Building Relationships

Assessing the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers as an indication of authenticity vs. toxicity

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Abstract

Relationships are so entrenched in the social interaction between individuals that most people do not pay attention to them until they experience trouble in their relationship. Humans create new relationships and end old ones all the time in conscious and unconscious processes.

This thesis will give a theoretical and practical overview to reveal the process of social interaction which shapes relationships between a leader and a follower. We focus on the necessary components as well as on the process in which the relationship is built. We approach the process of social interaction from both the side of the leader and the side of the follower to create a balanced picture that will provide systematic explanation of this complicated and multidimensional phenomenon.

The primary focus of this thesis will be on the origin and development of an authentic, healthy relationship between a leader and a follower.
Keywords

Relationship, social interaction, leadership, followership, authentic leadership, toxic leadership, leader member exchange, quality of relationship, vertical dyads, multiplying talents.
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I. Introduction

1.1 Building relationships

Leadership can never be caught in words but only be approached from numerous angles to get a better explanation of the process and its effects. In this thesis we try to approach leadership from a point of view that will focus on the relationship that exists between the leader and the follower. Relationships reveal crucial truths about both the leader and the follower alike but are often under examined and taken for what they are. In an attempt to get a better understanding of leadership we take a closer look at the relationship between a leader and a follower to see what elements construct leadership and who is responsible for the input.

In this research we assume that leadership is a phenomenon of social interaction (Lord, et al., 1999) which means that there is input from, and output towards, both sides of the spectrum. Therefore we look at leadership from neither leader nor follower perspective but rather focus on what establishes in between these two parties. We find it interesting that the majority of the leadership researchers take ‘follower attributes as outcomes of the leaders process as opposed to inputs’ and hereby ignore the impact that followers have on the relationship between a leader and a follower (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 434). We believe that the relationship between a leader and a follower is the result of input from both parties and therefore needs to be studied with an independent view that takes the influence of both parties into account.

Looking at leadership from the leader’s perspective underestimates the importance of input from the side of the follower and can be too pragmatic at times. We believe that our topic can bring something new to the academic literature and actually adds value to the issue. We see this research as the piece of the puzzle that might fit in to give a more complete view on the issue of leader- and followership.

Since firm and stable relationships between the leader and the follower are beneficial for both parties involved it is important that both parties have an equal, mutual understanding of the elements required in this relationship. The view on this relationship will create common understanding from both sides and take away confusion.
1.2 Main concepts

All along this thesis we will deal with two major concepts: authenticity and toxicity. We indeed want to describe the possible healthy and authentic relationships a leader and a follower can aspire to create. By doing so we also would like to alert the reader to the possible derives leaders and followers can face and explain him or her the different traps to avoid in order not to establish a toxic relationship between him or her and the followers.

The term *toxicity* is quite vague and deserves to be described more thoroughly. This term has a pejorative connotation because in the first place it refers to poison. ‘Toxicity’ (2014) is ‘the degree of strength of a poison’ and ‘the state or quality of being poisonous’. Thus, if we restrict ourselves to leaders, when one talks about ‘toxic leaders’, one easily thinks about dictators like Adolf Hitler or terrorists like Osama Bin Laden. However, the first definition implies with the term ‘degree’ that toxicity can be measured. It is therefore not relevant to talk about ‘toxic leaders’ and ‘pure leaders’. We cannot bring these terms in opposition like black and white because most people are grey.

As a matter of fact, every leader has some toxicity, even those considered as ‘good leaders’ (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 3). Bourdoux and Delabelle have even chosen to avoid the term of toxicity and rather talks about ‘leader with toxins’ (2013, p. 3). In concrete words toxicity in a leader can mean personality traits like egocentrism, narcissism, charisma and a propensity to lie (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013). However, toxicity in the relationship between leaders and followers do not come only from leaders. Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser have identified three sources of toxicity: leaders, followers, and the environment (2007). Followers also have toxins and can damage the relationship with the leader and even transform a good leader into a toxic one (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 21). Similarly, an environment of threat or instability impacts negatively the relationship. This “toxic triangle” will be dealt more in depth in the chapter 4.

It appears to us that this concept of toxicity and the one of authenticity are close and even inseparable. We also do not believe that they should be consistently used as opposites. As a matter of fact, it is utterly possible to find some toxic leaders, with immoral, dangerous or discriminating goals who are in the same time authentic in that they really believe in the ideas they claim. They succeed via these negative ideas to institute with their followers a toxic and in
the same time trustworthy relationship, where the followers would follow the leaders in everything they do.

However, the term *authenticity* can be perceived differently. Some authors like Bass and Steidlmeier see the ‘authentic transformational leaders [...] concerned with the welfare of others, because they believe every individual has dignity and moral standing’ (1999, cited in Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 442). This definition can be opposed of the one of *toxicity*, in that the leader wants to be good for the people around him or her. They have ‘moral standards or values that emphasise the collective interests of their groups or organisations within a greater society’ (Luthans & Avolio 2003, cited in Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 442). It therefore appears to us that authenticity and toxicity can be used as opposites or not regarding the employed definition.

The second definition is closer to the idea that we want to express about relationships between leaders and followers. As a matter of fact, we do want to find a term in opposition with toxicity. This term would describe a relationship that benefits both parties, where followers are able to fully express their potential and talent. To avoid any confusion, we have decided after a long reflection to use the terms ‘healthy’ and ‘good’ to describe this kind of relationship in the following chapters.

1.3 Research questions

**Major research question:**

*By what means can a healthy relationship be built between a manager/executive and a follower, enabling the manager to become a leader by releasing all the available talents of the team members?*

In this major research question we assimilate a manager/executive to a formal leader, that is to say a person having responsibilities in an organisation but nor really *leading* the people around him or her. Creating the kind of relationships we aim to describe, where the potential of the team members is unleashed, is a means for a formal leader to become a real *leader*. We believe that the multiplication of talents should be an objective for an organisation and we therefore would like to study the kind of relationships leading to this state.
Answering this major research question implies to describe also toxic relationships, as we would like to study both the sides to have a better understanding of relationship in general.

The following minor research questions can be seen as stepping stones that lead to the answer on the major research question.

**Minor research questions:**

1. *What are the key elements that define a relationship between a leader and a follower as healthy or toxic? (describing healthy and toxic relationships)*

2. *What are the consequences of a healthy or toxic relationship between leaders and followers?*

3. *How is a healthy relationship created, maintained and prevented from becoming toxic?*

**1.4 Objective and aim of this research**

In the first part of the thesis we have to focus on the ingredients that create the relationship between the leader and the follower. This study is linked to many other vast concepts that must be very captivating to examine. However, this subject is already huge enough per se and this is why we will avoid going too far on other fields. It appears to us impossible to tackle the relationship between a leader and a follower without addressing concepts like leader-, followership, authenticity and toxicity. Therefore we will try as much as possible to confine our work to the first subject without dealing too much with the next ones. This implies a limitation on the research because we will not go far into the theoretical backgrounds of these phenomena but limit ourselves to applicable analyses that benefit our objectives. We will use these different notions all along the thesis to support our ideas without analysing them individually.

In this study we are interested into studying relationships between a leader and a follower in every field, not in the business field in particular. Even though the majority of the examples given in this thesis come from the business area, we would like to express the idea that our findings must be relevant for relationships in other fields, like sport or politics.

The goal of this study is to understand how a healthy relationship between a leader and a follower
is built without creating a toxic environment. The latter term could for instance be a place where people are stressed, where they suffer and do not like to be. The healthy relationship is a means to an end and not an end in itself because it leads to a positive psychological environment that fosters personal well-being and functions as a catalyst of personal talent. The first step of our thesis is therefore to examine relationships between leaders and followers to see what the elements are that define a relationship as healthy or toxic. This helps us to understand and describe the kind of leadership that is needed to create this positive psychological environment. Our end purpose is to come up with a clear understanding of how a leader can influence a relationship in a positive way in order to multiply talent and foster personal well-being.

Looking at a relationship between a leader and a follower from an independent point of view gives a very balanced picture. Our main reason to select this neutral stance is because we want to zoom in on the ingredients that are used to create a healthy relationship between a leader and a follower instead of on the players who are responsible for bringing them in (or for the lack of bringing them in). We hope that our position will filter out a biased view on the issue that might obscure certain aspects of the relationship.

As potential leaders of tomorrow our personal objective for researching this relationship is to become better leaders ourselves. We want to have a deeper understanding of leader- and followership in order to improve our leadership skills and be more effective in leading ourselves and others. Once we have obtained a clear view of the ingredients that are present in the relationship we want to emphasise on the role of the leader in the leadership process to see what is required from the leader, where it is needed and how it should be applied.

