis *et al.*, 2003), researchers concluded that context impacts the results and should be carefully considered while planning, data gathering and further research analysis. Any quantitative method could explain what the leader is doing but need help explaining the reasoning behind that (*Ibid.*, 2003). Furthermore, results do not map the leader's actions or how their subordinates feel about that in that particular context (Fischer *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the scope and sample size of the Master's thesis would not allow for complementing results of top field researchers.

One of the contemporary methods to predict leaders' practical judgement and uncover traits associated with effective leadership is applying a computational method based on leadership theories (Bhatia *et al*., 2022), which opens access to a model previously impossible due to complexity variations (Banks *et al.*, 2022). Unfortunately, even though that method could be beneficial in managing various complex data units (e.g. triangulate method, case studies) and additional layers, it was not possible to apply it technically in the current Master's thesis framework.

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. According to some researchers, this method allows the interviewer to combine, shrink or combine questions depending on the context but consider major topics and go in-depth, asking additional questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 391).

The interview manual for semi-structured interviews which consists of 11 open-ended questions can be found in Appendix 3. The author could not identify suitable questionnaires from the previous researchers to fit the need of studying research phenomena. Thus, a questionnaire was built on the main topics covered in the theoretical part: context, cultural aspect, team performance, tools, and leader's decision-making process. The first five questions help to collect the interviewees' background and additional context information to build rapport. A list of themes and corresponding theories can be found in Appendix 4.

In the frame of this empirical research, the author of the Master's thesis conducted seven semi-structured interviews from the 26th of February until the 21st of March, 2023. On average, interviews lasted 51 minutes and 18 seconds. Interviews were arranged via MsTeams and one in person. During virtual interviews, the interviewer experienced technical issues with almost everyone (connectivity problems), or the interviewees were distracted/lost attention.

During the introduction, the author explained the aim of the research and asked permission to record the data for future transcription and analysis. Two interviewees did not agree to disclose the company name. Thus, the company names of all participants will not be disclosed but instead coded as "business areas".

After checking understanding of the tools, a simple slide with different tools concepts was shared for the interviewee's convenience. Interviews were conducted in the English language. Recordings were transcribed using Otter.io technology (Pro version), and recordings were listened to and

checked twice to make corrections, if needed. Later transcripts were cleaned from repetitions caused by direct speech, as well as unnecessary words (e.g. let's say, basically, kind of, obviously) distracting from catching the interviewee's thoughts.

The deductive analysis approach was applied to systematise and analyse collected data to validate information gathered during the literature review analysis (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, pp. 569–570). According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005), directed content analysis is a widely used method that provides researchers with a practical and systematic way of extending knowledge in a specific domain. Namely, it aimed to help to validate and expand knowledge of existing phenomena study frameworks and initially created a coding system (see Appendix 5); during the analysis, the code system was further developed and tuned. The main codes remained the same, connected to the theoretical themes collected during the literature review process. Still, sub-category codes were formulated depending on the content and simple comparison (e.g. external/internal factors or connection to the time), and can be found in Appendix 6.

Later all interviewees' data was coded, and their replies were summarised. A temporary link to codes and summaries of interview results can be found in Appendix 7.

3. RESEARCH OUTCOME AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the author will present the main findings of the interviews — link to codings and a summary of interviews are presented in Appendix 7, transcriptions and recordings in Appendix 8.

It was apparent from the interview sessions that all the interviewees have extensive leader's experience (from 3.5 to 20 years), leading teams of different sizes (from 6 to 110 people), have a lot of knowledge and were willing to share their experience and thoughts on the given topic providing the additional contextual meaning of their area of business. Five of seven respondents are currently in a leading role; one respondent works with international leaders on a daily basis.

3.1. Interview results

3.1.1. Notion of tools and their application

As it became explicitly apparent during the interviews, interviewees had their own perception of the leader's tools. Then they were asked to provide their notion; the majority provided a holistic explanation, where the concept was seen from the lenses of the leader's personality and experience and organisational environment (INT1), while INT7 agreed with the experience part, adding that this could be extensive, including support from line managers, training and some technical weapons; or in addition to the latter even accessibility to the information (INT 2, INT4). A bit of a pragmatical view was provided by INT6 – an explained phenomenon as a bureaucratic option for tracking information. While INT3 proposed an exciting thought that it covers communication for creating "...good atmosphere and exchanging this positive energy".

Interestingly, all the interviewees agreed with the proposed concept when Stacey's framework with essential tools was presented. They confirmed they were familiar with the tools and applied them with specific regularity.

Multiple interviewees proposed that the leader's tools application is universal (INT1, INT6, INT7), and each of them is important for its purpose. For example, INT6 commented, "...to have certain documentation and tracking, it is very useful" or to rely on decision-making (INT7). Moreover, no specific tool should be preferred, and application should come naturally on the "automatism" level (INT1) and subconsciously (INT5). At the same, INT5 added the idea that components of all tools apply to different leaders' positions in the company (first/middle/top level leaders). Still, those varieties could have a distinct predominance depending on the role (e.g. on the first level, more of monitoring and control vs heavyweight decision-making and strategies on the top level). The same idea of the dominance of decision-making due to closeness to that process on top level leaders was commented on by INT2.

INT7 believed that at some stages (team or period related), there is a need for a specific tool to prevail, or it could be connected to the leader's responsibility in the business organisation's unit (INT3). INT4 indirectly concluded the same, adding that it derives from the leader's current need to perform a specific task or achieve a particular goal (as per example, using planning and strategy during the period of strategical needs – setting KPIs, etc.). In contrast, the need might come from the team/situation context assessment.

INT6 commented that tools application is connected to the leader's organisations and customised versions they internally use or use of third-party alternatives. Some interviewees shared examples of different tool types with their application and frequency (INT2, INT3, INT4).

INT7 concluded that no leader's tool is connected to culture; they are universal, while INT5 added that the team motivation part is crucial in any leader's stage.

3.1.2. Performance, problem-solving

Once interviewees were asked about the performance reviews of team members, non-surprisingly, there were a bit different replies which varied from a very holistic approach to key metrics-based or transitional way to a more tangible assessment. A holistic approach was mapped at two business areas or types of work (project-based and advisory), where a team member was assessed according to two domains: motivation or job-specific skills (INT1), soft skills and actual work performance (INT3). Conversely, in fintech, banking areas tangible metrics were prominent (e.g. quality, quantity or speed of reply) on individual and group performance levels (INT2, INT7). INT7

mentioned quarterly assessments of each employee's status, which are in place in the company (i.e. leader evaluation).

