



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

Master Degree Project in Management

Sustainability boundary-work:

Balancing the lines of sustainable leadership

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Master Degree Project No:

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Abstract

This study identifies and discusses the symbolic boundary between what it means to be sustainable and unsustainable, in relation to leadership through a qualitative case study at a technology consultant company in Sweden. We explore the sustainability boundary-work that managers do and identify three sub-boundaries that contribute to the larger symbolic boundary of sustainability. These sub-boundaries revolve around maintaining a healthy balance in the levels of transparency, the locus of responsibility for personal development and the perspective that is taken on short-term actions. Through this study we show that boundary-work is indeed dynamic and multifaceted by identifying the somewhat paradoxical and unpredictable nature of negotiation as a boundary-work practice. As a result, this paper shows the importance of relational aspects in downplaying boundaries has previously been underestimated. We then highlight how boundary-work has been adopted in new ways to overcome these limitations of negotiation, where boundary blurring was done on roles by actors outside the boundary interaction and how re-appropriating perspectives was done to collaborate across boundaries. Finally, this study has contributed to the field of sustainable leadership by providing insight into what challenges leaders, that consider themselves sustainable, might face in practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to send a special thank you to our thesis supervisor Niklas Egels Zandén who provided invaluable help by asking critical questions throughout the research project.

In addition, we would like to extend our gratitude to Eric and Daniel for their constructive feedback and scrutiny of the paper at various points of the writing process.

We would also like to send a special thank you to Karin and Annika, without their help this thesis would not have been possible.

Finally, we would like to thank all of our interviewees for sharing their experiences with us, this research project is thanks to you.

1. Introduction

Sustainability has since its conceptual rise in the 1970s and 1980s been defined to mean a great number of different things (Bolis, Morioka & Sznclwar, 2014; Dresner, 2012; Kreisel, 2018; Metcalf & Benn, 2013). So many, in fact that it is neither feasible nor desirable 'to arrive at a mutually-agreeable and succinct definition any time soon' (White, 2013, p. 214). One thing, however, that many definitions of sustainability have in common is that they explicitly or implicitly see having a long-term perspective to be crucial (Kreisel, 2018; Metcalf & Benn, 2013; WCED, 1987; White, 2013). Recently however, the solution to problems associated with sustainability has been depicted to be more and better leadership (Adams et al., 2011, Metcalf & Benn, 2013). Some refer to this as leadership for sustainability or sustainable leadership (Bendell & Little, 2015; Gerard & McMillan, 2017; Metcalf & Benn, 2013). Leaders and leadership is not a new topic of research however, and has been a central theme and powerful tool throughout human history (Fairhurst, 2010). Because leadership has been studied for such a long time, it has gradually grown in significance among management scholars and has lead to leadership now becoming seen as a solution to most problems in society (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

While sustainability and leadership are increasingly connected by practitioners and scholars (Falck & Heblich, 2007; Gerard & McMillan, 2017; Rodríguez-Olalla & Avilés-Palacios, 2017; Stubbs & Cocklinn, 2008), sustainable leadership still suffers from a lack of critical scrutiny of its underlying assumptions (Bendell & Little, 2015; Bendell, Sutherland & Little, 2017) as well as a lack of empirical research on how sustainable leadership is put into practice (Gerard & McMillan, 2017). This paper aims to do this by using the social science concept of boundary theory as it is a useful theoretical package for identifying and working with problematic and salient issues (Watson-Manheim, Chudoba & Crowston, 2012). The reason for this is because boundaries are understood as the lines which circumscribe entities, problems and issues (Quick & Feldman, 2014). Making boundaries especially interesting here as they can assist in distinguishing issues and entities from each other by ordering and simplifying the environment, which makes boundaries a useful concept to individuals who are faced with complex decisions (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Soundararajan et al., 2018; Watson-Manheim et al., 2012). Stemming from the literature of boundaries, came the idea that boundaries could be shaped through what is termed 'boundary-work'. The concept goes back to Gieryn (1983) who wrote about boundary-work as a way of claiming ownership and legitimacy over a certain issue or problem as a result of boundaries. Gieryn's (1983) seminal work centered on the demarcation between science and non-science, where actions were undertaken by scientists to distance themselves from pseudo-science in order to gain legitimacy. This conceptual demarcation and distancing is what previous literature considers boundary-work done for a symbolic boundary (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Langley et al., 2019). The writing of Gieryn (1983) on boundary-work has since its conception been adopted to symbolic dichotomies other than science such as ethical versus unethical practices (Hobson-West, 2012; Wainwright, Williams, Michael, Farsides & Cribb, 2006). In these

papers, natural scientists working with stem cells and animal testing categorised their practices as ethical and other practices as unethical to discursively distance their work from the unethical practices in order to enable their own work to continue. Following the same analytical approach but applied instead to sustainability is this paper, where the symbolic boundaries concerning what is considered sustainable and unsustainable in regards to leadership and its practices are examined further.

To the authors' knowledge, boundary-work has not elsewhere been applied to sustainability with two notable exceptions. These are [Mcgreavy et al., \(2013\)](#) who discuss the role of boundaries and communication in cross-disciplinary sustainability work between journalists, scientists and policy makers, and [Tengelin, Arman, Wikström & Dellve \(2011\)](#) who study boundary-work in sustainable time management of nurse managers. In line with [Hobson-West \(2012\)](#) who ask for more empirical research on boundary-work in settings other than natural science, this thesis attempts to address the lack of critical scrutiny on the topic of sustainable leadership ([Bendell et al., 2017](#)), and respond to the call for future research on how sustainable leadership is put into practice ([Gerald & McMillan, 2017](#)) by asking the following research question:

Research Question: What are the main boundaries that sustainable leaders face in practice, and how are these boundaries overcome?

To answer this research question the consultant company 'SwedTech', that specialises in technical solutions, is studied as our empirical case. SwedTech has an expressed interest in sustainability issues both environmental and social and are consequently an interesting case to study for our research question. SwedTech has offices in a dozen countries around the world and has their headquarters located in Sweden. SwedTech has around 3000 employees out of which the majority have engineering backgrounds. Out of the 3000 employees, a couple of hundred have managerial roles in some capacity. A lot of the work that is done for SwedTech's customers is done in project form where first-line managers typically are project managers who lead consultants who then work in these projects. Above these first-line managers are middle-managers and above them are the senior managers, who in turn report to the board.

This thesis is structured as follows, we begin by describing the theoretical framework, highlighting the nature of boundary-work and the concepts used in this paper. We then explain the methodology, where the approach and ethical considerations are mentioned. The empirical section forms the main body of the paper, and tells three narratives of managers, in their pursuit of answering the questions, 'what is sustainable leadership, and what are the challenges faced in practice?'. The results are grouped to form the themes of how to balance transparency, the need to manage development and the complexity of confronting values. This is followed by a discussion where key insights from the empirical narrative are analysed through the boundary-work literature in order to develop our

understanding of sustainable leadership and boundary-work. We finish with our conclusion and contributions where we list the findings that give value to the work of practitioners as well as the literature of boundary-work and sustainable leadership.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Boundary-work

Boundary-work has been viewed as non-episodic, and can be considered 'the never-ending, hands-on, largely visible process through which boundaries are negotiated, placed, maintained and transformed by individuals over time' (Nippert-Eng, 2004 cited in Lindberg, Walter & Raviola, 2017, p. 82). Continuing this idea is the writing of Lindberg et al., (2017), who take the stance that 'boundary work builds on a recursive relationship between practice and boundaries' (p. 82). Sharing this perspective, the same stance is taken on boundaries within this study; boundaries are not understood as things that are static and pre-existing, rather they are understood to be 'dynamic [which] means regarding them as emergent, relational, and active' (Quick & Feldman, 2014, p. 675). While boundary-work can be perceived to be episodic and stem from specific triggers such as new technologies or other challenges, this is explained to be an optical effect because while boundaries become highly visible and salient during these triggers, boundary work remains an ongoing but less visible process even during times without triggers (Langley et al., 2019). Stemming from this perspective on boundaries, there are several ways that boundary-work is seen to carry out in practice, such as; translating, differentiation, alignment and reconfiguration, see Quick & Feldman (2014). Further, these boundary-work practices have been conceptually developed to describe a range of interactions that establish, construct, reinforce, flex, negotiate, or deconstruct boundaries (Eden, Donaldson & Walker, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, Elaine, & Sheep, 2009; Reinecke, Donaghey, Wilkinson & Wood, 2018; Soundararajan et al., 2018; Stjerne et al., 2016).

Given that boundary-work has been described in vastly different ways by different scholars, a categorisation of the concepts of boundary-work that is useful is that of Langley, Lindberg, Mørk, Nicolini, Raviola & Walter (2019) who synthesise and provide a literature review on the multiple papers that explore the concept of boundary-work. They introduce three forms of boundary-work that are conceptually distinct but still inter-related, which they label 'competitive boundary-work', 'collaborative boundary-work', and 'configurational boundary-work' (p.4). Through the literature review they clarify how conflict, collaboration and integration within organisations can be better understood and addressed through the concept of boundary-work.