The independent view on the relationship benefits our objective to learn in a second way. We believe that in order to really understand the leadership phenomenon one needs an understanding of followership first. We want this study to benefit both parties on either side of the spectrum. Both leaders and followers should be able to gain deeper understanding from our research and relate it to themselves. The vast majority of leaders have found themselves in the role of being a follower first before being in the leader role. For that reason we assumed that our independent view would make this research relevant for both ourselves and our readers throughout someone’s entire life.
1.5 Personal expectations and experience

Petrus Oskam:

My personal expectations for this research are that it will be a very interesting journey with a rewarding result. This first part will be very informative and theoretical because we want to go deep into the theory to examine the relationship but the empirical data and the conclusions that arise out of it are supposed to be applicable and beneficial to our personal development as authentic leaders. I expect the end result to be shaped in the form of a guide that can be used by both followers and leaders to create a better relationship between them. I have high hopes when it comes to the quality of both our theoretical framework and our conclusions. This study can be seen as the sum of everything we learned during the master’s course and we both want to show that this was a golden year for us. My personal experience with academic writing is that the beginning is the hardest phase together with the conclusion. I see the conclusion as both the most useful part of the writing and the most vulnerable part. I am positive that this study will be a great help for us and other readers in their development towards authentic leaders.

Romain Ferrec:

By working on this subject, I first want to increase my knowledge in the leadership field and especially concerning the relationship between leaders and followers. I thus hope to acquire some useful knowledge for my potential future as a leader. Having already been in a head position of a group during my previous professional experiences, I sometimes met some situations where the relation with my subordinates was not optimal. With the benefit of hindsight, I understand these situations might have been avoided with a different leadership style. I have also been quite often in a follower position within a group with sometimes a complicated or even strained relation with my superior. In both cases I think a better knowledge on the relationship between leaders and followers could have improved the situation. This thesis is therefore for me the means to develop personally and to improve my relationship with the others as a leader and a follower. I am confident that the reader may benefit from this study as much as us for their personal development.
II. Methodology

Methodology is defined by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss as ‘a way of thinking about and studying social phenomena’ (2008, p. 1). In this chapter we want to give an elaborate explanation of the way we thought about and studied the relationship between leaders and followers. We want to give an insight in how we came to the construction of this master thesis and what techniques we used. We would also like to focus on the methodological views that are available and how they influenced our work process. Then we will give the reader an insight in our choice for qualitative research and we will give a short outline of our view on methodology and what the role of methodology is in this thesis. Later on we will reveal the reasons behind our choice for the topic and give an explanation for the structure of this research.

‘We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started... and know the place for the first time.’ – T.S. Eliot

2.1 Choice of topic

Writing a master thesis is both a great privilege and a great responsibility. The size of the research requirements in this programme are dazzling and the expected standards can be frightening at times. This master thesis is the biggest academic project we have ever worked on and will function as the grand finale of our participation in this master programme. This is why our tutor, Professor Mikael Lundgren, has repeatedly stated that we have to give everything we have to this project because this thesis will be our swansong that will always be there as a reference.

We both agreed in an early stage that we had to write on a topic that had our common interest and would be highly rewarding to dive into. The fact that the program has a time span of only one year was very beneficial for us as students to focus on the thesis in an early stage. We both wanted to write about something that was very close to the heart of the leadership process. Something that would cut to the core of the programme and would also be beneficial for us as potential leaders of tomorrow. We both invested quite a lot of time and energy in our early talks to determine the topic or our research. After a few long conversations with Professor Philippe
Daudi we decided to write about the relationship between a leader and a follower.

The reason for us to choose this topic was because we both were absolutely convinced that this topic would reveal certain crucial truths about the leadership process that would shape our personal development in a positive way. We wanted to describe with as much accuracy as possible the relationship between a leader and a follower and to try to provide a guide on how to build and maintain a healthy relationship, while detecting and avoiding the potential toxins in the relationship.

2.2 Methodological overview

“Research” is a term that is used so frequently in the academic world that it is easy to forget the actual definition of the word. According to Redman & Mory, research is a systematised effort to gain new knowledge (1923, p. 10). “Gaining new knowledge” can thus be seen as the essential purpose of research. Uma Sekran defines research as the ‘process of finding solutions to a problem after a thorough study and analysis of the situational factors’ (2003, p. 3). We see this as highly relevant for our thesis because our end-purpose is to gain new knowledge in the field of leader-follower relationships. However, it is not enough to just try to create some new knowledge. We also need to focus on the process of how we do this. This is important because there are multiple ways to gain new knowledge and different methodological approaches make different assumptions about their subject areas which will result in different outcomes (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). The wrong use of research instruments will result in the creation of different outcomes than originally planned. For this reason we will focus on the underlying theories that are needed in the writing of this thesis.

There are several factors that influence the researcher’s choice for his or her methods. The main factors for this decision are the nature of the subject (1) and the personal beliefs of the researcher about reality around him or her (2). The first factor requires the researcher to choose the right method that will give him or her the most accurate outcome available. Problems that ask for statistical measurement that will form a theory ask for a very different approach than the problems that ask for observation and a summarisation of existing theories.

Every person has a personal view of what reality is and how it is constructed (Arbnor & Bjerke,
This view is shaped by his or her ultimate presumptions that can be both conscious and unconscious (Daudi, 1986). These presumptions shape a paradigm that is decisive for the way we develop knowledge and how we regard the available methods, or to use the words of Professor Björn Bjerke, ‘given the paradigm chosen, the way to solve the problem depends on available methods’ (2013a, p. 7).

The paradigm consists of four main parts: the conception of reality (1), the conception of science (2), the scientific ideal (3), and the ethics/aesthetics (4). The conception of reality deals with ideas of how reality is constructed. The conception of science has to do with various beliefs of what is to gain through research. The scientific ideal deals with the researcher as a person and is related to his or her desires while the ethical/aesthetical concept is associated with the ethical values of the researcher and what he or she claims to be suitable or unsuitable, ugly or beautiful (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009).

![Methodological overview](image-url)

**Figure 1 – Methodological overview**

Source: authors’ figure, based on Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009, p. 15

The figure above explains the importance of the paradigm in the process of creating knowledge. Paradigms are highly influential on the outcome of a study and therefore they deserve our full attention in this chapter. Every researcher constructs his or her own paradigm in the research process and even though their construction is a personal process paradigms can be ordered in groups. According to Arbnor and Bjerke there are six main groups in which paradigms can be placed in social science methodology (2009). The groups are ordered on their perception of reality based on their ultimate reality presumptions. The following categories contain
information, paraphrasing and quotes from Arbnor and Bjerke (2009).

The first group of researchers perceives reality with an objective and rationalistic view. Their ultimate reality presumptions are based on a reality as concrete and conformable to law from a structure independent of the observer. They see humans as the stimulus receivers and responders who make decisions purely rational. The ambition for creating knowledge for this group of researchers is to reconstruct external reality.

The second group can still be labelled as objectivistic and rationalistic in nature but they see reality more as a concrete determining process. They see man as a social fact and their ambitions for creating knowledge are to explain entities in their regularity and breaks.

The third group of researchers perceives reality as mutually dependent fields of information in which a human operates as an information transformer. The world is perceived as an ever changing environment in which humans have to adapt constantly. Their ambition for creating knowledge is to reconstruct contexts in terms of information. Information is the key in this paradigm and they focus more on the contextual analysis of a phenomenon they study.

The fourth group perceives reality as a world of symbolic discourse in which they see humans as role-players and symbol-users. They see research results in their relativity and as fitting for the environment in which they are found. They aim to find patterns of social interaction in terms of symbolic discourse.

The fifth group perceives reality as a social construction and has a subjective and relativistic understanding of reality. They see humans as the active creator of symbols and aim for understanding of how social reality is constructed, maintained and defined.

The last group of researchers has a totally subjective and relativistic understanding of reality and they perceive it as the manifestation of human intentionality. Their view on humans is a view of an intentional conscience. Identical insight is what they aim for in research instead of an empirical one. Reality is created and controlled by humans and therefore totally individual in perception.
2.3 Methodological views

Every paradigm has a different approach to research, uses different methods and therefore will use different results. Arbnor and Bjerke recognise three major views or approaches to research which are very important to explain because of the huge implications that follow this choice. These views can be used on their own and to some extent they can be used in a combination of other views. For our research we have chosen the analytical and systems views. In this section, we would like to give an explanation for this choice.

![Image of three methodological views]

Figure 2 – The three methodological views

Source: Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997, pp. 44-46

2.3.1 Analytical view

As figure 2 shows us, the analytical view is a view that is used by the researchers who have an objectivistic and rationalistic view on reality. Reality consists of ‘objective and subjective facts which are seen as independent of each other and which can be explained by verifying or falsifying hypotheses’ (Bjerke, 2013a, p. 14). The analytical view solely looks at reality with the aim to explain phenomena. It perceives reality as a collection of facts in an environment that is objective and independent of the researcher. The researcher adopts the role of an observer to gain knowledge. It is his or her aim to observe and explain a phenomenon without influencing it with...
his or her own actions.

Explanation means to come up with models – deliberately simplified pictures of reality (Bjerke, 2013a, p. 11). There are two different ways to explain an observation with the use of a model. The analytical explanation uses causal model to point out the causal mechanisms of a system while the systems explanation uses finality models to explain a phenomenon (Bjerke, 2013a, p. 11). The way researchers gain new knowledge in the analytical view is by finding cause-effect relationships, explanations of objective phenomena, and by predicting.