Multiple interviewees commented that the need to change the performance assessment metrics was due to business expansion and the need to bring standard and clarity on the expectation to the teams' members, objectivity (INT3, INT5), which also requires setting proper monitoring tools for measuring defined metrics by leaders (INT4).

INT6 commented that to adjust to a quickly changing environment they started setting fewer targets (quarterly) at the same time to be achievable to measure performance, as in addition to quantitative KPIs, there is a business (task) complexity; moreover, pointing out that team performance very much relies on proper competent team composition.

Later the interviewer asked everyone to comment and provide a sense of problem-solving in a situation where the team's performance started to drop. Interestingly, all the interviewees provided a similar "universal" approach of finding out the root cause and then trying to fix the problem with short or long-term solutions. INT1 had concisely concluded this process: "(i)nvestigation, troubleshooting, monitoring, assistance." Meaning that after root cause investigation, setting a solution, continuously monitoring the situation and supporting team members.

INT3 pointed out that they have not experienced such cases, adding that performance issues were mapped from the beginning, reasoning it with poor recruitment and personality attitude issues. Additional nuances, such as the involvement of other units (leaders) depending on the root problem and problem-solving strategy, were commented on by INT4, INT5, and INT7. At the same time, some mentioned a particular action plan in place for solving similar cases (INT7).

Intriguing, different-layered and nuanced replies were given during the discussion of improving team performance (application of different leader's tools). Those replies could be clustered into two main domains – individual (employee) and company angle. In general, interviewees who commented on individual or employee level mentioned the importance of assuring and boosting general motivation via different tools (e.g. team buildings) as this helps the team to bond (INT2, INT7); the additional implication of motivation commented – feedback, coaching, and providing the essence of the work both on group level (INT4) and individual face-to-face trustful discussions (INT6). INT3 also mentioned team members' willingness to know the company's vision and

direction. An alternative way has been proposed – involvement in decision-making or discussions applied to the whole team (INT2). A bit opposite – using planning and strategy to improve performance (INT3), which was reasoned by the personality types present in the team. As to the company-based angle, some interviewees claimed that tools for improving performance might be connected to the business area and its needs (INT2, INT7), including some expectations of employee profiles (INT3). A similar idea was proposed about the connection to the team (INT4), or stage of the team or the company stage or area (as provided example, crisis versus stable team, military or marketing organisation) (INT7). INT7 continued reflection, proposing that some expectations could be derived from several business owners, as more owners might require a more strategic approach from leaders, as decisions should be justified.

Some more practical ideas were proposed by INT4 mapping that higher management should be supportive in working on future processes and enhancement rather than constantly dealing with fire-fighting. At the same time INT1 mentioned that this is all about the organisation, adding "(i)t's like gears; everything has to set up, meaning as long as we have the same meetings every week to talk about the same subjects." Meaning some actions to be done to keep the process running.

3.1.3. Decision-making

In our discussion on decision-making during extraordinary situations some interviewees asked additional questions to understand the notion of extraordinarity (INT2, INT3, INT5). As this topic is vast, replies from the interviewees were multi-faceted, which could be defined from strategical, individual, and collective approaches (involvement versus decision-responsibility), including context assessment and company angle. INT1 metaphorically commented about different leader's approaches to decision-making:

"…with the team, it's really just experience and how we communicate with people and how we do things. Because this is where it works the best. You can have a book recipe. This, this is how you do it. This is how you have to put the eggs and flour, and sugar. But you have different chefs that will mix it up differently and make their own ways."

INT2 commented that first it is necessary to assess the context to be able to make any decisions, mentioning that each decision is unique; however, there is still some reliance on historical data. The same was mentioned by INT5 who stated that they would rely on previous experience and knowledge if the same pattern occurred; or use a combination of prior experience, expertise and consultancy with others (INT4). In case additional help or consultancy is required, there is also an option to approach superiors (INT2) or, depending on the situation, use "mastermind" to make

collective decisions (INT3). The discussion came to the urgency of decision-making; thus, INT6 commented that such extraordinary situations often put leaders under stress, their decisions should be taken quickly, and there is no time for consultation or information gathering. This concept goes hand in hand with the leader's responsibility as an individual to take the blame (INT1). INT3 also added that nowadays the staff members are not included in decision-making, commenting that the team is too big with different opinions, and instead they are involved with limited choices if it is not urgent but an important topic for the employees; or small things are delegated to employees if they have capacities (INT1).

Interviewees with experience over ten years commented that in specific situations, there is a clear borderline of responsibility shifting to top management, including some financial aspects (INT4) or at least validation or consultation of the major decisions with the leadership team (INT5, INT6). As a consequence of extraordinary situations, the leadership team is sometimes forced to make unpopular decisions, where there is a huge expectation on first and middle-level leaders to support the process of the fulfilment of their decision (e.g., layoffs, structural changes) (INT4, INT5). INT4 commented that support is on different levels: to collect and provide necessary data, be a part of discussions and support communicating and explaining to the teams to avoid misunderstanding and rumours; INT6 added that it's about a lot of explanatory work to make it sort of "(b)lack and white". INT5 expanded this layer, adding that in such cases the leader should find a delicate balance between two forces (top management and employees), who might express resistance to the change/decision and should not oppose the leadership team, at the same time to find the way of explaining the essence and purpose of the change to the teams (people).

From another angle, INT6 commented that, on the opposite, the leadership team should support the first-line leaders with clarity about the company's stand on specific points, the way how to deliver messages to the teams, and without letting them be alone. From a practical view, INT3 claimed a strategical, conscious and forward-thinking approach to address the issue (adding the explanatory comment about this approach due to team expansion, previous constraints, and the team's urge for clarity).

To an additional question about possible unexpected decision-making outcomes, INT4 answered that there might be different reasons starting from poorly prepared assessment, lack of data, involvement of wrong resources or tools, team motivation, and technical issues up to non-relevance of the change by the time of execution.