2.2 Competitive, Collaborative and Configurational boundary-work

2.2.1 Competitive

Boundary-work that is done to strengthen existing or create new boundaries is referred to as competitive boundary-work and is usually done by actors to gain some kind of advantage over the other side (Langley et al., 2019). The already mentioned examples of symbolic demarcations between science and non-science, ethical and unethical, sustainable and unsustainable boundaries belong to this category of practices that work *for* boundaries. In addition, boundary-work done to discursively legitimise the inclusion or exclusion of individuals' membership to a group also belongs to this category (Langley et al., 2019). One example of dynamic work for boundaries that is done to gain legitimacy is distancing and re-appropriating practices where individuals either discursively or physically distance themselves from an entity depending on how that entity is currently regarded (Farias, 2017; Langley et al., 2019). This can be done symbolically, technically, spatially or temporally through a variety of practices such as de-dramatization of the topic (Farias, 2017). If the view of the entity or practice has shifted from 'bad' to 'good' then the entity can be re-appropriated through legitimating it by rhetorically portraying it as necessary to the larger goals (Farias, 2017; Langley et al., 2019)

2.2.2 Collaborative

Boundary-work that is done to promote communication and coordination across boundaries is considered collaborative boundary-work and is commonly seen to entail working across differences to achieve a common goal (Langley et al., 2019). This kind of boundary-work is done *at* boundaries and is widely different to competitive boundary-work, here boundaries are negotiated or downplayed to make their presence less disrupting.

In this paper, negotiation is used similarly to Langley et al. (2019) where alignment (Quick & Feldman, 2014) and translation (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Carlile, 2002; Quick & Feldman, 2014) are considered negotiation boundary-work. Alignment is described to be the process of recognising the differences in perception and then trying to work around them to find new shared interests to pursue (Quick & Feldman, 2014). Alignment is further described to bring together diverse actors to find mutual interests and synergetic goals. Translation in this study is explained to be the act of working across different kinds of knowing and understandings (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Carlile, 2002; Quick & Feldman, 2014).

The other concept of collaborative boundary-work, downplaying, is conceptualised by Meier (2015) who asked the question of how collaboration is produced across boundaries by healthcare practitioners. When exploring the interaction of these professionals during their everyday work, Meier (2015) concluded that by creating a shared sense of 'we', boundaries can be dissolved and redrawn in this 'relational approach to collaboration [that] recognizes the significance of trust and familiarity' (p. 79). Similarly to Meier's (2015) study, Ybema,

Vroemisse & van Marrewijk, (2012) found that when asking the question of what strategies are adopted by human rights activists when they attempt to position themselves against international counterparts. The notion of using ‘we’ was found to allow collaboration, as it ‘cuts across boundaries’ (p. 56) and allowed for the creation of relationships. Building and maintaining strong relationships was seen to be needed when working across boundaries, as it deconstructed the differences between actors. Langley et al. (2019) describe this process of collaborative boundary-work as downplaying and explain that the apparent effectiveness of downplaying to enhance collaboration in previous studies has been attributed to an overemphasis of the significance of the boundary in the first place.

2.2.3 Configurational

Boundary-work that affects the interaction patterns of future boundary-work is considered configurational boundary-work or working *through* boundaries (Langley et al., 2019). This is done when actors and institutions reshape ‘the boundary landscape’ through re-configuring ‘patterns of interaction’ (Langley et al., 2019, p. 41). One example of this is arranging boundaries where the practices within the boundary are transformed, but not from within the boundary itself, from outside the boundary by an external party (Langley et al., 2019). Transformation, in turn, is explained by Akkerman & Bakker (2011) to lead to ‘profound changes in practices, potentially even the creation of a new, in-between practice’ (p. 146). Transformation is seen as the result from being confronted with a severe problem or breakdown, that cannot easily be surpassed without reconsidering the actions and practices that lead to the problem in the first place (*ibid.*). Another kind of boundary-work that affects the patterns of interaction is that of boundary blurring. Bach (2012) explores the concept of blurring in their case study, regarding the division of labor in healthcare, where the roles between nurses and healthcare assistants were blurred. This was done by the healthcare assistants in order to increase their proximity to the nurses who were perceived to have a higher status and more legitimacy. The practice of boundary blurring is also described to be the intentional or unintentional acts of blurring the lines of the boundary in order to reduce the ‘boundary distance’ between actors (Langley et al., 2019; Liberati, 2017; Lindberg et al., 2017). Boundary blurring can be used for both competitive and collaborative boundary work, as either similarities or differences can be blurred, in order to achieve the desired future outcome.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

We chose to do a qualitative case study because they are good at generating rich data (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Glaser, 1999) which becomes useful as the study is looking into the complex topics of boundary-work and sustainable leadership. Another reason that we decided to conduct a case study is that even though our case is specifically about sustainable

leadership, the context-dependant findings from that specific setting could be surprisingly insightful to scientific development on the phenomenon as a whole, especially if generalisation is utilised (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995). The way we gathered our case data was through conducting 30 interviews and limited document analysis of internal and external corporate documents. The process was started by studying corporate documents and having two informal interviews with our contact person who helped us get a preliminary understanding of SweTech to better appreciate the setting which the company operated in. After this, a third party was assigned by SwedTech, who became responsible for equally spreading out the 30 interviews between the three tiers of the organisation, randomly selecting the managers which would be interviewed. The reason that we decided to interview managers of all levels is that sustainable leadership research has been criticised for focusing exclusively on senior role holders and that this has been considered unsustainable (Bendell et al., 2017).

3.2 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

The main source of data for this research was interviews which is considered to be one of the most important qualitative data collection methods (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The data collection process lasted five weeks through which the interviews were conducted and analysed in order to come up with new or altered questions for the remaining interviews. We conducted the interviews in a semi-structured format as this allowed questions to be adapted and new ones to be asked, based off of the direction and answers given by the participants; additionally this provided us with the flexibility to address sensitive topics (Bryman, 2008; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Knox & Burkard, 2009). The questions were structured to be unbiased, non-leading and open as to not limit the answers of interviewees into a certain area (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). An example of this would be a question that was commonly asked; ‘How do you understand sustainable leadership in practice?’. The research from Bendell et al., (2017) was a source of inspiration for us regarding the topic of sustainable leadership and was used as a starting point for the interview questions. This was done by adapting some of the unsustainability proposed by Bendell et al. (2017) that criticised the dominant perspectives on both sustainability and leadership. An example of this was that we did not provide our own perspective of the topics nor did we take the importance of the leader for granted in our questions. Instead we would ask questions that could be interpreted many different ways, allowing the interviewee to introduce their own perspective.

The empirical data was gathered through 30 interviews in total, 12 face-to-face interviews and 18 phone-interviews over skype. We pursued face-to-face interviews whenever possible in order to minimise the risk of misunderstandings during the interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2013; 2015; Knox & Burkard, 2009). Despite this, we had to resort to phone-interviews when the interviewees were situated far away. We regard the downside of phone-interviews, being prone to misunderstandings, to be outweighed by the benefit of them being efficient and economical, with the capacity to allow the researchers to cast a wider net in the selection of

interviewees (Knox & Burkard, 2009). In all 30 cases, the interviews were approximately one hour in length and were recorded and transcribed which is along the recommendations of DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006). The total transcribed material amounted to 248 304 words and came from 30 hours 6 minutes and 6 seconds worth of audio. Before we conducted the first interview, we held a practice interview to avoid imposing our own views and biases on the interviewees (Knox & Burkard, 2009). The interviewees that were selected were a diverse group in terms of age, gender, role and experience which also helped us collect the rich data we were after for our analysis (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This was achieved by interviewing managers ranging from first line managers, area managers, to members of the management team as well as one member on the board. Of the 30 interviews we conducted, eleven were held with senior managers, nine with middle managers and ten with first-line managers.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

We decided to use grounded theory to analyse our empirical data because it provided us with a useful methodology package for interpreting and understanding the qualitative material on a deep level (Glaser, 1999; Martin & Turner, 1986). However, like Braun & Clarke (2006) explain, grounded theory is commonly used in its 'lite' version, and this was also the case in our study where we used the grounded theory methodology without implicitly committing to creating theory from the data. Braun & Clarke (2006) refer to this practice of grounded theory 'lite' as thematic analysis. The choice to use thematic analysis, or grounded theory 'lite', was done because as Braun & Clarke (2006) explain, it can be challenging for novice researchers to construct their own theory from data as in the case of full grounded theory. Therefore grounded theory 'lite' can serve as 'a more accessible form of analysis, particularly for those early in a qualitative research career' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). In addition, through using thematic coding we were able to interpret, organise and produce data that was rich in detail for our analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). This choice was made as thematic coding is explained by Ryan & Bernard (2000) to be a tool that is well suited in analytic approaches such as grounded theory. Thematic coding and thematic analysis were also useful to us as it helped us find 'repeated patterns of meanings' and themes across our entire data set, where prevalence was partly used as a weight per the recommendations of Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 86).