Our choice for this view is based on the fact that we are observing a social phenomenon without the desire to influence it. We aim to bring clarity by explanation in an environment that exists of objective and subjective facts. In this thesis we want to observe and explain the phenomenon of relationships between leaders and followers. We believe that using the analytical view will help us to structure this research into the right direction and by doing so answer the main research question.

2.3.2 Systems view

The systems view is substantially different from the analytical view based on its perception of reality. The systems view shares some perception of reality with the analytical view but leaves more space for a subjective and relativistic perception of reality by its researchers. The systems view explains objective and subjective facts as a system instead of individual facts. Researchers who use this view can use both explanation and understanding to gain new knowledge.

The systems view does not observe facts in a cause and effect relationship. This view uses the labels “producer” and “product”. Where the analytical view is focused on finding stricter, unquestionable causal relations, the systems view accepts the possibility that a given product can be produced by different producers and that a given producer can produce different products (Arnbor & Bjerke, 2009). The systems view is based on finding the simplest producer setup possible.

Researchers who use the systems view can both try to explain facts and understand them. Understanding in the systems view is done by the use of metaphors to simplify the system. As indicated on the figure 3, the creation of our research questions and the planning of the study
preceded the collection of empirical data and its analysis. This analysis was followed by both explaining and understanding.

We found confirmation for the systems view in an article written by Stefan Klaussner where he stated that ‘real-life phenomena like leadership should be studied from a process perspective rather than studying simple correlations, the effects and relations of multiple influences should be analysed in a rich and time ordering way’ (2012, p. 420). We use the systems view when we explain social phenomena in the leadership and followership theory and look at them as systems instead of independent facts. This happens for example when we explain the process in which a leader and a follower build their relationship (see section 3.3). Here we look at the organisation as a system in which the leader and follower operate and where they are both part of the same system. In our acquisition of data we will use the systems view to see how interdependent phenomena affect each other in a socially constructed environment. This happens when we try to explain how certain relationships between a leader and a follower can influence other relationships between the same leader and a different follower (section 3.4).
2.4 Qualitative research

We found out early that our thesis would be located in the qualitative research area. Qualitative research is a ‘process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). We believe that our research question dictates a qualitative approach in a way that it asks for an insight in the inner experience of the participants and is focused on discovering rather than testing variables (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Conger states that ‘quantitative methods, by themselves, are insufficient to investigate thoroughly phenomena’ like leadership because of its extreme and enduring complexity, its dynamic character and its symbolic component (1998, p. 109). Quantitative research has focused on a ‘single level of analysis such as behavioural dimensions’ (Yukl, 1994, cited in Conger, 1998, p. 109) ‘and in turn has overlooked the influential role of intrapsychic or group or organisational or environmental factors’ (Conger, 1998, p. 109). Our research is merely focused on studying the interaction between individuals. This is something that is poorly managed by quantitative research. All these factors made us decide that qualitative research was the approach we wanted to take in this thesis.

Qualitative research is merely inductive (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Instead of creating forecasts out of theories (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009) the qualitative approach ‘develops concepts, insights, and understanding from patterns in the data’ (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 5). The right formulation of the research question is not as important as in a quantitative research because the researcher follows a flexible research design (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

For this thesis, we have used an inductive approach. We indeed tried to determine the elements of healthy and toxic relationships by conversing with leaders and followers who live these relationships on a daily basis. These conversations enabled us to shape the image of relationships perceived by these people. However, we do not affirm that the elements presented in this paper are the only ones that determine healthy and toxic relationships. We only present the conclusions our conversations led us to, which can be seen as the “white swans”. Seeing only white swans does not mean that black swans cannot be found.
2.5 Methodology and methods

According to Robson, methodology refers to ‘the theoretical, political and philosophical backgrounds to social research and their implications for research practice and for the use of particular methods’ (2011, cited in Petty, et al., 2012, p. 378). Now that we know what methodological view we are using in this thesis it is useful to see what methods are available that fit the methodological view and deliver the results that will help us answer the main research question. Methods can be described as the ‘techniques that are used to acquire and analyse data to create knowledge’ (Petty, et al., 2012, p. 378).

Petty, Thomson and Stew recognise five commonly used methodologies that exist in different variants and bring their own methods with them. Case study (1), grounded theory (2), ethnography (3), phenomenology (4), narrative (5). We decided that we will work closely with the grounded theory and the narrative methodology.

We are now going to explain our choice for these two methodologies and describe the methods that correspond with them. The first method we use is the grounded theory. The grounded theory was introduced in Glaser and Strauss’ influential book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). This theory is a ‘method for discovering theories, concepts, hypotheses, and propositions directly from data, rather than from a priori assumptions, other research, or existing theoretical frameworks’ (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 126). Petty, Thomson and Stew give a clear definition of this method: ‘[grounded theory] aims to generate a theory that explains a social process, action or interaction. The theory is constructed grounded from the data of participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study’ (2012, p. 378).

The method that fits this methodology is coding data. This is done by allocating labels to events, actions and approaches (Petty, et al., 2012, p. 378). We will use the theoretical sampling method which selects new cases to study according to their potential for helping to expand on or refine the concepts and theory that have already been developed (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 126).

The narrative methodology focuses on the detailed stories or life experiences of a single event or a series of events for a small number of individuals (Creswell, 2007, cited in Petty, et al., 2012, p. 380). The most common methods are the interview (1), the conversation (2), and the dialogue (3) (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). It is very important for us to pick the right method in order to stick with
the methodological view we chose. For our research we have decided to use the conversation as the main method to acquire data. We use the conversation to collect data of a subjective, but factive nature, which corresponds with our choice for the analytical and systems view. In the section 2.7 about the work process we will give an outline of how these conversations were conducted and with whom.

2.6 Structure of the thesis

After the last course of the programme we both devoted ourselves fulltime on working on the thesis. Writing a master thesis with two individuals who have totally different backgrounds and different native languages requires a lot of structure to keep the oversight and not lose the big picture. This resulted not only in a very structured work process but also in a very structured thesis. Our thesis can be divided into two major parts: the theoretical framework and the empirical data.

The theoretical framework is a construction on existing secondary data. It is a review of the literature we went through and sums up the main ideas we thought were interesting for our purpose. In this part we have also created some new knowledge, when we thought the literature could be updated and completed. It is composed of an investigation of relationship in general and then a focus on healthy and toxic relationships. This part is followed by the empirical data, which is the analysis and lessons we retained from the conversations we had with both leaders and followers. The results of these two parts combined enable us to answer to the major research question.

![Diagram](Image)

**Figure 4 – Overview of thesis structure**

Source: authors’ figure
2.7 Work process

In our work process we used primary and secondary data to create new knowledge. This called for a structured way of processing to come up with the right answer for the research question. Therefore we used a guideline described by Taylor and Bogdan in their book, ‘Introduction to Qualitative Research methods’ (1984). This guide gives direction to qualitative researchers and helps them to draw the right conclusions from their data.

The first thing we did was to write a theoretical framework that would describe the context of the subject and give a summary of the existing data. Glaser and Strauss propose two major strategies for developing grounded theory: the constant comparative method (1) and the theoretical sampling method (2), from which we chose the second method (1967, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 126). In the theoretical sampling method, the researcher ‘selects new cases to study according to their potential for helping to expand on or refine the concepts and theory that have already been developed’ (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 126). The theoretical framework can be seen as the summary of theories that have already been developed and as the descriptive context in which our research fits.

2.7.1 Conversations

In section 2.5 we gave an explanation for our choice for the conversation as the main method of acquiring data. We approached leaders and followers with the request to have a conversation about their view on relationships between leaders and followers.

As we did not want our results to be biased we conversed with as many leaders as followers, to wit six of each. There is no specific reason for our choice for these twelve people, except that we were convinced each of them had a particular relationship with their leader or followers our research could benefit from. We did not want to limit ourselves to any specific field; yet, in practice, we had a greater accessibility to the business field. The leaders we talked to are therefore only from the business field whereas three followers come from other fields, which are sport, high school and PhD studies. Even in the business domain, the professionals come from very different sectors, from the industry of applications for mobile to the construction industry to the sealing sector.
By using data coming from so different areas, we aim to determine relationships in general, without a focus on a specific field. We believe that relationships between a leader and a follower are in essence alike and we want to define the core of these relationships, which does not defer according to fields.

During the conversations we followed a standard framework to create structure in our work process. This framework can be found in the appendices A & B. We carried out most of the conversations face-to-face or via Skype. One conversation was conducted by phone. We recorded most of the conversations and took some notes. Then we created one Word document for each conversation, with the main concepts and ideas that have been discussed. We also wrote down some quotes of the conversations to be as neutral as possible with the data and let them speak for themselves.