3.1.4. Context

One part of the interview was related to the context and significant constraints interviewees are experiencing. In addition to internal issues, which could be business specific, some could occur in other area companies as well, some external factors which are general or really business distinctive, and some universal and new challenges. Among recent universal, interviewees pointed out issues with communication with the people (team members) after a long time in a virtual setting, and this requires the leader to make an extra effort to resolve issues and give the floor to everyone (INT1); a similar concern of getting teams back to the office and building an organisational culture was pointed out by INT7. Another highlighted concern is that employees have become more demanding of the company setting, environment and other benefits (INT4). On the other hand, there is an enhancement in technology and tools to support executives (INT4); or the lack of data to make specific assessments yet (INT4). INT7 mentioned a universal sort of repeating issue of leaders about how to treat underperformers or outstanding performers, the problem with time management, and the domain where the leader is between two forces: "…have to kind of please, both leaders – their leaders, and then also keep the team happy. I think this is also the magic they have to do. And then the emotional work behind that."

Next up were internal issues; it was evident that some teams or companies are going through some (structural) changes: team composition and work balance (INT6); the team expanded and has a mixture of different personalities and cultures; thus, the leader has to set clear rules and processes to gain efficiency (INT3); or a company constantly goes through structural, other changes and deals with staff satisfaction and performance (INT5, INT2). INT7 commented on the current mental health issue, how to address it and keep this balance for leaders and employees where the company has different people, and to ensure that everyone would be included. On top of diversity, that leader should ensure that team members would not be left alone due to not knowing the local language (INT1); or being aware of constraints working with specific markets (e.g., concerning process speed) (INT6).

Among some general external factors, multiple interviewees commented on inflation; noticed layoffs in the sector as a consequence, it caused sort of anxiety and questioning about the future by team members in the company (INT2) or employees asking for salary increases when employers are also in a weak position due to expense increase (INT4), thus creating a need to explain and communicate it to the teams. From the financial aspect, another layer pop-up – money-

value change in the sense of a problem of getting external capital to the company or impact of currency exchange (INT6).

INT4 commented about specific external challenges primarily affecting the travel sector, naming its low salary levels with high demands to the candidates, vulnerability and unpredictability of the industry and consciousness of making investments by the management. On the other hand, INT6 has a positive vision of the staffing situation in its area, naming that currently it is easier to get an excellent IT expert for reasonable prices.

The interviewer further asked about the role of context in a leader's decision-making process, as it becomes evident that context is a broad topic. Thus, most interviewees asked to provide additional explanations (INT1, INT4, INT5, INT6, INT7).

Most interviewees replied that context plays a huge role and should be considered: as per INT6, it requires a proper assessment from different angles (e.g. who has the responsibility, and why something happened); INT3 agreed with that, adding that contents of context and length might count a lot; INT2 said that this is universal, even if a company relies on data it is necessary to listen to another party as well (e.g. in case of a staff/people related issue), also understanding the reasoning behind it.

Moreover, INT5 mentioned that this contextual assessment is crucial on all leaders' levels, as it helps avoid the risk of being trapped in misinterpretation. Still, gaining information could become an obstacle due to multiple filters or leader's levels (INT5). But depending on the leader's experience, they might require some support with assessing the situation, but they still should count it (INT7).

On the other hand, INT4 gave an alternative angle, commenting that context might be irrelevant, as it depends on the aim leader needs to achieve (e.g. if the need to establish a totally new process and historical data is irrelevant) or on people's context, then a hard decision should still be made, but trying to keep in mind the employees, and it might be a situation of conflicting agendas. INT1 noted that the need of context might be irrelevant depending on the company type, e.g. explaining that in big companies, people are "trained on the rail" without considerable deviations, whereas in start-ups, context should be considered as there is not so much standardisation but there is more flexibility.

3.1.5. Culture, international teams

All interviewees were asked about their experience working with international teams and if there is any difference from a tooling perspective. INT6 and INT7 commented that there is no difference in tooling, as there is nothing culture-specific.

Almost everyone from the interviewees commented that this factor (or context) requires the leader to expand cultural awareness. INT7 mentioned that leaders face the challenge of interacting with culturally diverse teams; thus, specific training on that topic was provided. It is also about team members bonding with each other and openly sharing their culture. INT3 mentioned a plan for similar training and commented on the same need. At the same time, a leader with more than ten years of experience shared that this education is a continuous process: asking for help from others and learning from experience how to tune it (INT5).

This cultural awareness is not essential only on the communication level: due to accent issues (INT1), the way how to communicate to achieve specific goals knowing some complications (decision-process) and avoiding conflicts (INT4), or about who is open to speaking up or prefers working individually or as a group (INT7), adapting the communication style and even topics according to the audience (INT5); understanding then to stay quiet to give a chance to speak by the employee, especially while working with an employee on a personal level, e.g. one-on-one (INT2); but to understand how to provide feedback then it is appreciated by the employee (INT2, INT6); or even what motivates certain team members (soft recognition, monetary, extra holidays etc.) (INT 2, INT6).

INT6 added that at some point, it requires inevitable adjustment of leader style to approach representatives of cultures, especially very different ones. At the same time, INT1 said that cultural diversity enriches the team with people with different backgrounds and from different cultures and even how they solve problems. Meanwhile, in specific settings, there could already be such a vast cultural difference, and it becomes cleared connection to personalities to be treated by the leader (INT4). INT3 proposed the same idea that there might be more differences in personality traits as "...at the end of the day, people are people, and they function the same way."

Some interviewees commented on culture defining organisational culture aspect. INT3 commented that their company DNA is about constant communication and feedback (one-on-one);

INT7 added that leaders have an essential role in their organisation, as they are building blocks of company culture – how comfortable employees are to speak up, to be heard, and to share opinions.

An intrinsic reflection point provided by INT6 commenting about the young generation with previous start-up experience joining big corporations and clashing with that, where the leader has to liaise and explain it, as specific frames of organisational culture should be inherited by this new wave of generation.

At the end of the interview, INT7 added that culture is also about self-awareness of everybody and noticing own biases: "(y)ou understand that if somebody is doing something that you don't like, is not a person but is about you." Thus, awareness is not only about others but also connects to self-awareness.

3.2. Discussion

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to explore and understand leaders' decision-making process of applying specific leader tools to achieve certain goals of international teams in concrete contextual situations, and align theoretical knowledge and practical applications in reality nowadays.