After the data had been transcribed, we coded the texts in the software Nvivo. This coding process was done through reading the transcript while we were re-listening to the audio from the interview and pausing to code what was found to be interesting. This was done in an attempt to gain a better understanding of what the interviewee was saying through being able to hear the details, such as tone of voice or the mood of the conversation. We coded all the transcripts of the interviews separately in order to capture more potential angles and ideas as it was discovered after some initial coding that the codes from the same material were quite different depending on who had coded it. Initially, we did what Valentine (2018) refers to as

‘open coding’ which means that no particular theme guides the coding process. We created a combined total of 837 different concept codes which we referenced 3287 times throughout the data set, these concept codes were closely tied to the empirical material. The concept codes represented what we understood to be said by the interviewees, put in a short statement (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Martin & Turner, 1986).

When we had given all the data concept codes, we paid special attention to ‘concepts that [were] found to pertain to the same phenomenon’ which were then grouped to form categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 420). The concepts were grouped this way to form a total of 38 categories. This process was aided by us posing the question ‘what is this an example of?’. This was partly done as this question helped us reach a level of further abstraction, which is in line with Martin & Turner’s (1986) description of coding where ‘movement from data to concept is appropriately viewed as a movement across levels of abstraction’ (p. 147). When creating the categories, the occurrence of the concept code across the different interviews was used as a weight to indicate how important the concept code was in the empirical material. The higher the empirical weighting, the more time we spent analysing the concept code and determining what category it was part of. Further, the higher the empirical weighting a code had, the more influence it was given in re-shaping the category it was part of. At times, we would return and give more attention to previous categories to rework them, this process is in line with Martin & Turner (1986, p. 150) who explain that, ‘the grounded theory process is self-consciously and intentionally non-linear and iterative’. An example of this was the initial category, ‘Clear communication is a prerequisite for effective teamwork’ that was re-conceptualised and became ‘Incentivising cooperation delivers financial results’ after a few rounds of reconceptualisation.

When the 837 concept codes had been categorised into 38 categories, we analysed these 38 categories further. Braun & Clarke (2006) stress that prevalence is important but it should not be the only thing determining how crucial a theme or category is. In order to follow their advice, we sorted the 38 categories not by their aggregate empirical weighting, rather they were treated somewhat equally through the iterative process of axial coding. The process of axial coding is described to be one where the researcher tries to relate different categories to one another, to be able to group the categories together (Trefalt, 2013). When a recurring theme began to materialise, we put the groupings of categories through several rounds of selective coding where the categories were integrated around the emerging themes. This resulted in several sub-themes emerging, these sub-themes were then grouped to form the three main themes (ibid.). Eventually, these themes got the names Balancing Transparency, Managing Development, and Confronting Values and became the sub-chapters of the empirical narrative. When we had developed our empirical themes, we identified the common aspect between all three themes to be that of different perspectives causing issues. We then worked with this idea at length and developed a conceptual map over how all the categories were related to differences in perception. After this, we chose boundary theory as our

theoretical framework as it is useful in explaining and exploring the dynamics and consequences of these differences in perception.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

We conducted all the interviews in English because one of us is not fluent in Swedish. This could be considered a problem if it, as [Bryman & Bell \(2013\)](#) predict, inhibits the interviewees if English is not their first language. To mitigate the harm of this, we communicated that the interviews would be held in English in order to only interview interviewees that were comfortable with English. During interviews however, when interviewees couldn't recall an English word and a Swedish word was used instead, an English word that was perceived to be the Swedish equivalent was proposed by the Swedish interviewer. Despite all our efforts, however, there is still the risk that some interviewees might have been misunderstood.

Further, when we listened back to the audio, the sentences would sometimes be incomplete or hard to read when transcribed verbatim. To make the quotes that were used legible, when taken from spoken to written language, we removed stuttering or unnecessary repetition of words. In addition we also added words that were implied but not explicitly stated such as 'the' or 'and'. An example of this would be the following situation where a manager was describing how their role had changed from operational to a more senior managerial function. They described some of the issues that they currently faced. The example below is how the quotes are presented in the empirical section where we changed them from a literal transcription of the spoken words, to what we perceived the meaning to be. We did this by listening closely to the audio as per the recommendations of [DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, \(2006\)](#).

After (empirical representation):

'I was sitting together with them, and telling them "why is this value so important?"

And now it is more [about] communication [where] I don't get the feedback in the same way as I did.'

Before (verbatim transcription):

'I was sitting together with them and they, and telling them what, what, what, why is this value so important?

And now is, you know... and now is more of communication to, you know... I don't get the feedback in the same way as I did.'

In instances like the one above, we attempted to capture what we think the interviewees meant, but there is a risk that we misinterpreted the interviewees. This risk is always present in interviews but is amplified further by the language barrier.

When having one off interviews with representatives of organisations, [Van Maanen \(2011\)](#) notes that researchers run the risk that the interviewees will feel forced to speak well of the organisation to represent it in a positive light. We attempted to mitigate this by asking for practical examples whenever an interviewee mentioned doing something. At the start of every interview, we told the interviewees that they would be anonymised, as well as any compromising data that was shared, this was done to ensure that they felt free to say whatever they wanted without the risk of negative consequences ([DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006](#)). Another reason why we carefully anonymised the interviewees is to avoid what [Kvale \(2006, p. 497\)](#) describes as an ‘invasion of the subject’s privacy’ which can happen when an interviewer is not mindful of the uneven power dynamic that can happen in an interview setting. In the empirical section, to uphold the promise of anonymity, the interviewees are referred to as ‘Interviewee X’ where X represents a random number. To ensure overall anonymity, if a person, location or customer was mentioned in a story, we redacted the name and replaced it with e.g. [Person X], [a medium sized city] or [the customer]. If the nature of the client was central to the story we replaced the customer name with a description of the client e.g. [company in the defense industry]. In some cases, financial figures or other kinds of compromising data would be shared and in those cases we redacted this in a similar fashion e.g [a large percentage]. Much in the same vein of this, we anonymised the case company wherever it was mentioned by replacing it with ‘SwedTech’.

Lastly, we included 27 voices out of the 30 interviewees in the empirical section. The missing voices have been read, analysed, and discussed and their absence should not be interpreted to mean that they were not heard or represented. Instead we found others to simply express themselves in a manner that was better suited for our writing of the empirical section. We paid special attention to ensure that the voices heard in the empirical chapter represents the empirical data as a whole.

4. Empirical section

When the interviewees were asked to describe what they viewed sustainable leaders to be, and what the actions of these sustainable leaders might be, the responses were almost exclusively that the sustainable leaders would focus on the long-term. When probed further what this would mean in practice, three general themes emerged of issues that these leaders had to manage. The issues were balancing the level of transparency, managing the approach to personal development and acting in line or not with one’s personal values.

From the interviewees the idea of balancing transparency, in the pursuit of creating trust and motivation, was brought up. It was seen that it could lead to negative effects if not balanced

properly such as uncertainty and demotivation, and ultimately stress. The issue of personal development was perceived to stem from managerial action, that either pushed people out of their comfort zone or shifted agency unto the individuals in order for them to take charge of their own development. Both approaches had their complications for the long-term, however, where pushing people could have the effect of causing individuals to burn-out, conversely the transfer of agency could result in individuals feeling that there was a lack of opportunities for growth. Lastly, the interviewees introduced the idea of the need for a fit between the personal values of the individual and the organisation at large. Should these values not be aligned, this would result in a breakdown of the culture and the sense of belonging that having shared values creates. Problems were seen to arise when these values came to clash with the organisational needs of the firm. This potential clash could result in people no longer feeling comfortable in their role. This was seen to be partly alleviated by the individual rationalising their actions through seeing the bigger picture. To rationalise the actions is seen to be reconceptualising them while looking at the long-term rather than the short-term.

Balancing these three themes was understood to be critical to the long-term success of sustainable leaders. The vast majority of the interviewees emphasised the importance of looking at the long-term, this is exemplified below by Interviewee 26;

‘When someone talks to me about sustainability, what I would assume as a first starting point, is that they think of sustainability as a generic term. How can you sustain something? How can you look really long-term. How can you make sure you don't burn any bridges or make sure you don't live above your means.’ (Interviewee 26)

4.1 Balancing Transparency

To introduce the concept of balancing transparency, and why leaders found it important to the goal of sustainability, it is necessary to begin with the notion of trust. A common understanding among the interviewees was that being a sustainable leader was not possible if you were not trusted by your team. Sustainable leaders, therefore, needed to actively build and maintain trust through their actions.

Interviewee 4 describes the importance of trust in leadership by saying; ‘trust for me is the key in leadership [...] that the team should trust me and I should trust them.’ Similarly, Interviewee 8 explained that the trust also needs to come from all directions; ‘We need to know [upper management] trusts us. I need to trust my employees and they need to trust me, [otherwise] you don't have a relationship.’

When asked the question of ‘how do you create trust?’, one interviewee explained that trust should not be seen as all-encompassing, rather trust is attributed and built on many things and is a rather complex topic.

‘Trust is related to something, it is not a complete thing [...] You can trust someone to be a very good, technically skilled engineer, you can trust someone to be a very good leader, and you can trust someone to be very good at something [...] it does not mean to cover all aspects of a person.’ (Interviewee 27)

With that being said however, most interviewees explained that one created trust through being open and approachable; that ‘it has a lot to do with transparency [and] admitting mistakes’ (Interviewee 10). Building and earning trust was seen to be about being truthful and honest with one’s persona through being authentic and not putting on a show. Interviewee 17 described that it is about inner reflection and, ‘not try[ing] to be something else [...] you need to be yourself and you need to be honest about who you are.’