In order to increase transparency on our work process we would like to reveal a list of leaders and followers with whom we had conversations. Some people have asked to remain anonymous, so their names have been modified. These people’s names are followed by an asterisk in the following list:

Leaders

- Anders Broberg
  – Director Sales & Marketing – Trelleborg – Sealing sector, Kalmar, Sweden

- Danny Dressler
  – CEO – LifeSymb, Kalmar, Sweden

- Eva-Marie Hagström
  – CEO – Mats Jonasson Målerås, Målerås, Sweden

- Corry Hulleman
  – Human Resources Manager, Payroll administration – Construction sector, The Netherlands

- Bruce Uhler

- Margreet van den Berg

– Financial Director – Offshore construction sector, The Netherlands

**Followers**

- Sam Carlsson*
  - Doctor of Philosophy student – Kalmar, Sweden

- Marion Faure*
  - Swimmer in a club and lifeguard as a summer job, France

- Michel Fontaine*
  - Principal educational adviser in a high school and treasurer in a sport association’s board, Saint-Brieuc, France

*Role of follower: (1) with the director of the school, (2) with the head of the association*

*Role of leader: with the supervisors of the school*

- Mary de Jong*
  - Works at a media editor, The Netherlands

- Lee Park*
  - Role of follower in a company, Vietnam

- René Ranger
  - Intern in the department of Consulting & Process Development – Fujitsu Technology Solutions, Germany
2.7.2 Analysing data

The six steps of the analysis of data described in this part have been based on Taylor and Bogdan’s research *(Introduction to qualitative research methods*, 1984).

The first step after data collection in Taylor and Bogdan’s guide is to ‘read and reread your data’ (1984, p. 130). By the time the researcher is ready to start analysing his or her data he or she should know the data inside and out.

The second step is to keep track of themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas. It is important to record ‘any important idea’, any interpretations that the researcher can have while reading through their data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 131).

In the third step the researcher looks for emerging themes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 131). This is done by meticulously analysis of the data with a view that is as objective as possible. It can be certain words of sentences that are recurring and therefore of particular importance. We did this by going through the conversations together to brainstorm and recall what we had just heard. It turned out to be a helpful method to find emerging themes in the data.

The fourth step is to construct typologies which aim to simplify data and to identify specific themes in the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 182).

The fifth step is to develop concepts and theoretical propositions. It enables the researcher to move ‘from description to interpretation and theory’ (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 133). We did this after reading the existing literature. We used secondary data to see what propositions we could use for our research.

Read the literature is the sixth step in this guide (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 135). This is something we have done fairly early in the process of writing this thesis. The danger of doing this so early in the process is that we might have developed a biased view on the outcomes of the conversations. According to Glaser and Strauss, qualitative researchers should ‘begin their studies with minimal commitment to a priori assumptions and theory’ (1967, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 135). The benefit we reaped from knowing our literature early in the process was that we were able to give direction by slightly changing the research questions in order to find a research area that was highly relevant.
2.7.3 Coding

Coding means ‘deriving and developing concepts from data’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 65). Researchers take the raw data and raise it to a conceptual level. Corbin and Strauss emphasise on the fact that coding is more than just paraphrasing and noting concepts (2008, p. 65). They compare coding to mining because it shows similarities with a miner, digging beneath the surface to discover hidden truth. We will explain a few analytical tools that we have used in the coding of our own data. These analytical tools are based on and described in the chapter 4 (Strategies for Qualitative Data Analysis) of Corbin and Strauss’ book (Basics of Qualitative Research, 2008).

2.7.3.1 Questioning

‘The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The true dangerous thing is asking the wrong question.’ – Peter F. Drucker

This quote from Peter Drucker reveals the importance behind this analytic tool. Questioning is done throughout the entire process of analysis. Asking questions is done to develop a range of possible answers. We have done this while going over the data and zooming in on part that had a certain indistinctness or ambiguity inside it. By doing this we had the feeling of probing deeper into the data and becoming more familiar with it.

2.7.3.2 Comparisons

Making comparisons in the data can be done in the form of adding a metaphor. This can be done on moments when the researcher feels stuck in a situation and in need of clarification. It is also possible to compare ‘incident with incident in order to classify data’ (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 73). In this case the researcher groups incidents that are ‘conceptually similar’, which allows him or her ‘to differentiate one category/theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to that category/theme’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73). We used this tool on a regular basis while analysing the data. We used metaphors to get a better explanation of the phenomenon described.

2.7.3.3 Drawing upon personal experience

Researchers can draw upon their personal experiences ‘to obtain insight into what [the] participants are describing’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 80). This analytic tool was particularly helpful for our data analysis because we create knowledge in an environment that covers multiple
cultural backgrounds.
III. “Relationships”: a theoretical investigation

3.1 Literature review of leadership as a social exchange

In this chapter we will first be reviewing the existing literature about leader- and followership and the relation in between these two parties. This will function as the theoretical foundation from which we will derive our propositions. In order to understand the true nature of relationships we need to shape a view of leader- and followership first.

3.1.1 Leadership as a social interaction

Leadership is a phenomenon of social interaction that contains multiple levels of phenomena in it (Conger, 1998, p. 109). These multiple levels of social interaction make it so hard to grasp and to catch in clear definitions. We all have our own thoughts and personal interpretation of what leadership means for us personally. This causes misunderstanding of the meaning and ambiguity in interpretation of what we understand when we talk about leadership. Since leadership consists entirely in a socially enacted environment it has long been taken for granted and regarded as unfit for scientific research. Leadership as a subject for scientific research is a relatively new phenomenon that did not start until the twentieth century (Yukl, 2013, p. 19). All this scientific research has brought us more than 850 definitions of what leadership exactly is (Bennis & Nanus, 2003, p. 4).

It is clear that the view on leadership has changed drastically through the years. Avolio, Walumbwa and Weber describe this change of perspective in the clearest way possible:

Leadership is no longer simply described as an individual characteristic of difference, but rather is depicted in various models as dyadic, shared, relational, strategic, global, and a complex social dynamic (Avolio, et al., 2009, pp. 422-423)

Leadership definitions are often based on the traits, merits, behaviour, influence and communication that are brought to the social interaction by the leader. We believe that leadership has to be studied in its social context or as Yukl states it: ‘as a social process or pattern of relationships’ (2013, p. 19). This is a view that is backed by recent researchers who conceptualise leadership in its social interaction (e.g., Klaussner, 2012; Avolio, et al., 2009).
This approach shifts the focus away from the leader and his influence towards the influence of both the leader and the follower. Yukl calls this a ‘shared influence process’ where the person with the ‘primary responsibility to perform the specialised leadership role is designated as the “leader”’ (2013, p. 19). This theory implies that a person can be active in both roles at the same time.

### 3.1.2 Follower empowerment

The start of follower empowerment can be found in the early 1980’s where the advent of a global economy, advancing technology and changes in the labour force caused the delegation of power from the leaders into lower levels in the organisation (Baker, 2007, p. 52). This process has been amplified ever since. Followers are no longer expected to simply follow orders but to think for themselves and create a solid opinion.

Ela Bhatt, the founder of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), goes even further when she states that ‘a leader is someone who helps others lead’ (Wiseman & McKeown, 2010, p. 167). The ultimate role of a leader is not only to lead the others, but also to empower them and leverage all capability of the team ‘with the right kind of leadership’ (Wiseman & McKeown, 2010, p. 16). This idea adheres to the logic of multiplication of talents.

The developments of follower empowerment are picked up by researchers and form the basis of the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The main concept of this theory is that ‘effective leadership processes occur when leaders and followers are able to develop mature relationships (partnerships) and thus gain access to the many benefits these relationships bring’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991, cited in Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 225). This theory is rooted in the Vertical Dyad Linkage theory (Dansereau, et al., 1975) that approaches leadership as an ‘exchange relationship that develops within the vertical dyad over time during role making activities’ (1975, p. 46).

We see this as a very interesting development and a starting point for our own research. We believe that the relationship between a leader and a follower reveals interesting truths about the behaviour of the leader and the follower and the interpretation of this behaviour.
3.2 Why are relationships important?

As relationships become more and more products of a reciprocal influence it must be a rich source of information. Every relationship is unique but we believe that there are certain core values that are universal and are indicators that reveal crucial truths about behaviour and the interpretation of it.

Our context of studying relationships is the organisation. The definition of an ‘organisation’ (2014) is stated as follows: ‘an organised group of people with a particular purpose’. This particular purpose is to reach a shared goal, namely their mission statement. This can be winning the super-bowl, providing excellent patient care or selling insurance. Weick therefore states that an organisation can be seen as a collection of ‘people who are trying to make sense of what is happening around them’ (2001, p. 5). This implies that the organisation benefits from a shared understanding among its people. It can operate more effectively once every contributor has the same understanding of what the meaning of the goal is and what it takes to achieve that goal.

A high level of commitment in an organisation translates itself into higher performance effectiveness because of the constructive behaviour towards the organisation that comes with it (Simosi & Xenikou, 2010, p. 1598). Meyer and Allen describe commitment in the business field as ‘a psychological state which characterises the employee’s relationship with the organisation and has implications for the decision to continue membership in the organisation’ (1991, cited in Simosi & Xenikou, 2010, p. 1598).