This chapter provides insights into the research questions, analyses of the results of semi-structured interviews compared to theoretical reviews, main conclusions and further directions. Due to the small sample size, it is impossible to make any generalisations; instead, this can be used as a starting point for further research. It is noteworthy that functional leadership and tools are theoretical concepts; thus, empirical analysis helps to expand the concept from a more practical perspective.

3.2.1. Leaders' tools application to team performance in international teams nowadays

From the interviewees' replies, it was evident that leadership terminology is inconsistent, and each might have a different meaning, connotations or understanding. For example, interviewees provided various notions of a leader's tools, varying from practical to very holistic, or asked clarifying questions about some terms (context, extraordinary situation). At the same time,

interviewees confirmed that they are familiar with the leader's tools concept (Stacey's tools, 2012) and use them regularly.

Some interviewees (INT1, INT6, INT7) mentioned during the interviews that leaders' tools are universal, and there is no direct connection to or difference in tooling in international teams (INT6, INT7). At the same time, INT5 mentioned universality in the scope of usage on different managerial levels. A similar concept was indirectly described by Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999), Adair (1998, 2015) and Stacey's (2012) theories, which do not define that this phenomenon should be applied in specific settings only (e.g., organisations, teams).

Multiple interviewees agreed that applying those tools is somewhat automatic and subconscious (INT1, INT5), while some interviewees confirmed that they use certain tools consciously as these have a specific goal (INT3). Stacey (2012) also pointed out that this concept goes hand in hand with experience and particular situation assessment and adaptation by the leader. Some interviewees mentioned that specific tools might prevail at a certain period, as they might be connected to the team stage (INT7); for example, Morgeson *et al.* (2010) proposed "transition/active" phases for different functions; or dependent leader's goals or tasks (INT4) or variety and predominance might be connected to the role (INT5, INT3). Those replies indicate specific context, which was pointed out and presumably assessed by the interviewees. Adair (2015) wrote about this adaptation to the contextual constraints, highlighting that during some periods not all functions should be performed; likewise, Hackman & Walton (1986; 1999) wrote about the leader's primary role to monitor the situation and take necessary actions accordingly, and Stacey (2012) referred to a "flexible manner" of using them.

INT1 pointed out that there should not be a conscious preference to apply only one specific tool. Moreover, interviewees indicated that precisely the tooling option could be connected to the leader's organisational setting (INT6), defined by Oc (2018) as an "omnibus context" trigger.

Due to the fact that leadership is connected to the team's performance, they were asked to explain it in their companies' settings. All interviewees replied that they have specific metrics for team member assessment and some regularity for the reviews. In some areas or companies very tangible metrics of quality and speed are in place (INT2, INT7, INT5), but in some there is a more holistic (INT1, INT3) or transitional (INT4) approach. Thus, there was no unified approach; at the same time, INT6 mentioned that on top of individual goals, there are team goals, and the latter are

connected to the team composition. This indirectly explains the complexity and difficulty of assessing a leader's performance, which Madanchian *et al.* (2017) and Yukl (2002) mentioned. At the same time, some interviewees (INT3, INT5) noted the need to change or adjust metrics due to company/unit specific change (INT6) about the need for short-term goals due to fast evolving conditions. Inevitably, a similar concern was raised by Yukl (2002) who mentioned that performance effectiveness might not have an immediate effect or might be inconsistent.

As it was mentioned by Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999) and Klein *et al.* (2004), one leader's function is to monitor (e.g., team performance); Adair (2015) called it "controlling", and it was defined by Stacey (2012) as "monitoring and control" tool. All the interviewees repeated a universal approach to problem-solving that the leader applies in case team performance drops – juggling with different tools (or their combination) to improve the performance and continuously monitor and support their teams or people. Interestingly, INT1, INT2, INT3, INT4, INT6, and INT7 commented that ensuring performance requires the leader to constantly work in parallel on motivation by applying different tools on an individual (keeping in mind that motivation factors are individual from recognition to monetary) and team levels; INT5 also stated that it is similarly essential if the leader is in charge of summer helpers or people leaders. It is noteworthy that some interviewees added that there might be additional factors to be considered – that this must not only be the leader but it could be executive team support, also noticing personalities and the best ways to deliver. Thus, it could be compared to the bubble that everything inside of that works collaboratively to support that function (keeping in mind the individuals, group and the task, as Adair (1998) wrote).

All interviewees have international team managing experience and they pointed out the need for the leader to enhance cultural awareness; and specific training on this topic (INT7, INT3) or proceed with constant learning. Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2020) wrote about "intercultural competencies" which might be required by the leader to enhance this skill; a similar conclusion of learning by experience was mentioned by Raithel *et al.* (2021).

Interviewees (INT1, INT4, INT5) pointed out that awareness should be brought not only through a communication domain (e.g. as per Hofstede *et al.,* 2010, "visible factors") but also related to "invisible factors" (e.g. as per Hofstede *et al.,* 2010, "values", e.g. motivation, etc.) (INT7, INT2, INT6).

Moreover, some interviewees also specified their company's organisational culture aspect and their company's cultural DNA (INT3, INT7). Concepts of organisational culture and that they are structured by top management are mentioned by Hofstede *et al.* (2010), and different styles in Europe by Kakabadse *et al.* (2000), and an alternative view of "people-oriented" vs "accomplishing task" types of organisational cultures by Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2020). INT6 mentioned the complications of organisational cultures and new generation people (especially with start-up experience) as they clash. Indirectly, a similar context was mentioned by Anderson *et al*. (2017), comparing Millennials and their expectations of leaders and the working environment.

Despite interviewees' different experiences, backgrounds and business areas, the general notion was that a leader's tools are widely applied mainly subconsciously or derived from the leader's constant assessment of the current state and need to adjust the course or aim, adapting to the way how to solve it. There was no mention of any "golden" tool which could "solve" all the issues; instead, a skilful manoeuvre, a unique solution to each situation. At the same time, there is some reliance on previous experience, connection to team members and organisational culture (e.g., its state, role and responsibility differentiation, expectations towards leaders, etc.).

Interestingly, despite no indication of specific leader tools in international teams, all interviewees pointed out that leaders should be cautious about interacting, motivating, and engaging international team members to get impactful team results. This indirectly brings to the sentiment that this is not even about what they do, but more precisely how they do it, how well they "study" their people (teams) on an individual level and at least acknowledge the personal differences, or even attune to the way, but also why they do it, what is the reasoning behind (motivation).