It was found that the word ‘transparency’ was collectively used to describe these actions, i.e being honest, authentic, truthful, and showing weakness. The actions of transparency and subsequently trust, were seen to result in other benefits such as others feeling that they were involved and engaged.

‘If you think about the topic sustainable leadership, honesty, building trust, and transparency... that's important. You need to involve people, so that people feel engaged. That's the main thing I think, [that] you need to do things that makes people feel engaged’ (Interviewee 17).

Building upon these ideas of involvement and engagement, and further discussion into these transparency actions of managers and their justification for doing them, motivation of individuals became a clear topic that emerged; ‘Involving and engagement that leads to motivation’ (Interviewee 23). In practice this was described to be; sharing a vision, including employees into discussions, explaining the purpose and having individuals understand their contribution of how they made a difference. Interviewee 18 described a situation where there was a lack of transparency, additionally, that at the time their branch had issues both financial and other;

‘There was not a lot of openness, transparency and closeness, [I had to] make people understand what their contribution to SwedTech was every day, that what they did every day, made a difference.’ (Interviewee 18)

Interviewee 18 emphasised how detrimental a lack of purpose and transparency could be for individuals. However, after working with these issues, Interviewee 18 perceived things to change, through involving, engaging, and creating openness, they perceived that the individuals now felt valued and motivated. Several interviewees reframed this idea of ‘purpose’ as the ‘why’, and Interviewee 12 explained that the ‘why’ was crucial to finding meaning in one’s work;

[Individuals] ‘are pretty clear about what an organization does and how they do it, but why they do it, it's not necessarily as clear. And in order to find meaningfulness to go to work

every morning you need to understand why you're going there, not only what to do and how to do it.' (Interviewee 12)

Interviewee 14 gives an example of how a leader might explain the 'why' and build motivation.

'It's quite important that I set a direction, but still make it possible to interpret on a daily basis. Because if I go out and talk to the department of 25 people, saying that, "next year we want to grow with x amount of million or x amount of people", that is usually not interesting at all for the employees. You need to interpret what would that mean for them, on a local level. [For example] if you are currently working in Lund, working for [a customer], but next year we also plan to work in Italy for instance with [that same customer] if you are interested there's a possibility for you to work within a start-up in Italy.' (Interviewee 14)

The importance of motivated individuals and their relationship with sustainable leadership was further stressed by Interviewee 7 who felt that why someone works for a company goes beyond money, while important it is not the thing that provides the meaning that people look for.

'They say your salary is very important, but I don't think it is. I mean you should get paid for the work you are doing but "why" you spend that amount of time at work, money can't be all of it. [...] I think the best is to have a good friends and a good company' (Interviewee 7).

However, that is not to say that money is not important, it is still seen as an important factor and it can be hard to measure where the line is drawn.

'The manpower agencies started hunting people. And of course, they contacted our employees as well. And sometimes they offered double salaries. [...] So me and my managers had to put together a plan, you know, just to be able to keep our people. Because even if they would want to stay, because they really like working for SwedTech [...] Some of them told me that, "look it's like 50%. That is big a difference." So, together with my managers, we put together a kind of salary-adjustment-plan. [With others] the salary they were offered was a bit higher, but not double or 50% but just a bit higher, and they decided to stay because, they like the people here, the atmosphere and the projects. So, all in all, they said that, 10%, 15%, even 20%, is just not worth it, just to change jobs.' (Interviewee 1)

Returning to the theme of transparency, it was stated that not only is transparency beneficial, but a lack of transparency was indeed harmful and that without transparency individuals are hindered by uncertainty which ultimately results in stress and demotivation. Interviewee 2 emphasised that the reason for leaving their previous company was due to a lack of transparency as they felt stressed due a combination of poor information sharing and a lack of understanding the purpose of their actions.

'They [the employees] do appreciate very much the information sharing here at SwedTech. We are very transparent when it comes to information. [...] I appreciate it because I come

from a company where everything was basically a secret, and it was very difficult to work, not knowing if we are doing good things, or moving in the right direction. [...] Back then I was very stressed because I didn't know if I was doing the right thing and if it fell in the right direction where the company wanted to move forward towards.' (Interviewee 2)

Similarly on this topic Interviewee 16 explained that they found it was not the hours nor the workload that caused people to burnout or succumb to stress. But rather a lack of clarity and information on what is expected in the work process by managers, which only becomes apparent after the work is completed.

'What burns people out, is when they want to do a good job, but they found out that they didn't. That they did their best but it wasn't good enough, that really breaks you down in the end. [...] It's not the hours that's breaking people down, it's having the feeling of not being able to do a good job.' (Interviewee 16)

In both situations uncertainty, caused by a lack of transparency, is a detriment to the individuals. Interestingly, a way of managing these issues of uncertainty was mentioned by Interviewee 19, who explained that while uncertainty could not be solved entirely, it could be mitigated. A pragmatic approach was to rely on trust. That through trust, employees could be empowered to overcome the uncertainties that they were faced with.

'It's a pretty simple answer to me, the biggest thing between the really good ones and really bad ones [their previous leaders] was the trust. The really good ones had trust in me all the way. If I came to them with the question, "can I do this? Is this a good way of working?" The answer was always, "if you think so, then it's to going be great! Because I trust that you do your job". And the bad ones would always be micromanaging me; leaders where I felt that I didn't have any empowerment over myself, I didn't feel trusted. [...] I always felt that my manager kept an eye on me. [...] And that also led me to underperform and do worse and worse, because in the end, I just lost faith in myself.' (Interviewee 19)

A synopsis so far on transparency is that it is developed out of a need for trust. Through practice, transparency builds the required trust as well as motivation that benefits the long-term goals of the involved individuals. Transparency is viewed to have a recursive relationship with trust, where trust is built from acts of transparency and the uncertainties that can arise from a lack of transparency are mitigated by having trust.

However, when probing further into the potential causes of uncertainty and the reasons behind a lack of transparency, it became clear that transparency was not only viewed as beneficial. Instead it was perceived to be downsides to transparency in some situations. Interviewee 29 gave an example where being transparent would result in demotivating people rather than motivating them. And contrary to Interviewee 2's statement above, it was perceived to sometimes be beneficial to purposefully withhold information in order to protect an individual's motivation;

'Sometimes maybe it is information that is not valuable for me at the time, because I cannot do anything about it. And second of all, maybe we are doing something here that is in a

different direction than they are internationally, and it will not have an impact [there]. If he gives me that information instead, that will kind of kill my motivation for a certain activity or something. There's so many dimensions when you're working with global customers.' (Interviewee 29)

Similarly stated by Interviewee 20, being overly transparent was seen to run the risk of causing individuals to worry and think about things outside of their control, that full transparency in every sense does not bring individuals much joy;

'Now, transparency for me in every sense doesn't work because everyone shouldn't know everything. If we talk about salaries, for example, that's something we accept. Almost everyone accepts that. We cannot see the salaries that every person within a company has and there are reasons for that; because it doesn't bring much joy to everyone to know everything. And I think that also comes with experience because you see what information does, sometimes it is a benefit but sometimes it doesn't do any good.' (Interviewee 20)

Interviewee 20 reiterated with an example which governed their own access, that even when on the receiving end they felt transparency needed to be limited. This was described where the process of decision making by the board could potentially lead to worry and they perceived themselves as better off not knowing.

'I don't know what's being discussed at the board meetings. I'm not sure that it would help me to know everything in detail because there are decisions being made there that might be uncomfortable for me in my daily life. So, you know, sometimes it's better to know when you should know, [rather] than to worry. And once again, we are different as people, some might handle the board meeting information very well.' (Interviewee 20)

The notion of being 'too transparent' was further investigated, where it was stated that the decision of being transparent or not, is not always an explicit one. Instead managers need to be aware of their actions as they too represent a form of information, which will be viewed and perceived by others. Managers therefore needed 'to be role models [...] act[ing] the way you want the people that follow you to act' (Interviewee 19.) It was not perceived to be enough to simply lead by words, instead the leader was seen to be a 'front figure' that needed to lead through action, aware that their actions carried the responsibility of sharing or not sharing information.

'Leadership is to be a person who is some front figure, but not showing us a front figure by words, but by acting.' (Interviewee 4)

When the interviewees were asked for practical examples and the consequences of their actions in relation to the theme of transparency. Interviewee 20 explained that their previous actions of sending emails and working late at night, carried a 'message' which resulted in unhealthy pressure and demotivation on the employees. They explained that although their actions had only partially changed, the transparency or sharing of these actions had. They had continued to work late at night on occasion, however now they have the emails programmed to be sent early the next day.