The process of making sense out of a given situation and to create a common goal is done in a process of social interaction. Stryker and Vryan define this process as ‘the reciprocal influence of persons taking each other into account as they act’ (2003, cited in Klaussner, 2012, p. 419). Leaders and followers interact with each other and become exposed to social influence (Oc & Bashshur, 2013, p. 922).

Relationships between followers and transformational leaders – leaders who identify the need for a change in a group and execute it ‘with the commitment of the members of the group’ (‘Transformational leadership’, 2014) – are ‘based on personal understanding rather than on formal rules and organisational regulations’ (Bass 1985, cited in Simosi & Xenikou, 2010, p. 1600). This explains why relationships can be regarded as the basis for a strong commitment in
the organisation.

Relationships between a leader and a follower are shaped by their social interactions (Figure 1). First, one of the actors perceives the behaviour of the other and tries to make sense of it by using their ‘individual expectations’ (Klaussner, 2012, p. 419). This stage is the “interpretation” of the behaviour of the other. Then the given actor responds to the perceived behaviour by selecting their ‘own behaviour in response to perceived behaviour’ (Klaussner, 2012, p. 419). This is the “selection” stage. Finally the other actor interprets this behaviour and selects their own exactly the same way. This behaviour building constitutes the social interaction between a leader and a follower.

A leader and a follower who have a strong relationship are therefore more inclined to understand each other faster and more precisely than those who do not have such a relationship. Strong relationships are not a luxury or a bonus for the people involved but a necessary tool to provide the required understanding and the commitment that results from it.

3.3 A close-up view of a relationship

Relationships are the products of continuous social interaction. Therefore they should be regarded as dynamic processes instead of static end products. Relationships have a life-cycle with a starting point and a path that leads to maturity. Graen & Uhl-Bien define three major stages in
every relationship (1995). We would like to take a closer look at these three stages to begin to answer our minor research question, “how is a good relationship created, maintained and prevented from becoming toxic?”

Blau makes a definite distinction between a social exchange and an economical exchange by stating that a social exchange engenders ‘feelings of personal obligation, gratitude, and trust’ while these feelings are not present in the economical exchange (1964, p. 64 cited in Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, p. 523). Similarly, Bass and Riggio make a distinction between transformational or transactional leadership (2006). It is important to see that Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) can be both transformational and transactional at the same time. The exchange starts out as a ‘material exchange’ and evolves into a ‘social exchange’ (e.g., trust, support or consideration) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 238). A new, underdeveloped relationship is based on the transaction of goods and other material compensation. A mature relationship is based on the transaction of psychological benefits and favours instead of material goods. The economical/material exchange is defined as a ‘lower-quality LMX relationship’ and characterised by ‘unidirectional downward influence, economic behaviour exchange, formal role-refined relations and loosely couples goals’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991, p. 232), while the social exchange is labelled as a ‘high-quality exchange’.

High-quality LMX relationships bring ‘very positive outcomes for leaders, followers, work units and the organisation in general’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229). They are indeed the cause of a healthier relationship within an organisation. Furthermore, when such ‘high-quality social exchange relationships’ are developed and maintained they trigger ‘effective leadership processes’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229). These processes can for instance be achieved when a leader manages to get more from their team without having more resources. The followers can be motivated, involved, fascinated by the relationship they have with their leader and achieve a higher sense of commitment and become more productive. A leader creating such a relationship is called a Multiplier by Wiseman and McKeown (2010). Taking the LMX theory into account might reveal some crucial truths about the relationship between a leader and a follower. This can help us to answer the first part of the major research question of this research namely how to build and maintain a healthy relationship between a leader and a follower.

Sahlins describes the stages of social exchange into greater detail and calls them the three
‘primary dimensions of reciprocity’ (1972, pp. 185-230). The descriptions of the following dimensions are based on the descriptions used by Sparrowe and Liden (1997, p. 524).

**Equivalence** – This specifies the degree in which the two partners reciprocate the original stimulus. A low equivalence refers to a reciprocation that is not equal with the original action, while a high equivalence refers to a reciprocation that is equal or comparable to the original.

**Immediacy** – This specifies the time span in which the reciprocation takes place. A low immediacy reflects reciprocation at some point in the future while a high immediacy reflects an instant or quick reciprocation.

**Interest** – This reflects the degree of self-interest of the exchange partner ranging from ‘unbridled self-interest, through mutual interest, to interest and concern for the other’ (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, p. 524).

These three dimensions will function as the main indicators in our analysis to give a better explanation of the stages that a relationship can go through.

### 3.3.1 The Stranger phase

Leader – follower relationships start out as a formal, contractual interaction or exchange. This first phase of the relationship is called the ‘Stranger phase’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 230). In this stage both sides aim to fulfil the contractual obligations towards the other. All social interaction in this phase is on a contractual basis and in a formal setting. The leader either rewards or disciplines the follower and receives the follower’s enactment on a mutually agreed basis (Bass, 1997).

In the stranger phase we talk about a form of negative reciprocity. The follower does not do anything more than what is asked of him or her. According to Bass and Riggio there is ‘no identification with the organisation, its vision, or its mission’ (2006, p. 103). The only stimulus for the follower to comply with the requests that the leader makes is the economic reward he or she gains from it. Besides satisfaction of personal interests there is no stimulus to react to a request from the leader. Followers are not committed to the organisation and do not consider the good of the group as a factor of importance. The immediacy of reciprocation is high which means
the follower replies instantly, or at least very quickly, to a request. The equivalence of reciprocation is high which implies that the nature of reciprocation is equal or comparable to the original request.

Table 1 – Stranger phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LMX Level</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalence</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Self-interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental Influence</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership based on</td>
<td>Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followership based on</td>
<td>Fear + Willingness to make good impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary role of leader</td>
<td>Supervisor/manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary role of follower</td>
<td>Conformist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: authors’ table

This first phase can be seen as a crucial moment that has a great impact on the development of the relationship. The exchange between a leader and a follower is very unique. There are no two development processes identical although they show similarities.

There are relationships that never go beyond the stranger phase. The social interaction between leader and follower never surpasses the point of an economical exchange. However, the relationships that develop further come into the so called ‘Acquaintance phase’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 230).

3.3.2 The Acquaintance phase

In the acquaintance phase both the leader and the follower are adapting into a role that they play in the social exchange. During this stage there are first signs of behaviour that are not contractual. The core values for a strong relationship are not yet fully developed in this stage.

Both leader and follower share more information on a professional level and there might also be
some sharing of personal information. The time span of reciprocation increases slowly as there is a higher level of trust in the relationship.

Table 2 – Acquaintance phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquaintance Phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LMX Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership based on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followership based on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More trust to improve the well-being of the follower and thus get a higher contribution from them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to make good impression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: authors’ table

The acquaintance phase is a phase of testing that is critical because not every relationship will grow into a mature one. There are relationships that get stuck in this acquaintance phase and never see a mature phase. They simply fall back into the stranger phase (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 232).

3.3.3 The Maturity phase

The maturity phase of a relationship is the result of investments that are made by both leaders and followers. The mature stage is a result of a successful exchange record. Bass and Riggio describe this phase as follows:

‘There is a sense of purpose and feeling of family. Commitments are long term. Mutual interests are shared, along with a sense of shared fates and interdependence of leaders and followers’ (2006, p. 103).

Both leader and follower go beyond their job description in this phase. They can both count on each other for loyalty and support. The relationships are based on ‘higher degrees of mutual trust, respect, and obligation’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 232). Leader and follower are no more self-interested but are more focus on mutual interests. The exchange is no longer founded on an economic basis but on a social one. There is room for feedback and constructive criticism.
As a consequence followers are engaged ‘in more responsible activities that they otherwise would’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 232). The relationship is not hierarchical anymore; individuals behave instead ‘more like peers than superior-subordinate’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 233). The influence is not downward but reciprocal, which means that ‘the leadership role can rotate between partners’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 233). The follower is likely to make some extra efforts for the organisation. They would like to take ‘personal initiative’ or to exercise ‘personal leadership’ within the unit for instance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 233). The follower takes more risks because he or she is more confident. According to Graen and Uhl-Bien the relationship is also based on ‘mutual trust, respect and obligation and internalisation of common goals’ (p. 233).

Table 3 – Maturity phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LMX Level</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation</td>
<td>Generalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalence</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Concern for other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental Influence</td>
<td>Almost unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership based on</td>
<td>Trust, respect and obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followership based on</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary role of leader</td>
<td>Coach/ Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary role of follower</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: authors’ table

3.3.4 The “toxic maturity” phase

The three stages of the leader-member exchange, as described above, reflect the development of a healthy relationship. However, some relationships never reach the maturity phase and fall back into the stranger face. These relationships that find themselves in the stranger phase after a failed attempt to go through the acquaintance phase are far different than the relationships that find themselves in the stranger phase for the first time. We decided to call the stage of these relationships the “toxic maturity”.