Thus, due to the continuous fast mutability of the context: internal (team personalities and team composition; organisational culture, which is impacted by the C-level management and decisions, and working culture), external (business area, economic, political, environmental with different impact and longitude), there is no similar team, organisation or leader, but there is continuous company's direction and goals, which should be gained with the resources in hand. There is a need for further research of concept in a comprehensive way using all new and recent technologies (computational method) with current situational constraints; based on that, to develop supporting training programs for leaders to skilfully apply different tools and be ready for various scenarios and options of mitigating (performance, crisis, key staff members leaving, etc.).

3.2.2. Leaders' context perception to take decisions or further actions

Zaccaro *et al.* (2018), Westaby *et al.* (2010), Stoker *et al.* (2019), Oc (2018), and Tourish (2019) concluded that the context impacts the leader (e.g. attitudes and intentions) or processes. In contrast, the complexity might be derived from interaction with different counterparts inside the team, units, organisations or external factors.

Most interviewees agreed that context is relevant to consider during cognition processes or decision-making. Some interviewees commented that it might depend on a specific goal or organisation type. But actually, this "depends" is a direction of some contextual constraints, which could bring to the chain of thought: "we decided to consider this "depends" to eliminate further contextual issues to achieve the bigger goal". Interviewees defined a vast number of constraints (context-related issues) they are facing nowadays, from very situational and currently company-based (staffing, team and process-related), team members' mental health or issues to bring people back to reinforce team bonding and foster an organisational culture, to very nuanced and specific to the company essence (markets they are working with, challenges of business area due to continuous effects), and also to some general covering finance part (money-value, inflation). It again links to the general idea of Adair (1998) – it's all about individuals, teams and tasks and how to balance them due to changing and complex environments. It is noteworthy that interviewees brought to the picture that this contextual constraint should be viewed from very different angles (not only data) – to consider people, length of the issue, and content and also sense; thus, leaders sometimes require help from more experienced to assess it and be relevant on all leader levels.

Leaders are tightly connected to responsibility and the decision-making process (as per Hackman & Walton, 1986, 1999; Klein *et al.*, 2004; Adair, 1998, 2015; Stacey, 2012). Schwarber (2005) mentioned a straightforward notion for the decision process of leaders: aim, options, and risk assessment.

Even though the frame is the same, interviewees emphasised that each decision is unique (INT2), or each leader could do it in their own way (INT1) – making a decision alone or doing it collaboratively (INT3), or consulting (INT2, INT5, INT6, INT7), or involving the team in the discussion for certain topics (INT3). INT2, INT4, and INT5 clarified that some decisions might rely on previous experience, a standardised way it was solved in the past. This, in a way, connects to Jeleva *et al.* (2017) conclusion that decision-making might be related to its "routine/non-

routine" and some level of decision (something daily operational could be applied to specific company standards).

An interviewee with more than 20 years of experience mentioned that results were not always what was expected. The reasoning behind them might again be broad, from poor preparation, team motivation, incorrect data usage (INT4) or difficulty in getting non-biased information due to multiple layers (INT5), or not involving correct people (INT6) or wrong recruiting decision (INT3). The same conclusion was mentioned by Jeleva *et al.* (2017) as a possible consequence of a non-rational decision.

The leader could be in between critical strategic decision-making, providing the info to the executives and then communicating and trying to explain it to the people and teams (INT4, INT5, INT7). A leader with more than ten years of experience in different size teams added that it is difficult to find this balance between those forces, especially if the leader is personally against some of the decisions (INT4). Figure 2 illustrates a multilayered decision-making process where the leader might shift back and forth if a new complexity arises.
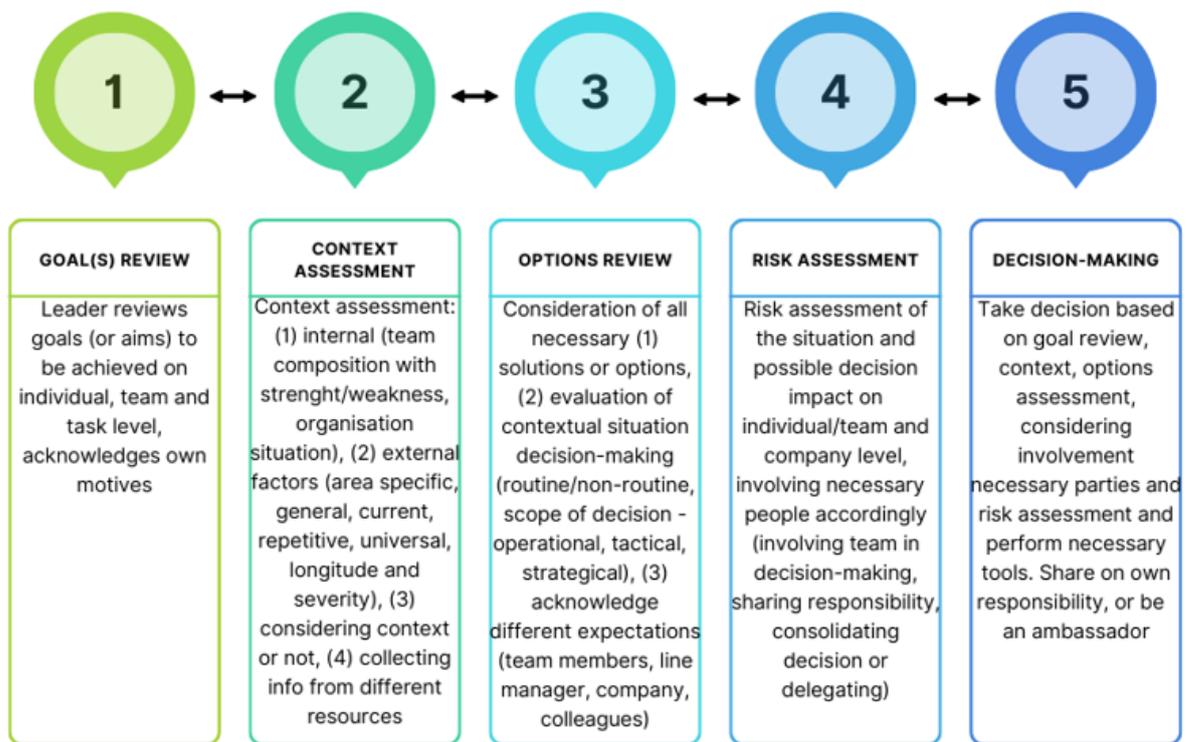

Figure 2. Leaders' decision-making process considering contextual constraints.