'I've been working really hard all the time and I'm very task oriented. So I've been like, performing, performing, and performing and I have not really thought much about motivation. Because I'm self motivated, I just do things, but as I grow older I understand that this is not the case with everyone and I understand that people actually look at me. I'm their manager, they look at me, they observe me, they read my emails and interpret things. So I understand much more now that it's not just about the doing stuff, giving people tasks, the objectives and the assignment, as such. It also has to do with how I behave. [...] So they don't want me to do too much because if I do too much, that puts pressure on them. They don't want me to send emails at one o'clock in the night because that puts pressure on them.' (Interviewee 20)

How individuals acted was also connected to the notion of trust through how it is built and affected by transparency. Interviewee 6 recalled a situation of someone telling an inappropriate joke during a coffee-break and stated that how a manager conducts themselves, i.e. how they react, what they laugh at, what they share or don't share in social groups, will affect the relationships they have with their employees and work colleagues.

'How you act is... I think that many managers are not aware of how everything you do is picked up by the employees. Every word you say. If you sit on a fika-break, laughing at a joke that is maybe... "not okay." It could be around sexuality or women or anything. They pick up on that, so you always have to think how you act. [...] I had a colleague, a manager, sitting on a coffee-break and hearing this kind of joke that was, "not okay". And actually, he acted afterwards and talked to the guy that had said the joke, and told him that it was not okay.' (Interviewee 6)

The dilemma of transparency therefore is that managerial actions can be both beneficial and harmful, transparency can and does result in trust and motivation, but it can also have the opposite effects. A lot depends on the situation, people and context. Manager 17 exemplified this by explaining that they tried to share as much as possible but it was not possible to share everything;

'I often say to all my colleagues that if I don't say something it's not that I keep secrets. So ask me whatever you want. But of course, there are some things like economy or some stuff in a detailed level I am not allowed to share with people. But otherwise, I would say that I am transparent with everything. So I think it's as much transparency as possible.' (Interviewee 17)

The interviewees explained that managers need to balance their level transparency and this can be very difficult as there are no rules, rather managers need to find the tricky balance, and this can take time.

'Yeah, it's very difficult to find a balance and you have to find the right level of transparency. [...] I want to be transparent because I want my employees to know us, to know what is going on, and I want to tell them a lot. But sometimes you can't tell them everything, because then they will want even more details. So that's a tricky balance. And it takes some time to find to the right way, the right level.' (Interviewee 22)

In summary, from the empirical material it was seen that in order to create trust and motivation, which the interviewees regarded as necessary to being sustainable leaders, managers were required to balance different levels of transparency. Failure to do so, either by being overly transparent or not transparent enough, would result in negative outcomes like uncertainty, demotivation, and stress. Trust however was seen to have a recursive relationship with transparency, in that not only was trust created by transparency, but trust could be used to accommodate situations where a lack of transparency would cause negative outcomes. Trust, therefore, can be understood as something that makes the tricky balance of transparency easier for sustainability leaders.

4.2 Managing Development

Apart from maintaining the delicate balance of transparency, leaders were also seen to set the direction for future action; 'I would say the role of a leader is to set a direction and help people get there' (Interviewee 3). One way the leader was seen to help individuals 'get there' was through creating the necessary steps for their personal development.

An example of how this was done in practice was by providing constructive feedback, in order to clarify what was done well and what needed to change;

'Because that's another thing that I forgot to mention that is very important when being a leader, it's giving feedback both positive, but also negative feedback. So we know what we have done good and what we have not done good. So I would say that for myself, it's a very important part from my leader, as I see it, that I expect my leader to give me feedback. And to tell me when I've done something wrong so I can correct it.' (Interviewee 2)

The important part of providing feedback was seen to be that it; 'helps people to understand where they're going in the right direction and going in, maybe, the wrong direction' (Interviewee 20). Leaders were also seen to be responsible for pushing the employees out of their comfort zone, in order to challenge them and help them acquire new competences. The pushing needed to be accompanied by support and help, as without support and help, the pushing would be less effective;

'Growing, of course, comes from expanding your competence and expanding your zone of comfort, and that's always about pushing limits a bit [...] to help people grow and challenge them. But it's not only about challenging but also about helping and providing the support that is needed to overcome the challenge.' (Interviewee 15).

Pushing was understood to be raising expectations and the required standards, managers needed to do active work in providing the prerequisites needed as well as finding the opportunity wherein individuals could try new things or take on more responsibilities.

[It is about] 'providing the prerequisites [...] it's challenging people, raising the expectations, raising the bar, but also giving them the opportunity to try new things.' (Interviewee 15)

The actions of support and help, involved being present and available, answering questions and helping the employee when needed. Interviewee 9 stated that sustainable leaders need to 'always be there as a support when it's tricky and the questions are coming up.' Additionally, the interviewees felt that care was another crucial issue when it came to support and help. Ensuring that each individual knew you cared, was an important part of their development.

'I give them these sort of assignments or whatever to sort of push them a bit further and they know I do that because I care about their development. If I didn't care I simply wouldn't. I could keep them and they would do exactly the same today as they would do tomorrow. But then they won't grow and I know they want to grow so I push them.'
(Interviewee 20)

When asked for a practical example of where individuals were pushed out of their comfort zone, Interviewee 4 gave an example where they had encouraged their junior to present at a manager meeting. Even though the individual felt uncomfortable when presenting to senior individuals, the manager regarded the discomfort to be necessary and that through the process, the individual was developing.

'I bring them if we have the management meeting, I take her with me and she will present things. She's not so comfortable. But with that, she is growing.'
(Interviewee 4)

Even if the individuals, at least initially, are hesitant or have doubts, the role of a 'manager is to make people do things they didn't know they could' (Interviewee 16). In a similar situation, Interviewee 20 gave the example that it's not necessarily about doing new practices, but it could be doing old practices in a new way, that development was also about changing old habits.

'So, she was asked to do a PowerPoint training and I said, "well this time, you're not allowed to, you know, overdo it and do it in a perfect way. You are allowed to spend, so and so, many hours and I promise you it will be good enough." And she really took that sort of challenge and didn't spend too much time. And I knew she was going to be nervous as hell because that's her way of preparing, to sort of overdo it. I said "Now, I know you're going to be nervous, but you're gonna do fine." And she did... And she was really proud afterwards.'
(Interviewee 20)

A pivotal point, in the success of developing and retaining employees, was seen to be that leaders needed to provide individuals with the right opportunities and prerequisites.

'I think my role as a sustainable leader is quite focused on providing a working environment for my consultants where they can thrive for a long time, where they can thrive and develop in the direction that they want, and that SwedTech also wants.'
(Interviewee 10)

It was seen as important that each employee felt that the leader provided these opportunities for development, 'because you [as the leader] have to get that the employee is feeling that

they can develop under your wings, because otherwise they don't want to stay with you' (Interviewee 9). While developing employees by pushing them to try things outside of their comfort zone was perceived to be a big part of retaining them, it was also seen to not be unproblematic. Leaders needed to be mindful when pushing, to not push the followers so hard that they would break from stress or demotivation;

'She didn't feel comfortable starting at this customer, because she had been working with them previously and she had bad memories from it. But I tried to coach her and told her that it's not the same department you will be working with and it's not the same tasks. So, you should give it a shot and try it anyway [...] I had, not daily discussions, but very often discussions with her about how she felt, and how it felt and so on, and it felt like it was going good. And one day she called me, and felt very, very bad. She said that she had been at the doctor, and she would be on sick leave because she was burned out.' (Interviewee 2)

Through support and help, one of the key responsibilities of the leader is to help people find the balance in their work, in order to avoid the mentioned stress and demotivation that could arise from new opportunities or practices.

'It's what I feel is my key responsibility, because what I found out, basically, is that people can take care of their health themselves in terms of exercising and doing that stuff but I need to manage the working environment together with them. Not too many hours. Not too stressful and those sort of bits.' (Interviewee 20)

To avoid burnouts, the interviewees brought up the importance of work-life balance multiple times as something that played a key role in the retainment of individuals at the company. Interviewee 9 felt that one practical approach would be to encourage people to stop working outside of office hours, that while occasionally necessary, this practice should not be a common occurrence, as it could be unhealthy in the long run.

'I also tell my people that when you stopped working and when you leave the office, then you shouldn't work. Leave the office and go home and do something else [...] because otherwise you will not feel well. You think you're doing something good, and maybe you're doing something good that at this moment, but in the long run, that will only harm yourself'. (Interviewee 9)

It was mentioned that employee motivation and retention are linked to the perceived availability of development opportunities, rather than the development opportunities *per se*. This was seen to mean that the role the leaders plays, in employee motivation and retention, is to provide support and help so that the person sees that there are development opportunities rather than forcing the individual into uncomfortable, yet developing, situations.

'So we give more room for that person, to engage in having presentations and so on, [...] maybe they feel the pressure, and they don't want to do it again. Or in other cases they like that and they will want to take more responsibility. The important thing is that we give the opportunities, as an environment, so they can see that there are different ways to grow.' (Interviewee 29).

The responsibility for the development of the employees, however, was not perceived to rest entirely with the managers, rather it was considered a team effort. People needed to contribute by acting upon the opportunities that were created for them.

‘In the development of people, it's only the person who wants to develop who can do that. I can teach someone but I cannot learn for them. They can only learn if they want to.’
(Interviewee 18)

From the interviewees it was understood that pushing people too hard in pursuit of their personal development could lead to stress and demotivation. Interviewee 8 explained how the HR-department had changed how opportunities for individual development were set up. That the new process worked by putting the individuals in charge of their own development plan.