The explanation of how a mature relationship can be toxic is beyond the scope of the LMX theory. This theory looks at the development of a relationship towards a healthy relationship based on ‘respect, trust, and obligation’ (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 237), high incremental influence, and commitment. We believe that this view is too narrow and that we need to have a brief look at a relationship that does not develop according to the LMX rules.

Both the leader and the follower experience a high level of uncertainty in the stranger phase. This level of uncertainty will gradually decrease as they have a continuous social interaction. This happens when the same behaviour is interpreted in a consistent way and the other responds in a consistent way to this behaviour. Both partners adjust to each other, adapt their expectations and stabilise their behaviour.

Seen from follower’s point of view, when leader behaviour is consistent, he or she expects the same behaviour in future interaction (Klaussner, 2012, p. 424). This is regardless of the nature of this behaviour. A follower who is being threatened and intimidated over and over again will expect this behaviour in the future and adapt to this. Seen from the leader’s point of view, the same expectation is being formed. A leader who regards a follower according to McGregor’s theory X (1960) will use force to gain the follower’s compliance. This is because he or she had stabilised the expectation that this is the only way to execute leadership (Klaussner, 2012, p. 432).

A leader and a follower who find themselves in such a situation have established a state of maturity. Not the kind of maturity that is described in the LMX theory but a toxic maturity. They both know what to expect and have eliminated every form of uncertainty in the relationship. They have both stabilised their actions and restricted their behaviour to certain ‘well-proven choices’ (Klaussner, 2012, p. 425). In chapter 4 we will get a look into this toxic relationships and the outcome of it.

3.4 A network of relationships

Most relationships between a leader and a follower are built in a social environment where multiple leaders and followers interact on a daily basis. The traditional view, also referred to as Average Leadership Style (ALS), only focused on the individual differences among supervisors
and had never thought of the possibility that one leader could develop different relationships with different individuals (Dansereau, 1995, p. 481). In the early 1970’s, Fred Dansereau was the first researcher who attempted to reveal that a single leader can create different relationships with different individuals (1973). The findings of this research revealed that one leader can have different relationships with different followers in the same group.

Two years after this research, Dansereau created a clear distinction between “trusted assistants” (in-group members) and “hired hands” (out-group members) (Dansereau, et al., 1975, p. 74). This is regarded as the basis for the Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) approach. This approach clearly states that leaders discriminate among individuals when it comes to the development of relationships. Leaders compare members relatively to one another and place members in groups of in-group members or out-group members. However, this theory turned out to fail the empirical tests (Nachman, et al., 1983). It turned out to be impossible to prove that leaders formed groups among members because the researchers approached the issue unilaterally from the perspective of the leader. This made it impossible to explain the reason behind the low quality relationship. This led to the development of the individual leadership approach (ILD).

This new approach (ILD) made it possible to show differences between the in-group versus the out-group (VDL) in a purely dyadic perspective (Dansereau, et al., 1984). The unique aspect of this approach is that it conceptualises followers as unique individuals instead of members assigned to a formal group (Dansereau, 1995, p. 484). The same can be said about the position of the leader. This theory is a sharp distinction from the average leadership style approach. Leader and follower create a unique relationship that is independent from the relationship between the leader and the other follower. Leadership becomes a dyadic interpersonal process where the dyads are independent (Dansereau, 1995, p. 482). The possibility to belong to the in-group and thus become an active follower is no longer dependent on the assignment to a certain group but is solely dependent on the influence of two actors, a leader and a follower.

The expansion of this dyadic partnership to the network level is an interesting issue that has caused a lot of disagreement in the academic field. The real question is “what are the sources that cause differentiation between individual leader-member dyads”. The different opinions in this area can be split up in two main camps. (1) The researchers who see the individual relationships as interdependent dyadic relationships (Graen & Scandura, 1987) or as network assemblies
(Scandura, 1995, cited in Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). (2) The researchers who refuse to recognise any interdependency between the independent relationships (Dansereau, 1995). We see this question as highly relevant for our research because we believe that, in order to answer our minor research question “how is a healthy relationship created, maintained and prevented from becoming toxic?”, we need to understand what forces influence the relationship and how to cope with them.

In more recent work researchers argue that the LMX relationship between leader and member is the product of both leader and member characteristics as well as the context in which the relationship exists (Zagenczyk, et al., 2013, pp. 1-2). Scandura makes a case for the interdependency of leader-member relationships in his study for organisational justice (1999). Both the leader and the follower will use benchmarking to compare their exchange relationship to similar exchanges in order to determine whether the return they get for their input can be regarded as ‘fair’ or ‘unfair’. This is an ongoing process that can be seen as an investment-return cycle (Scandura, 1999, p. 27). Relationship development is an important function of these investment-return cycles because the relationship will only develop into a high quality leader-member exchange when both parties regard the exchange as reasonably, equitable and fair (Graen & Scandura, 1987 cited in Scandura, 1999, p. 27). This can be explained by the nature of human behaviour. ‘When an obligation is created through supportive behaviours of another party,
individuals form a desire to reciprocate’ (Gouldner, 1960 cited in Erdogan & Liden, 2006, p. 3). This implies that mutual obligation and trust are created through fairness, which in turn are related to high quality LMX (Erdogan & Liden, 2006, p. 3).

These investment-cycles start as soon as the relationship starts. In the stranger phase the leader and the follower will mostly focused on distributive justice while the focus shifts more towards procedural justice once the relationship moves into the maturity phase (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Scandura, 1999).

In the part of this research where we give an outline of a good/bad relationship we will give examples of how a perception of justice/injustice regarding the relationship might affect the outcome of this relationship. The importance of organisational justice has long been underestimated and out of scope from major research projects. We believe that there is a treasure of information to be revealed in these studies. We also realise that a thorough investigation of this subject is beyond the scope of our research. We will regard organisational justice as an important factor in our research but do not want to shift our focus away from our major research question.

3.5 How are relationships built?

The development of the relationship between a leader and a follower is a very personal process. Even though the time span and the degree to which relationships develop can differ there are a few characteristics of this process that can help us to get a better overview of this process.

As we know every relationship starts out on the stranger phase. We try to get behind the reason that causes strangers to develop their relationship together and eventually become partners in a mature relationship. Leadership research points out that the fact that influence on the relationship can be found in the fact that leadership is a social process.

The individual subjective cognitive structures (expectations) facilitate social interaction and are influenced by the interaction at the same time. Interaction on the dyadic level and expectations on the individual level are in permanent reciprocity and cannot be studied separately to understand the interaction process. (Klaussner, 2012, p. 420)

This implies that expectations can be seen as the major factor that influences the social interaction in the relationship. Furthermore, leadership research points to the following three
factors that shape the expectations of both the leader and the follower: Implicit leadership/followership theories (I), Previous experiences (II), Perceived organisational context (III) (Klaussner, 2012, p. 421).

3.5.1 Implicit leadership/followership theories

Followers hold individual beliefs about how leaders behave and what is expected of them (Den Hartog, et al., 1999, p. 226). ‘Using an information processing perspective, implicit theories are cognitive frameworks or categorisation systems that people use during information processing to encode, process and recall specific events and behaviour’ (Shaw, 1990, cited in Den Hartog, et al., 1999, p. 226).

Followers use the implicit leadership theories (ILT) to make an interpretation of the leader’s behaviour. It guides their sense making towards an acceptable image of the leader. This framework is shaped from early childhood interaction and experiences (Hunt, et al., 1990, p. 52). Leadership researchers found that the ILT does not just provide expectations for followers but also for leaders (Lord & Maher, 1991). Leaders create expectations based on interpretation of behaviour and characteristics. This process of relationship development starts even before the professional relationship itself starts. Expectations are created based on information from resumes, job interviews, company websites, social network or publicly available news about the follower or leader.

3.5.2 Previous leadership/followership experience

Social interaction creates certain memories in the life of a person which are determinant in the development of future relationships. The difference with the implicit leadership theory is that here we look at personal experience while ILT shape the frame of references by comparing the situation to ideal and general concepts (Klaussner, 2012, pp. 421-422).

Relationships shape a certain code of behaviour that can be used as a reference to guide cognitive and emotional processes in a new relationship (Ritter & Lord, 2007, p. 1683). Besides certain traits and characteristics individuals also transfer entire behavioural structures and expectations into new relationships. This can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy. The follower who expects a certain kind of behaviour might act to defend him- or herself against this kind of behaviour and
by doing so actually causes the counterpart to start the behaviour that he or she tried to escape from in the first place (Klaussner, 2012, p. 422). This does not just apply to the follower. Leaders also have their expectations shaped by experience with follower interaction and can even shape expectations for follower based on his or her own experience as a follower.