Source: Created by the author based on Lord *et al.*, 2001; Schwarber, 2005; Jeleva *et al.*, 2017; Adair, 1998, 2015; Stacey, 2012; sub-codes created according to interview analysis.

This is a complex process of various complex decisions and keeping the whole concept aligned of the leader's role: people as a group and individually and the core tasks. It is also about the constant dilemmas and shift between multiple expectations for the leader by each employee with his own personal "ideal picture", line manager expectation, organisational expectation (by colleagues, community), and personal standards or agenda. On top of standard cases, irregular issues and external factors, speed factor. It is also about the leader's values (identity, national culture) versus the organisational culture, what would prevail and if the leader becomes a result of that melt or will continuously search for ways, "own signature", how to keep the whole concept via juggling tools of "planning and strategy", "decision making", "monitoring and controlling", "motivating", "improving and developing", "interactive planning".

The standpoint of the author of this Master's thesis's is that, in general, the concept of functional leadership and leader's tools is a promising, interesting, simple and, at the same time, agile way of studying leadership. This focal theory does not prescribe any specific way for resolving the issue; it's a frame connected to the function, which in a way, might help the leader stick to the basics during the very complex process they are involved in or affected by. A way to systematise fragmented leadership in different domains. This Master's thesis research aimed to explore and understand leaders' decision-making process of applying specific leader tools to achieve certain goals of international teams in concrete contextual situations, and align theory and practice and how it is perceived in real-life concepts. According to the interviewees, leaders are skilled in applying various tools in specific situations, and it does not contradict the theories; this is possibly derived from the experience which was gained during their tenure time (with possible mistakes on their road) and some expectations towards organisations.

As a considerable role and expectation are towards leaders who constantly work with people and teams – there is a potential need to support the learning process of junior leaders from the first day of applying different tools and upskill them all (as per the example of Santos *et al.*, 2015, to cover all tools and their variations in organisational settings), support leaders to increase cultural awareness or enhance "intercultural competence" as per Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2020, due to constant changes in the context (e.g. work setting – a hybrid, change of team members expectations, more nationality-wise diversified teams, different organisational cultures with the expansion of start-ups, new external factors affecting sectors, etc.) and the requirement to address and adjust to the situation more quickly. Meanwhile, some interviewees commented about the need for supporting leaders – giving a clear understanding and borderline of decision-making,

organisation's standpoint to specific situations in a timely manner, steer for getting constant support from different parts (supporting units, leadership team) or options for resolving wrong decisions.

Even though practitioners justified theoretical claims, interviewees complemented them, adding additional components or layers to be considered by future researchers of decision-making (e.g. organisational culture or C-level management might impact hugely decision-making process in certain situations if there is a crisis moment and need to save the company, company culture and transparency from disclosing information or involving in goal setting or decisions). Thus, it could become a foundation for future research or applying junior leaders' training to support their learning curves. It could be a call for action for executives to review the process of how to support and motivate the leaders, as they are part of the organisational culture, the ones who stand next to the teams and help them to grow. At the same time, this also aligns with the fact that leaders across different companies face similar or a bit different challenges, but each situation, person and organisation differs, and there is no suitable solution for everybody.

3.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Among the first limitations of the Master's thesis is the sample size. The sample size does not allow any generalisations, mainly to collect comprehensive insights from experienced practitioners. At the same time, the sample included leaders working in Estonia; thus, other regions were not covered to have a broader understanding of whether those insights are region specific. One of the limitations is that the analysis could be biased by the author's interpretations of the phenomena. Most of the interviews were conducted virtually, and the interviewer experienced some technical issues, which might have affected the interviewees and their attention due to their openness to disclose some ideas. Even though interviewees reflected on their previous experience, replies can only catch sort of a "snapshot".

In the scope of this research it was not studied how and how quickly the leaders reach automatism of applying tools – if it's trained, gained through experience, or more connected to organisational directives (or intangible knowledge passed on by the colleagues).

The reasoning of a leader's decision-making process could depend on the leader's values, the company's regulations and conditions, speed of situation assessment or its accuracy, experience, the novelty of the situation, or continuous cognition. The aspect of motives or "why" was not included in the research but could be a direction for a future study.

Based on the insights and results of qualitative research, Stacey's tools concept (2012) and Morgeson *et al.* (2010) different-stage framework, there is a call for future quantitative research to research the impact of leader's decision-making process of tools at different teams stages and contexts linked to performance (team and leader's). Other domains (layers) could be connected to the sub-category codes.

1) Phase 1: to arrange a survey among first-line leaders and ask them to assess their decision process in specific contexts (during team or structural changes, crisis, well-functioning team) and the tools (functions) they applied with selecting the most suitable reason from the provided choice, evaluate company stage processes, contextual constraints (external/internal/constant/new), evaluate how satisfied the leader was with the final result of his/her decision;

2) Phase 2: to arrange a survey among the leader's subordinates to assess the leader's decision-making and tools ("planning and strategy", "decision-making", "monitoring and control", "motivation", "improving and developing team", "interactive planning") in specific contexts (during team or structural changes, crisis, well-functioning team) and leader's involvement of team members in the decision-making process;

3) Phase 3: to arrange a survey among line managers of first-line leaders to assess their leader's decision-making process in specific contexts (during team or structural changes, crisis, well-functioning team) and the tools (functions) they applied, evaluate how satisfied they are with the results of first-line leaders.

An alternative way to study phenomena is via focus group interviews with leaders in the same organisation but in different countries to check how decision-making is connected directly/indirectly to organisational culture. One exciting way is to study phenomena in the complex to apply to triangulate method. Case studies with leaders from the same and different companies, based in various countries, to assess their essence of decision-making and understanding of context impacts on other teams (forming, crisis, well-functioning) and repeat the analysis after 6–12 months, identifying the context, how the leader's evaluation has possibly

changed. There is considerable potential for developing this concept in complexity (tools/functions, complexity, teams), covering more countries, sectors and companies to create a holistic approach, but not fragmenting into pieces (only specific sectors, leadership style, team type, etc.).