‘Now we have a different way to create a better process for everyone [...] the employee has a bigger responsibility for their own development process, so to say, because everyone is different.’ (Interviewee 8).

In practice managers would create the framework, a development plan at the beginning of the year. But following that, it was the individual's responsibility to initiate and engage with the process throughout the year. Routine check-ins allowed the manager to provide the needed support and help without seeming overly pushy. As long as the individual was seen to take charge of their development process, helping them a little bit was seen to be enough.

‘So, now we will have this meeting in the beginning of the year and there I, as a team manager, will send the invitation. And then we will have quarterly dialogues and that is the employees' responsibility so to say. We then have check-ins all across this process but at the same time, it's the individuals responsibility. Of course, sometimes I can see that they need it, but they don't see it themselves, then you can help them on the way.’ (Interviewee 8)

Interviewee 9 gave an example where they had seen an opportunity for an employee to develop into more of a leadership role. And subtly began the process of giving the individual more responsibility. After the employee was comfortable in the new role they continued on their own.

‘I have one woman who always [had] been working as a technical writer but I can see that she was quite organized and always had full control of everything. So I gave her a little bit more responsibility so she was doing some team leading without her knowing it. And after that I informed her, “can you see here that you are actually leading the team?” And, of course, she could see that. After a while she started taking care of the team meetings and now she is [the] project leader for a quite big project. And this is one and a half years ago that we started this process.’ (Interviewee 9)

The issue with this approach, however, was seen to be a disparity between the development opportunities that the managers created and the development opportunities that the

individuals took. Many interviewees felt frustrated when the opportunities they created were ignored and employees complained that there was a lack of opportunities.

‘Yeah, we have, for instance, some internal trainings here at SwedTech to grow people and to make sure that they develop. So we have the different kinds of trainings in terms of, agile methodology for instance, or whatever it could be. And I think it is something very good that we offer our employees. And I feel a bit disappointed when the consultants are, at the same time, complaining that they don't see the development possibilities here, when they have these possibilities and they don't take the chance to go to these trainings.’ (Interviewee 2)

In summary, from the empirical material it can be seen that enabling people to develop is an important part of the role when being a sustainable leader; this so that each individual wants to stay with the organisation long-term. Helping people find work-life balance in order to prevent burnouts was also found to be crucial. The issue then became that when not pushing people to develop, and instead, giving them the agency to make their own choices, some individuals did not see or take the opportunities and so they felt that they didn't have the needed support or help to grow. Therefore sustainable leadership was found to be a delicate balancing act of creating opportunities while pushing hard enough that individuals felt that they developed but not so hard that they broke from it.

4.3 Confronting Values

The final theme connected to how the interviewees viewed what sustainable leaders and their actions were, is the theme of confronting values. This theme stems from the situation where the manager or their employees, are torn between acting per their own core values and what the organisation expects from them. To abate this issue, managers need to actively ensure that there is a similarity between the recruited individual's values and the values of the organisation. While this was described by several interviewees to rest on ‘gut feeling’, Interviewee 14 explained that one has to make sure that the values of these two entities are somewhat shared otherwise it can lead to problems. It was clarified that this should not be mistaken with diversity, that it is a good thing if people are different but not in regards to their core values;

‘In the interview phase I would have a lot of discussion to get an understanding that we share the values because I have no problem people being different. I love that. [But] we can't have different values because then we have problems all the time.’ (Interviewee 14)

These potential problems that arise when there is a difference in the core values, is described by Interviewee 11, who emphasised that if ‘you don't have the same basic values, it is very difficult to have a good working environment’. The upside of people being different in regards to things other than values, was captured by Interviewee 25 who explained how the recruiting process had changed, that the company had focused on diversity, and recruited

people from different backgrounds. The benefit was gained as a result of the the new group becoming more innovative and creative in their approach to projects.

‘What we always used to do when we would recruit and look for people, was very much based on “we need somebody who's from this background, with this education, with this work experience, with this age.” But actually what we kind of did in that was always getting the same type of people [...] We are doing CGI [Computer-Generated-Imagery] animation, really high-end photo-realistic animations and graphics and we've completely diversified that in recent years by taking people from different backgrounds, from gaming backgrounds for example, and also looking for different ages as well. And I find in that, actually, when we built the team by having a much more diverse team, we actually have a better output, because we get lots of different opinions.’ (Interviewee 25)

Interviewee 13 described the importance of values in the creation of culture, and that the organisations’ values were the starting point for the new culture work that had taken place over the past year. Interviewee 13 explained that, currently, management was busy developing leadership programs that ran in line with the culture and values;

‘We will try to connect our leadership programs to our culture. So, they will be also based on the value principles we have.’ (Interviewee 13)

It was explained by Interviewee 6 that similar to values, the personal and cultural fit with the company sometimes proved crucial, even to the point that a lack of cultural and personal fit could lead to some people voluntarily or forcefully leaving the organisation;

‘If you have a personality that maybe doesn't fit into to the company culture. Then it could be a downside, there are a few examples of people who have left SwedTech, or have been forced to leave SwedTech because maybe their personality doesn't match the platform that we have and the culture. [...] As managers and as people, they may be perfect in another company, but not in this one.’ (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 21 nuanced this statement by saying that if someone does not hold the same values as the organisation at large, that person will not feel at home. The responsibility of the sustainable leader is then to mediate, should this situation arise, by aligning the person’s values with the organisation’s values;

‘You help to align his values with our values and if we conclude, “okay, well actually this will not work.” I think by then [Person X] himself would have understood, “okay, I do not want to work here.” Because if he doesn't share the same set of values, then he will go back and say “this doesn't feel good.” So if we then talk and say “Ultimately, we cannot work together.” [Person X] would be like “No, I get the point, I actually didn't feel good here.” ’ (Interviewee 21)

Interviewee 18 explained that when the values were taken to practice, they became translated to priorities and that these also needed to be aligned with the work the company expected. They expressed that it was important that the priorities were met so that the person could feel that they had taken actions that were supporting their values and principles;

‘You must find ways to understand [and] reflect on things. That you have done it with the right priorities. Because if you start to take actions that don't support your own values and priorities, then you will not feel good when you go home. So that is everyday important, to reflect a little bit.’ (Interviewee 18)

An example of values being translated into practice, was given by Interviewee 19, who elaborated that it's not just about the values but rather what the values represent, a common ground, around which the team could connect to one another. In the example that was given the organisational values of teamwork and collaboration were understood to be represented by the team's desire to contribute and be a part of something;

‘You need a team that has different personalities, but you also need to catch somehow, a similarity for them to grow around. And I think for this team, the one thing that they all have in common, is that they really want to contribute and be a part of something.’ (Interviewee 19)

Ultimately, what was understood to be important was the need for belonging. This need for belonging was seen to be partly addressed by individuals sensing that they shared their core values and had a shared culture. It was further seen that by taking managerial action to support this, a win-win situation would arise where the individual would be happy in their work and would want to stay, while also generating economic benefits to the company.

‘I have hired a couple of hundred people to SwedTech over the years. [...] There is a SwedTech-culture, that is a little bit different from other companies. And that's something actually that can create belonging to SwedTech even if you are somewhere else. And that type of culture, I like to call it that you are more or less like a family. You feel that it's easy to talk, for example, with our CEO. So it's a quite flat organization. We are generally interested in your personal situation, and actually try to adapt the assignments and the way we drive your career in directions that are interesting for you as an individual. Because if you are happy, we are happy... and probably we are going to earn money on it also.’ (Interviewee 30)

In practice however, as explained by Interviewee 21, an individual's actions cannot always be in line with the individual's values. Rather in some situations the economic needs of the organisation were seen to result in having to put pressure on people in order to make them more efficient, this solution was something Interviewee 21 was unhappy with, as in certain situations, they felt it was not conducive to the person's wellbeing;

‘I understand what needs to be done to generate good profits, but my personal values could be something else where I could say, “Ok I understand that we have to increase the pressure on people” or if you want to put it more like management, “We have to increase [the] efficiency in people.” [...] Which probably means that people have to have the personal evolution to become better, they have to actually manage more with less time. Which needs me to put, kind of, pressure on them; which I think depending on who it is or under which circumstances, [is] why I think I'm not really happy with that solution.’ (Interviewee 21)

Another manager brought up a special example of where standing by one's values might not be unproblematic if those values clash with what an important customer is doing. Specifically when working in a town where the industry is highly focused on a field that may be unaligned with an individual's values. Reiterating that there can be occasions where the employee's or manager's values will be unaligned with the economic requirements of the company.

'Because what I'm saying here really is that there is a type of red line, where we set the standard for everybody, but everything within that line, that's open for choice. So, even if we as a company say that we can develop [products for the defense industry]. I don't expect all my employees to be either willing or interested in doing that kind of work. That's your personal choice. But if you are located in [medium sized city in Sweden], then it's a little bit more difficult for us to employ you if you don't want to work for [the defense industry] because that's [a large percentage] of our revenue in [medium sized city]. [...] We ask this question to everybody because one important thing is also that if you have a very strong view on this, then you shouldn't really be getting that type of question in the future either.'