3.5.3 Perceived organisational context

Leaders and followers adopt a role to play in an organisational context. This context causes certain expectations from both sides. People who operate in the social context of an organisation have a sense of belongingness that forces them into the adoption of a role that is accepted in the organisation. The organisation consists of its own language, hierarchy, organisational identity, values and laws. This shapes certain expectations for both leaders and followers. People have different expectations of how they are going to be treated by leaders when they start working in the army and when they start working for a graphical designer.
3.5.4 Trust

The three factors we mentioned above have a very strong impact on the relationship during the stranger phase and have their influence reduced once the relationship reaches the acquaintance phase. The reason behind this is that the leader and the follower start to create their own history of social interaction that can overwrite the implicit leader- and followership theories that are brought into the process. A developing relationship simultaneously develops a lower level of uncertainty while trust between the leader and the follower grows. Transactional trust is the assurance that behaviour will be reciprocated according to expectations and is consistent with previous experiences (Klaussner, 2012, p. 422). The reason for this assurance is the built-up history of social and economic exchanges that shaped expectations and lowered uncertainty. In
Figure 8 it is made clear that stability in the relationship is built over time. Trust is being matured in an environment that is relatively stable. Both the leader and the follower know what to expect from the other part.

![Diagram of stabilising expectations on individual and interaction level]

**Figure 8 – Stabilising of expectations on an individual and interaction level**

Source: Klaussner, 2012, p. 426

In this part of our research we only want to look at trust with a neutral point of view. In the following chapter we will try to reveal the causes and consequences of trust/mistrust and of the other components of healthy and toxic relationships.
IV. The good, the bad and the ugly

Up until this point we have talked about relationships from a neutral perspective. We have described them as objective technical phenomena. Before we go to the data analysis we think it is necessary to study in depth ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in a relationship so we can begin to answer the major research question, ‘by what means can a healthy relationship be built between a manager/executive and a follower, enabling the manager to become a leader by releasing all the available talents of the team members?’

Defining healthy and toxic relationships as accurately as possible indeed gives to the reader a good understanding of the reality and a clear vision on the objective to attain and to the different obstacles to avoid.

The chapter 5 should be seen as a continuity of this one, as it will aim to confirm or deny the results of this chapter with some empirical data. The following descriptions of toxic and healthy relationships focus mainly on their features and outcomes.

4.1 What does a toxic relationship look like?

In order to explain a healthy relationship, we believe that it is important to first define what a ‘bad’ relationship looks like. In this section, we will try to describe what we consider as toxic relationships and the possible outcomes of these relationships in case leader and follower are not able to avoid them. At the end of the section, we will study the various sources of such relationships.

As we focus on the relationship between leader and follower in this research we will not limit ourselves to the leader as the source of toxic behaviour. Our approach to toxic relationships is based on the “toxic triangle” theory as introduced by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007). The authors recognise three domains as possible sources of destructive leadership – the leader, the follower and the environment in which they operate. Their theory will be used to describe relationship with toxins before we focus on the outcomes.
4.1.1 What is a toxic relationship?

In order to describe a toxic relationship, it is first needed to have a common understanding about the term “toxicity”. It is not accurate to speak about “toxic” or “non toxic” people. According to Bourdoux and Delabelle, every person and therefore every leader or follower has some toxicity in him or her; the authors therefore prefer to use the expression people ‘with toxins’ (2013, p. 3). The conclusion of their work is that a leader cannot avoid having a part – although slight – of toxicity. This can be revealed through charisma, narcissism, manipulation, a tendency to do things only for one’s interests and not for those of the rest of the group, etc. (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013). According to the authors, the leader has therefore to find the ‘right well-balance of toxicity’ to be able to truly lead (2013).

A toxic relationship is one that does not allow the followers to fully express their potential. Followers can indeed experience a relationship with their leader where they feel their contribution to the organisation is not very high and their talents is not as much used as it could. The leader sometimes does not let enough space for his or her followers to grow. This is typically what happens when a manager places people into boxes on the organisation chart and thus diminishes their real genius and prevent them to grow (Wiseman & McKeown, 2010, p. 39). The welfare of the followers can then decrease quickly because their job is not adapted to their capacities and needs and they feel they do not have the possibility to bring as much knowledge and know-how to the table as they could.

Leaders, by virtue of their power, have an essential role in the early take-off process of the relationship. The next part aims to describe the role played by the first element of the “toxic triangle” of Padilla et al.

4.1.2 What makes leaders partly responsible for toxic relationships?

According to Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser, destructive leaders have some common characteristics (2007, pp. 180-182). Three features have a real impact on the relationship between a leader and a follower: ‘charisma, personalised use of power [and] narcissism’ (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 180). These three elements are going to be described more thoroughly in the following paragraphs.

4.1.2.1 Charisma

Charisma is usually not seen as a possible toxin but more as a quality. A charismatic person is
often perceived as someone with a strong personality, able to convince people around them and to get things moving. Yet according to Howell and Avolio, ‘the risks involved in charismatic leadership are at least as large as the promises’ (1992, cited in Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 180). Yukl goes in the same direction when he observes that charismatic leaders sometimes favour their own interests. They are depicted as people exaggerating their successes, blaming others for their mistakes and trying to silence criticism and dissidence (Yukl, 1999, p. 296).

Charismatic leaders have a clear vision and ‘exceptional rhetorical skills’, enabling the ones among them with too much toxins to take advantage of it to promote themselves (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 181). To use a scientific expression one may say that charisma is a necessary condition to toxicity. If a leader is destructive he or she is charismatic but not all charismatic leaders are destructive (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 180).

**4.1.2.2 Personalised need for power**

The reasons of the need for power distinguish leaders with few toxins and leaders with many. Leaders with tendency to be good for the people around them have a socialised need for power. They are in a leading position to help the others in pro-social causes (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 181). Conversely, destructive leaders have a personalised need for power. They use their power for their own purpose and ‘to the detriment of their subordinates and organisations’ (House & Aditya, 1997, cited in Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 181). By doing so, they damage the relationships with the others and eventually deteriorate the organisation in general.

**4.1.2.3 Narcissism**

This third feature found in leaders with toxins is very linked with the two first discussed above. Narcissist leaders damage the relationship with the others by seeking all the attention and ignoring the ‘other’s viewpoints or welfare’ (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, cited in Padilla, et al. 2007, p. 181). They abuse their power by not letting the others express any diverging opinions. The followers have to obey without asking questions (O’Connor et al., 1995, cited in Padilla, et al. 2007, p. 181). Narcissism is positively related with fear, which can lead to perception of threat (Riskind, et al., 1992, cited in O’Connor, et al., 1995, p. 533). We will see in the third part of this section that the environment, such as a perceived threat, is another source of toxic relationships.

The role of followers in toxic relationships has been investigated at a much lesser extent than the
one of the leader (Lowe & Reckers, 2012, p. 182). However, their role in the building and maintenance of a detrimental relationship should not be underestimated. The following part tackles the importance of the followers in the creation of a toxic relationship.

4.1.3 What kind of followers intensifies toxic relationships?

A follower confronted to a leader with toxins has a role to play in the creation of the relationship. He or she has the choice either to stand up and oppose the leader, by expressing disagreement and proposing alternatives or to keep quiet and to obey. Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser describe with their theory of the “toxic triangle” two types of followers who are likely to bring toxins within the relationship with their leader: conformers and colluders (2007, p. 183). The first kind follows the leader because they are feared of the consequences of ‘not going along’ (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 183). They are motivated by self-interest and see compliance to the leader as a means to avoid to get trouble with him or her. Lowe and Reckers identified frustration and fear as two features likely to result in compliance with unethical behaviour of the leader (2012, p. 183). Similarly, they stated that individuals with low level of anger are likely to conform and to accept an unethical attitude of a leader (2012, p. 183). Using the framework of Graen and Uhl-Bien we believe that this kind of followers can only develop stranger phase relationship with a leader. Indeed, the relationship based on fear does not allow the leader and follower to get closer as they do in the maturity phase. There is no mutual trust and the influence is only downward and not reciprocal.

The colluders are more involved in the process of followership. They believe in the cause of their leader and have the same vision of the world (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 183). They are ambitious and see compliance as a means to get promoted. They can ‘set ethics aside and be complicit in fraud’ to satisfy their own interest (Lowe & Reckers, 2012, p. 183). Even though they are self-interested, they are more likely to have a relationship with their leader in the maturity phase because they are in accordance with him or her and ‘join in the destruction’ (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 183). The relation can therefore be mature in the sense that colluders actively help the leader to achieve their goals and can be close to the leader but will remain toxic because of the absence of mutual interest. By sharing the same world views as the leader, colluders reinforce the leader in their position. They can thus render the relationship even more toxic.
A “good” leader can also become more toxic because of the behaviour of their followers. Bourdoux and Delabelle stated that followers using flattery with a leader to turn the situation to their advantage can encourage and influence him or her to behave in a way to get compliments (2013, p. 44). The leader’s first preoccupation is then no longer the organisation but rather his or her self-interest.

Leaders cannot exist without followers and vice versa. Each of these statuses does not make sense without the other one. Similarly, it is not correct to talk about relationships between a leader and a follower without considering the environment that surrounds them. The following part is going to explain the influence of the environment on toxic relationships.