CONCLUSION

New dynamic complex environmental changes challenge leaders to constantly take decisions to address the issues and achieve established goals. There is a lack of understanding of and recent research on how leaders make decisions by applying specific international team tools to different changes. There is a requirement to research theoretical frameworks to present practical application of aligning most appropriate practices. Therefore, the purpose of this Master's thesis is to explore and understand leaders' decision-making process of applying specific leader tools to achieve certain goals of international teams in concrete contextual situations, and align theoretical knowledge and practical applications in reality nowadays.

The first theoretical part of this work is dedicated to the main theories and research results about leadership, functional leadership and functions, connections of context to leadership and its processes, and the leader's possible impact on team performance by applying tools. The second methodological part describes the applied research method, sampling and methodology. The last part of this work presents insights and sentiments from the applied method, limitations and directions for possible future research.

The author of this Master's thesis applied a semi-structured interview with experienced practitioners, namely leaders of international teams. Interviews were conducted between the 26th of February until the 21st of March, 2023. Among the interviewees were representatives from different business areas; the leader's role experience varied from 3.5–20 years; the leaders had different leadership positions; five are currently in leading positions, and one is supporting leaders of international teams. All interviewees are based in Estonia. Most interviews were arranged via MsTeams, and one interview was in person, all done in English. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed via Otter application. Further, transcripts were cleaned and final codes were created using the directed content analysis method.

According to the interview results, there is no specific tool which would help leaders to resolve all the goals they have. Tools application is rather automatic, with a possible connection to previous

experience. The leaders' tools concept is universal, as it is linked to the main functions given to the leader. Leaders manoeuvre and juggle with those tools dependent on the goals or needs which are present in the team or which the leader has. This concept gives freedom to the leader to assess what should be done to achieve certain goals, such as improving team performance. Interviewees mentioned there is no difference in tooling with international teams, the ways how leaders should approach representatives of different cultures might somewhat differ. This was linked to the leader's cultural awareness, to be cautious about communicating, providing feedback or motivating people. Still, there are also personality differences, which might not be linked to cultural aspects.

Functional leadership or tools theory is a good base for studying leadership concepts. This is a simple theoretical base, interconnected with the leader's role and base functions they should perform. It does not assess any prescribed way of work, just a simple guide to address issues working with the teams. At the same time, an interview creates a certain sentiment that each situation is unique and the way how the leader achieves it is unique. The interesting part of future research is to analyse how it differs and how are these differences created in the decision-making process of the leaders.

Interviewees found the context as an important factor while making the decision process, or at least acknowledge that at some point it might be irrelevant due to a specific aim. Decision-making is one of the leader's core functions, which is a complex process of assessing the situations, looking for solutions with risks and then deciding. In some situations, leaders are among two forces (executives and employees). They need to find the balance between contexts (internal/external), teams on a group and individual level, and the task connected to performance. To keep the team motivated and enhance productivity.

Among the limitations of this Master's thesis are the small sample size and representation of different business areas. Thus, it is not possible to make generalisations. Another limitation is the connectivity issue, which could be overcome if further research were fully arranged in person.

Directions for future research:
1) To apply quantitative research among first-line leaders, their subordinates and line managers to assess the decision-making process from different angles with provided contextual assessment of first-line managers;

2) To increase the sample group and include representatives from other units (countries) to analyse if there is any substantial connection between organisational culture to a leader's decision-making process;

3) To apply the triangulation method and research the same leaders and international teams after some time and certain stages (forming, crisis, well-functioning) to get a leader's assessment on the same questions of tools, context and decision-making;

4) To use focus groups for testing phenomena;

5) To continue studying leaders' tools, context and essence of decision-making in a comprehensive way, not being limited to only one type of business area or linkage to leader's tools.

As a result of this Master's thesis and empirical research, which aimed to align theory with practice, there was no contradiction found; instead, an extension of the theoretical base with sentiments from practitioners. Based on that, a generalised structure of the decision-making process of contextual constraints was presented (see Figure 2). This (and sub-codes) could become a basis for future research of the leadership concept, enriched with additional layers of the current context, as there is a need to adhere to the knowledge of a leader's decision-making and action process.

As to practical contribution, there are possible insights for the company leadership programs for expanding their training of junior leaders, supporting processes and channels of leaders, and the need for future advancement of cultural awareness in the organisations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Commonalities of functional leadership and tools.

Functional leadership theory by McGrath	Functional leadership by Hackman & Walton	Functions referred to by Klein *et al.*	Functions referred to by Adair	Tools categories classified by Stacey
"monitoring" the team's internal and external factors	"monitoring" (analyse and predict): 1) Direction; 2) Teams structure; 3) Internal context of the company; 4) Accessibility to support exchange; 5) Available resources	the direction of the team's activities, coordination, structure	"planning"	"planning and strategy" (e.g. PESTEL, Porter's five forces analysis, etc.)
		-	"initiating" (explanations and implementation of processes)	"decision-making" (various analyses and methods for implementing further strategic decisions)
		team's performance and environment monitoring	"controlling"	"monitoring and control" (review of objectives versus achievement etc.)
"execution" towards the team's internal and external factors	"taking action" towards the team's internal ad external factors: 1) Direction; 2) Teams structure; 3) Internal context of the company; 4) accessibility to support exchange; 5) Available resources	motivation and inspiration	"supporting"	"generalised motivation" (appraisal, team building, staff training, feedback, one-on-one talks etc.)
		teaching and development of the team	"evaluating" (providing feedback)	"tools for improving and developing" (coaching, organisational development)
		norms and routines for effectiveness	"informing" (comunication)	"second-order tools" (Interactive planning)

Source: Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999), Klein *et al.* (2004, p.7), Adair (2015, pp.117-120), Stacey (2012, pp. 42-47); created by the author.

Appendix 2. Overview of interviews

Link to the overview of interviews: Overview of interviews_VL_2023.xlsx

Appendix 3. Interview manual for semi-structured interviews with experienced practitioners

Introduction, asking permission to record the interview and mention the company's name.

1) What is your working experience as a leader?

2) Area of business?

3) How many subordinates do you have in your team, and how many of them are representatives of different nationalities (cultures)?