(Interviewee 30)

The dilemma with economic needs and values is described by Interviewee 6 who made the statement that, economic stability is highly important to an organisation and that if the economic needs are unmet, the other aspects of business need to take a secondary role;

'The first thing that my manager is asking me is, "are you delivering money, are you performing?" [...] And if you are delivering the economics, then the second question can come. So that's the most important thing. I would say it's more important than anything else.'

(Interviewee 6)

Sharing the sentiment of having to prioritise economic sustainability was Interviewee 18. They explained that as a publicly traded company, the other kinds of sustainability were very important, but that all other sustainability efforts are dependant on financial stability;

'I only have three important KPIs; it's customer satisfaction, happy employees and then we are a company that should perform, so of course, we must have happy shareholders. So financial results of course is something that must be, otherwise you are not allowed to continue.'

(Interviewee 18)

This idea was illustrated further by Interviewee 26 who expressed that sustainability and long-term thinking is something they value, however when economic performance is poor, more long-term goals that favour sustainability have to be put to the side, and more emphasis should be put on the short-term;

'So there's a lot of macroeconomic factors that influence, how our business performance is, and, I mean, last year hasn't been a brilliant year, I'm quite open about that. It's unfortunate. But that then puts the spotlight on more the short term actions. "How can you claw back some of the terrain you lost?" So, that's where the short term actions come in, and we had a big push last quarter of last year, just to to crank up numbers.'

(Interviewee 26)

The above is nuanced by several interviewees who explained that it is not that you should always prioritise the economic sustainability of the company, rather based off of the goals of having long-term relationships, you should take the appropriate actions. Interviewee 11 exemplified this by saying that sometimes the cost of having a strong customer relationship is you need to think long-term, and short-term losses can be warranted if they benefit the long-term customer relationship;

‘It could be that you maybe not in every single business situation are making money. But you know [that] if you can make the customer happy this time, without earning money. He or she will come back and you will have a good relation with him. Maybe the potential of earning with this customer comes next year. So, it could be maybe you sometimes put a really, highly qualified consultant for a customer that are not paying the fee which should be necessary for really good business. But it will help the customer in a difficult situation. And I think you will have a customer who is loving you for a long time after that.’
(Interviewee 11)

Interviewee 26 explained that the approach to business has to be more than achieving short-term economic gains. That as sustainable leaders, with a sustainable and long-term organisation as the goal, what is required is the need for actions that follow and build upon the values and culture of the company. The values and culture then guide how the organisation acts, in order to create the desired results;

‘How we do business; how we act [...] as leaders, to build a sustainable business [...] that becomes very important. To create that culture that then fosters the sustainability and make sure we as a company move in the right direction, in a sustainable way. Because we want SwedTech to succeed in the long term. We don't want to have short-term success. You can obviously maybe just act in a certain way, or push certain targets, and just be successful for a year or two. But then, that's it. I don't think that's the journey that we are taking.’
(Interviewee 26)

In summary, from the empirical material it was seen that people being different, was something to strive for as it could yield valuable outcomes such as innovation. A caveat to being different, however, was that the core values had to be largely shared with the organisation's or trouble would ensue. Should the values be aligned with those of the organisation, that was seen to result in people feeling a sense of belonging. Connected to this, was that people should act in ways that were conducive with their values, or moral compass, as not doing so would be unsustainable. As individuals and leaders, however, when it came to ensuring the financial stability of the company, acting in ways contrary to your values was sometimes perceived to be necessary. This was seen to be, at times, having to take the short-term approach. To always take the short-term approach, however, was not seen to be a prudent cause of action as this was seen to be unsustainable. Following your values, was seen to be necessary as it aided in developing talent, customer relationships and a strong company culture.

5. Discussion

Based on the empirical work that has been carried out we will identify several situations that have similarities to the boundary-work literature that [Langley et al. \(2019\)](#) describe. But we believe that even without the theoretical lens, the empirical chapter does allow practitioners the opportunity for reflection and the chance to develop an understanding on what a sustainable leader can be in our context.

To begin the main argument, the managers in our paper identify several actions that contribute to understanding what it means to be a sustainable leader. These actions were largely influenced by the different perspectives on what was considered sustainable and unsustainable. We view this difference in perception to be what is described to be a symbolic boundary ([Lamont & Molnár, 2002](#); [Langley et al., 2019](#)). This symbolic boundary is similar to how a demarcation is made between what is considered ethical and unethical, ([Hobson-West, 2012](#); [Wainwright et al., 2006](#)), and science and non-science ([Gieryn, 1983](#)). This symbolic boundary, demarcating what is perceived to be sustainable and unsustainable, is prevalent throughout our case and is the foundation for how the managers rationalise and legitimise their actions. This symbolic boundary is from this point onwards simply referred to as the ‘sustainability boundary’. Following this logic, we consider all boundary-work done to influence this sustainability boundary to be ‘sustainability boundary-work’. Similarly to [Hobson-West \(2012\)](#) we argue that our sustainability boundary is affected by several other boundaries, that are referred to as ‘sub-boundaries’, which are dependant on the perspectives of those involved. These sub-boundaries together contribute to the sustainability boundary and are the conceptual lines around the concepts of: relational aspects in transparency, the locus of responsibility for personal development, and the light in which short-term actions are viewed. These will be discussed below in more detail;

5.1 Negotiating Sustainability

In line with previous studies on boundary-work ([Langley et al., 2019](#)), negotiation was the most prevalent form of boundary-work found in our study, present in all three of our sub-boundaries. We identify negotiation as an essential boundary-work practice for achieving sustainable outcomes in our case as it enables collaboration. Through enabling collaboration, negotiation can contribute to working at the boundary by limiting the unsustainable effects that the sustainability boundary has on the practices of managers. We see managers doing this negotiation boundary-work through the practices of: providing a sense of direction and the required prerequisites; including individuals in discussions where their purpose and the company’s expectations are explained; giving and receiving feedback; and asking and answering questions through check-in’s. We see that the negotiation boundary-work done by managers in our case is similar to [Quick and Feldman’s \(2014\)](#) study on the boundary-work of urban planners. Where in both cases managers negotiated the perceptions of different actor groups which allowed differences to be overcome whereby promoting resilience and

collaboration. Our understanding is that the managers view these practices of negotiation (Langley et al., 2019), alignment and translation (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Quick & Feldman, 2014) to be more sustainable and beneficial to the goals of long-term sustainable leaders as problems and issues can be avoided or solved through these practices.

Interestingly however, we found that negotiation as a means of boundary-work is not without its problems, as in some situations it did not enhance collaboration at the boundary as you would expect from the literature (Langley et al., 2019). In fact, in some situations the practices of negotiation, translation and alignment, were found to disrupt collaboration as opposed to enhance it, thus suggesting that negotiation might not be enough in all situations. Therefore as an alternative to solely relying upon negotiation, in each of the three sub-boundaries, managers adopted alternative boundary-work practices for handling the issues and problems that arose.

5.2 The Role of Relations

In the sub-boundary of transparency we see negotiation to be an important practice in enhancing collaboration, which once again is in line with previous literature (Langley et al., 2019). However, as mentioned above we found that only relying on negotiation would not allow managers to avoid all the problems that arise when there is an imbalance of transparency, rather negotiation could even add to the imbalance e.g. demotivation stemming from oversharing information. As a result of these issues, managers adopted the use of trust to overcome the limitations of negotiation. To describe how trust works over the transparency boundary we refer to the similar case of Meier's (2015) study of collaboration and trust in healthcare. Trust viewed as a relational aspect does not redefine or change the perspectives of actors regarding the appropriate level of transparency, instead it allows the flexibility to collaborate across the differences in perspective, by moving the focus off of the differences and having them 'out of sight' (Meier, 2015, p. 63). Through trust, the boundary of transparency between managers and other individuals was 'downplayed' (Langley et al., 2019) whereby differences could be overcome, creating a shared sense of 'we'. This is in-line with Ybema et al. (2012) because we see in our case that strong relationships like teamwork and family make it easier to overcome boundaries and their respective issues like uncertainty and demotivation, due to the differences in perspective becoming irrelevant.

To add, while we agree with Langley et al., (2019) that in some situations, the ease of downplaying boundaries supports the notion 'that boundary tensions have possibly been overemphasized in previous research' (p. 38). We feel that our case gives evidence that the importance of relational aspects are more central to overcoming boundaries than previous literature has found, and that there can be situations where distinct and strong boundaries are not overemphasised, rather relational aspects such as trust are needed to downplay them.

5.3 Managing Blurred Roles

In the sub-boundary of Managing Development, in a similar way to transparency, we found that once again negotiation was an important boundary-work practice (Langley et al., 2019). However, there were situations where negotiation would fail and collaboration would suffer from it. This can be seen for example in the statement, ‘I had [...] very often discussions with her about how she felt [...] and it felt like it was going good’, but in the end, the individual still suffered from a burn-out. We regard the old practice connected to managing development to be competitive boundary-work because it entailed boundary-work done to reinforce the conceptual demarcation (Langley et al., 2019) between what we label ‘constructive pushing’ and ‘destructive pushing’. As apparent from the empirical chapter, this is no easy task and given the unsustainable results that could occur should the boundary-work fail, we interpret the actions of the HR-department in introducing the new practice of giving agency to the employees, as an attempt to re-configure how the personal development process worked. Through rearranging the boundary-work practices, the old practice of pushing employee development was thus transformed (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

We make this argument because, in our case we see that the HR-department ‘reshape[d] the boundary landscape’ through reconfiguring how the boundary-work practices took place which is in line with the description of ‘arranging boundary-work’ by Langley et al. (2019, p. 41). The HR-department did this by transforming the nature of the interaction between managers and employees. Instead of managers attempting to shape the individuals’ perception of which managerial actions were considered constructive or destructive pushing, the transformed practice resulted in managers now shaping the individual’s perception on the availability of opportunities for development. Additionally, given that complete agency was not given, because managers still had to set up the initial meeting and that some employees required the occasional push, we interpret this as ‘boundary blurring’; where the conceptual line circumscribing the role of who is responsible for the personal development is blurred (Bach, 2012; Langley et al., 2019; Liberati, 2017; Lindberg et al., 2017). However, while we see that the lines surrounding the roles are blurred, which is in line with previous literature, the difference in our case is that we do not see boundary blurring to be done by the involved actors in an attempt to achieve a higher status by showing proximity to privileged others (Bach, 2012; Langley et al., 2019). Instead, boundary blurring was initiated by a party outside the boundary interaction, the HR department, as a form of configurational boundary-work, done in order to mitigate some of the problems that came with the old practices.

In line with the observations of previous research (Langley et al., 2019; Lindberg et al., 2017), we see in our findings that it appears that boundary-work is indeed recursive and multifaceted. This is because we identify that as a result of the above mentioned configurational boundary-work, new distinctions are generated between what the individual wants to develop and what the company needs, these distinctions will result in further

boundary-work as our findings indicate that sustainable leaders will only create opportunities that suit both interests.

5.4 Legitimacy and Turmoil

The final sub-boundary connected to the overall sustainability boundary is interesting as it draws attention to the demarcation between a short- and long-term focus. Rather than a clear understanding that focusing on the long-term is seen as sustainable, the importance of short-term economic viability as a means to ensure the survival of the company was lifted. To explain the demarcation between long and short, we use distancing and re-appropriating in a similar way to [Farias' \(2017\)](#) case of an anti-capitalist commune.

We identify distancing boundary-work because, in our case, individuals look to define and demarcate themselves against a short-term approach. One example of this is when an interviewee stated 'we want SwedTech to succeed in the long term. We don't want to have short-term success'. In line with [Langley et al. \(2019\)](#) we interpret this as competitive boundary work done to maintain their legitimacy, in our case as sustainable leaders. A frequent obstacle to long-term success, however, that threatened the legitimacy of sustainable leaders was explained to be poor financial performance. Referring to [Farias' \(2017\)](#) second notion, that of re-appropriating, we see that during times of financial instability, short-term actions are regarded differently based off the context. This is similar to how the members of the anti-capitalist commune regarded money differently based on the context. In this study when financial performance is perceived to be poor, short term actions are seen as necessary, 'just to crank up numbers'. Whereby connecting short-term actions to the legitimacy of sustainable leaders. In this way depending on the financial stability, the short-term approach is discursively distanced and re-appropriated ([Farias, 2017; Langley et al., 2019](#)) as a result of the variance of the perceived economic performance of SwedTech.

Interestingly, while our findings support what [Langley et al. \(2019\)](#) found, that the practices of distancing and re-appropriating ([Farias, 2017](#)) are examples of the unstable and porous nature of boundary work, we see in our case that these practices are not only used competitively to create boundaries but also collaboratively to enable work across the boundaries. The boundary-work done to influence the demarcation between a short- and long-term focus is not only viewed as competitive boundary-work where actors aim to defend and legitimise their actions, by portraying long-term as something 'good' and short-term as something 'bad'. Rather, we see collaborative boundary-work as well, where short-term actions are re-appropriated to enable work to continue despite the previous demarcation between a short-term focus and what is considered to be sustainable.

Additionally, from our findings we agree with [Langley et al. \(2019\)](#) as we see evidence of boundary-work becoming more visible and salient after triggers, such as poor financial performance. However, whether this indicates that distancing and re-appropriating boundary-

work is ongoing in situations without these triggers or if it is episodic and started by the trigger is not possible to determine based off of our findings alone.

5.5 Finding the Healthy Middle

When reflecting on the sustainability boundary-work, and subjecting the three sub-boundaries present in our case to critical scrutiny, we identified that the manner in which they constitute the overall sustainability boundary is through balancing based on context. Put differently, in each of our three sub-boundaries the sustainable outcomes were perceived to be achieved through avoiding the extremes, or moving away from dichotomies where one side of the boundary is considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’. In our case the sustainable outcomes of motivation and trust, could only be acquired when the boundary-work achieved a balance in transparency. Likewise, the sustainable outcomes of employee development and retention could only be acquired when the boundary-work achieved a balance between pushing and giving agency. Lastly the sustainable outcome of financial stability could only be acquired when the boundary-work balanced both short- and long-term approaches. In this way, by balancing these sub-boundaries we see that sustainable outcomes are achieved whenever boundary-work is done to remain in the healthy middle.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrates how boundary-work done for the demarcation between what is sustainable and unsustainable, labeled sustainability boundary-work, is dynamic, ongoing and multifaceted. Similarly to boundary-work demarcating between ethical and unethical (Hobson-West, 2012; Wainwright et al., 2006), science and non-science (Gieryn, 1983), it was through studying the micro-concepts, in this case sub-boundaries, that we were able to better understand sustainability boundary-work.

Given our research question of ‘*What are the main boundaries that sustainable leaders face in practice, and how are these boundaries overcome?*’. Our results show that within the symbolic boundary of sustainability, the sub-boundaries could largely be overcome through negotiation as a form of boundary-work as it enabled and enhanced collaboration. However, negotiation was not without its limitations. Therefore in the sub-boundary of transparency the boundary-work of downplaying and creating a shared sense of we, allowed leaders to overcome the issues and problems that negotiation was unable to solve. When managing the sub-boundary of development however, the context was different and downplaying could not be used, rather there was a need to transform practices, and blur the resulting new role. When analysing the discourse between sustainability and long-term, the boundary work of distancing and re-appropriating short-term actions enabled managers to retain their legitimacy when faced with financial turmoil. Overall, the sub-boundaries associated with sustainability boundary-work, are all situations where balance needs to be maintained. Most previous literature considers a dichotomy separating actions that work for and against the boundary,

labeled competitive and collaborative boundary-work, respectively, by [Langley et al. \(2019\)](#). Different in our case is that we see that depending on the context both types of boundary-work practices can be used to achieve the same outcome, where sustainable leaders seek to avoid the extremes creating a ‘sustainable’ middle.

Our study has several theoretical and practical implications that we will recount below. For theoretical contributions, our study has identified some of the limitations of negotiation as a form of boundary-work, where negotiation in some situations could disrupt collaboration rather than benefit it. Further, our study indicates that relational aspects could be more central to downplaying boundaries than previously thought. The reason for this is that in situations where downplaying is surprisingly effective, this might not be due to the boundaries being overemphasised as previously indicated ([Langley et al., 2019](#)). Instead it could be that relational aspects such as trust are more important than seen in previous studies. Further, from our study more light has been shed on the concept of boundary blurring and how boundary blurring can be initiated, not as competitive boundary-work by the involved actors trying to gain a higher status, but rather by outside parties that perform configurational boundary-work that leads to changes in how future boundary-work is performed at the boundary. In addition, the concept of re-appropriating has been applied to boundary-work in a context other than competitive where it served to enhance collaboration by working around the differences of actors. Overall, our results strengthen the perspective on boundary-work as a recursive and multifaceted process where boundary-work done can necessitate the need for further boundary-work on other boundaries which is line with recent literature ([Langley et al., 2019](#); [Lindberg et al., 2017](#)).

For practitioners, we have identified the need to maintain a balance in at least three areas. This is not an exhaustive list but we have found that sustainable leaders need to be able to balance their level of transparency, in order to earn trust and achieve motivation. They also need to balance pushing and giving agency in order to manage development in pursuit of retaining employees. Lastly we found that sustainable leaders need to balance long- and short-term actions by acknowledging the importance of a fit between personal and organisational needs all the while creating and maintaining an organisational culture and sense of belonging.

Further Research

Through relying chiefly on interviews, we were able to get a clear understanding of the perspectives of managers. However, it would be interesting to see if future research done through an ethnographic approach, would find similar results; whether the need to balance would remain a central theme in the everyday boundary-work practices.

Additionally it would be interesting to study actors other than managers and leaders to see if the dynamics of the sustainability boundary-work would remain the same or if our findings are exclusive to the boundary-work done by managers.

Lastly the perspective of boundaries as multifaceted goes back to the roots of boundary-work with [Gieryn \(1983\)](#) who stated that science should not be seen as a single thing, we have found that this is likely also true for sustainability. It would be interesting to see if future studies on the concept of sustainability with the use of boundary-work could explore this aspect as well. Further, we believe that the complex and ambiguous nature of sustainability lends itself well to be studied with boundary theory in the future.

7. References

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