4) How do you measure the performance of your subordinates and team overall (what are the measurements, regularity, dependence team to team or)?

5) What are your main challenges or obstacles as a leader nowadays?

(Recent, repeating issue, etc.)?

Researchers have distinguished that leaders work with different types of tools: "planning and strategy", "decision-making", "monitoring and control", "generalised motivation", "improving and developing teams"; and "second-order tools" (e.g. interactive planning).

6) Do you have any preferred tools, or do you apply all of them? Please provide some examples.

7) In your opinion, what are the most effective tools for your team's performance? Why do you think so? Please provide specific examples.

8) What do you do if the general or specific team performance drops (what tools do you apply, if any)?

9) What is the role of context in each situation? Do you consider whether a golden tool or combination is applicable in any case in the context of the problem?

10) How do you act in an extraordinary situation? What is the essence of your decision-making? What steps or tools do you take for your team? (ask help from superiors, follow instructions, rely on previous experience, skills, and knowledge, act subconsciously/consciously, request from a colleague, etc.)

11) Is there any difference in the tools you apply to work with colleagues from different nationalities? Or do you feel there is no considerable difference?

Appendix 4. Questionnaire topics and corresponding theory

Question number in the questionnaire	Topic (s)	Corresponding theory or research
Q1, Q2	background info collection, i.e. context	N/A
Q3	teams	Kozlowski & Bell (2003); Bell *et al.* (2012); Adair (2015); Yukl (2002)
Q4, Q8	(team) performance	Mathieu & Gilson (2012); Madanchian *et al.* (2017); Yukl (2002)
Q5, Q9, Q10, Q11	context	Lord *et al. (*2001); Oc (2018); Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017); Tourish (2019); Witzel (2016); Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018); Stoker *et al.* (2019); Westaby *et al.* (2010); Zaccaro *et al.* (2018)
Q6, Q7, Q11	tools (functions)	Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999); Adair (1998, 2015); Morgeson *et al.* (2010); Stacey (2012); Klein *et al.* (2004); Santos *et al.* (2015); Maynard *et al.* (2017)
Q8, Q9, Q10	decision-making	Hofstede *et al. (*2010); Westaby *et al.* (2010); Jeleva *et al.* (2017); Schwarber (2005); Van de Calseyde *et al.* (2021)
Q3, Q11	culture	Hofstede (1994); Hofstede *et al.* (2010); Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2020); Dorfman *et al.* (2012); Kakabadse *et al.* (2000); Raithel *et al.* (2021)

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Appendix 5. Codes system

Initial codes	Main codes	Corresponding theory or research
teams	-	Kozlowski & Bell (2003); Bell *et al.* (2012); Adair (2015); Yukl (2002)
team performance	performance assessment	Mathieu & Gilson (2012); Madanchian *et al.* (2017); Yukl (2002)
	leader's tools to improve team performance	
context	main challenges	
	role of context in decision-making	Lord *et al. (*2001); Hofstede *et al. (*2010); Westaby *et al.* (2010); Oc (2018)
tools (functions)	tool's notion	Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999); Adair (1998, 2015); Morgeson *et al.* (2010); Stacey (2012); Klein *et al.* (2004); Santos *et al.* (2015); Maynard *et al.* (2017)
	tool's application	
decision-making	problem-solving	Lord *et al. (*2001); Hofstede *et al. (*2010); Westaby *et al.* (2010); Hackman & Walton (1986, 1999); Adair (1998, 2015); Morgeson *et al.* (2010); Stacey (2012); Jeleva *et al.* (2017); Schwarber (2005); Van de Calseyde *et al.* (2021)
	decision-making	
culture	culture	Hofstede (1994); Hofstede *et al.* (2010); Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2020); Dorfman *et al.* (2012); Kakabadse *et al.* (2000); Raithel *et al.* (2021)

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Appendix 6. Codes with sub-codes

Main code	Sub-code(s)	
tool's notion	holistic approach	
	communication	
	bureaucracy	
tool's application	global approach	automatism
		depends on leader's position (tasks)
		tracking approach
		company based
		subconscious
		universal
		according to the situation/company culture
		depends on the goal or task
		periodical
performance assessment	holistic approach	motivation and skills
		operational and soft-side assessment
	transition to key metrics	individual and team level
	key metrics	individual and team level
		due to business expansion
		individual and team level, short term
		business-related
leader's tools to improve team performance	company angle	agenda
		company/business based
		dependence on team/organisation
		management support
		business owners
		team related
	individual angle	motivation
		involvement of decision-making
		feedback
		face-to-face discussions (individual approach)
		personality specific
problem-solving (if performance drops)	universal approach	understand the cause and fix the solution

Appendix 6 Continued

Main code	Sub-code(s)		
decision-making (extraordinary situations)	team involvement	additional tasks	delegation
		urgency	non-delegation
	collective approach	mastermind	
		consult superiors	
	context assessment	previous experience	
	individual approach	leader's responsibility	
		quick actions	
	strategical approach	Forward-thinking	
	company perspective	supporting top-management and information exchange with the teams	
		decisions responsibility split	
		support and clarity to first-line leaders	
		reasons for unexpected outcomes of decisions	
main challenges (context)	external	area-specific	common
			common but new
		general	inflation - new
			money value - new
	internal (company specific)	current	could be common issue for other companies
		repetitive (constant)	could be common issue for other companies
	universal	communication	new
		staff demands	new
		technology	new
		back to the office	new
		operational	repetitive (constant)
		general	repetitive (constant)
role of context in decision-making	depends	of company type	
		on goals aiming to achieve	
		people context	
	important	problem-solving	
		length domain	
		on all leader's levels	
		assessment tool	
		experiences and support related	

Appendix 6 Continued

Main code	Sub-code(s)		
culture	cultural diversity	cultural awareness	communication
			feedback
			motivation
			productivity
			adjustment
			cultural vs personality
			diversity
			cultural education
	personality-type wise		traits
			self-awareness
	organisational culture	DNA	
		new generation	
		the way how is led	

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Appendix 7. Codes and summaries of interview results

Temporary link to the codes' overview: Codes_VL.xlsx

Appendix 8. Interview transcriptions and recordings

A temporary link to the transcriptions and interview recordings: Masters thesis_transcriptions_recordings

Appendix 9. Non-exclusive licence

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