### 4.1.4 Importance of the environment

The environment can be understood as the external factors that affect the relationship between leader and follower. It can for example be the economic situation of a country for a company or the invasion of an allied country for another nation. It is something that will change the perception of the reality of the persons in the organisation. A different environment can modify their expectations; shift their vision of the future, their state of mind or mood in general. It can also have an impact upon the level of hope of the people in the organisation – especially the followers. The leader can indeed take advantage of a particular environment to enlarge his or her power on the others and create a toxic relationship.

An environment of threat can damage the relationships within an organisation. In a business facing bankruptcy, the subordinates are more inclined to follow a strong authoritarian leader with a clear direction than a participative leader (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 185). Threat implies a need of protection for the follower who looks for this safety to the leader. It is the role of the leader to protect the organisation and take difficult decisions and take on responsibilities leading to an improvement of the situation. The threat does not have to be real; it is the perception of the threat that will make the followers more vulnerable. Some leaders sometimes create or at least overplay a threat and identify someone as an enemy to increase their power. We found a good illustration of this threatening behaviour in the leaders of the Enron Corporation. Leaders at Enron would go around the company to find support for their decisions among employees (Madsen & Vance, 2009, p. 219). The employees who would not be supportive to the ideas of the leaders would be
approached with threats and ultimately face employment termination if they do not comply.

Hambrick and Abrahamson state that destructive leadership is likely to be found in three situations: a senior job with little supervision (1); a small and young organisation (2); and ‘in high-growth and rapidly transforming industries’ (3) (1995, cited in Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 186). The idea is that the lower the level of supervision, the more the opportunities for a leader to grow toxins in his or her relationship with the others.

Finally, instability also plays a role in the ignition of toxic relationships. When there is an environment of instability, leaders can reinforce their power by ‘advocating radical change to restore order’ (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; cited in Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 185). Instability gives the leader more space for decision because ‘quick action and unilateral decision making’ are needed (Janis & Mann, 1977; Vroom & Jago, 1974; cited in Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 185).

**4.1.5 Outcomes**

The outcomes of a toxic relationship are multiple. People feeling diminished by their leader will see their well-being in the organisation decrease. Unable to perform as they would like to, they feel powerless, lack motivation and their moral is going to decline. They soon become sad, sorrowful or even depressed. Lack of motivation is a key outcome of toxic relationships.

Toxic relationships have therefore direct impact on productivity and success on the organisation. In a business context, employees feeling down will not work as hard as they could if the relationship would be healthy. Similarly, athletes will not be able to give their best if they are stressed by their coach and too much concerned with their future reprimand after the effort. In every field, a follower needs to feel good and have a certain level of happiness to have good results.

Stress and fear are also possible consequences of a toxic relationship. Certain managers put an extreme pressure for results on their followers without caring about their psychological state. Some can be too much focus on figures and results and forget that they deal with human beings. This feeling of stress and sometimes fear may eventually lead to burnout for the follower (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 106). When a relationship is too toxic, people feel bad in the
organisation and try to leave as soon as they have the opportunity. Some of them do not find any other way to escape this situation than committing suicide. This extreme consequence has regularly occurred since 2008 at Orange, the French telecoms company. The next part aims to list the different causes leading to such outcomes. One may face toxins in one’s daily relationships without noticing it. We would like to help the reader to better spot and avoid them in reality.

4.1.6 Roots of a toxic relationship

4.1.6.1 Causes resulting in stress, fear and finally burnout

A toxic relation can have multiple causes. It can first translate into a manipulative leader who tries to control the thoughts of their followers and thus establishes a detrimental ambiance within the group by creating stress, fear and anxiety (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 76). The leader first creates a climate where the follower does not feel at ease and can therefore be easily manipulated; as a consequence, the latter complies and adopt the same ‘required behaviours’ as their peers; the leader finally increases the pressure by inventing rewards and punishments to shape a “wished behaviour” and thus reinforces his or her influence and domination (Singer 2003 cited in Bourdoux & Delabelle 2013 p. 77).

The same outcomes apply to relationships where leaders do not trust their followers and control them all the time (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, pp. 96-97). Leaders thus lose the trust of their followers who gradually decrease their involvement. Rather than working efficiently on their tasks, followers in this kind of situation will try to escape to the control of the leader and to protect themselves to get back some freedom and/or some privacy (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, pp. 96-97). Similarly, a leader obsessed by details and perfection will render their followers paranoid, stressed and sometimes even close to the burnout (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, pp. 92-93). One follower constantly controlled in every detail of their work will feel discredited and will in the end doubt about their own capacities. Involving people and making them confident by giving them responsibilities and trust is one good way to multiply their talents (Wiseman & McKeown, 2010, p. 168).

This atmosphere of stress and fear is also found where there is no respect in the relationship, for instance when a leader shouts on their follower and frightens them (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, pp. 88-89). Rather than being motivated and inspired, a follower will see their results diminished
in a climate of fright. Conversely, a leader allowing people to make mistakes will create an environment of learning, where people can try and learn from their mistakes (Wiseman & McKeown, 2010, p. 77).

Another situation where the relationship is toxic appears when the leader imposes too much work with tight deadlines on the followers. The latter are exposed to stress and sometimes eventually go through a burnout (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, pp. 91-92).

We believe that leaders and followers have to respect some professional limitations and not mix private and professional life. Some leaders can indeed make their followers ill-at-ease by being too close to them. The latter then do not know any more if they have a friend or a superior in front of them (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 94).

4.1.6.2 Causes resulting in a lack of motivation

A toxic relationship can also translate into a lack of motivation of the followers. This can be due to a leader taking all the responsibilities and claiming all the success of the group (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, pp. 90-91). Followers do not see any possible evolution in their work, they get bored and lack of motivation. According to Wiseman and McKeown, making people accountable for their work and successes is one way to multiply their talents (2010). It is important that followers have responsibilities, without which they cannot make mistakes and thus learn (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 103). One needs to be empowered to grow and develop.

The importance of giving feedback does not have to be proved any more. It is important that a follower received comments about their performance in order to correct it and avoid doing mistakes twice. It is as important to point out the faults and errors as to reward and encourage the good performances. However, some leaders tend to insist too much – or only – on the mistakes of their followers. By doing so, they reduce the well-being of the follower who may feel inefficient and useless. The psychological state of the follower will gradually decline and so will their commitment. They will indeed try to draw away from their mission and responsibilities to be less affected by negative impact of too much negative feedback.

A lack of feedback – positive and negative – does not enable the followers to be aware of their weaknesses and strengths (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 112). We think it is therefore important to reward a follower with an exemplary behaviour and to warn and help one who
makes mistakes. This will enable the follower to make sense of what they do and to feel that what they do matter. It should enhance the results, as it is likely that a non-malicious follower will try to get some positive feedbacks.

Lack of motivation among followers is also found when a leader looks cool, does not worry and does not give any direction or deadline to the followers (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013, p. 94). Without any pressure or direction, the latter get bored and are not efficient any more.

4.1.6.3 Other sources of toxicity

A relationship between a leader who does not give any direction and does not have enough leadership and followers who consequently control too much is also toxic. The leader can be manipulated by their followers who for instance can take advantage of the situation to work less and justify it with false reasons. What’s more, in the business context, the firm is likely to have bad results if followers do not have a clear direction.

The listening skill is a factor that can tip the scales in favour of healthy or unhealthy relationship. As a matter of fact a highly intelligent manager who talks a lot during meetings, does not listen to their colleagues, and impose their own point of view will tend to reduce their productivity (Wiseman & McKeown, 2010, p. 9). It will make them feel that their interventions are useless and they will thus keep for them all the creativity they may have. In the end it is a vicious circle and the manager who knows everything – or thinks they do – will diminish their colleagues’ and the whole organisation’s output.

Being able to spot in order to try to avoid toxins in a relationship let us halfway on the path to be able to create and maintain healthy relationships. Let us now have a look at the different features that make a relationship healthy.

4.2 What does a healthy relationship look like?

After analysing available literature about relationships we found a few recurring themes that characterised a relationship as healthy. The themes we found are the following, trust (1), respect (2), well-being (3), commitment (4), and justice (5). Some of these themes/features have been
mentioned and described before in this thesis. It is not our aim to repeat that but rather to explain why they have such a positive outcome on a relationship.

4.2.1 Trust

‘It is relationships with trust at their core – that make business happen and enable organisations to succeed. When people have trusted relationships, the result is greater clarity, focus and confidence about their course of action.’ - (Bibb & Kourd, 2004, p. 113)

The most important unit in the foundation of a good relationship is trust. We have given a short description of trust in 3.5.4 about the presence of trust in the development of a relationship. There is a multitude of definitions that try to describe trust as accurate as possible. After going through a lot of literature we decided to formulate our own definition of trust. Trust is a willingness to be vulnerable and a state of assurance and confidence that the trusting person will be treated fairly and that the outcome will meet his or her expectations (Rousseau, et al., 1998; Hasel, 2013).

Trust is present on both sides of the spectrum in a healthy relationship; both the leader and the follower experience a state of trust towards the other. Trust is contagious in nature which means that it will spread throughout the organisation because of its reciprocal benefits (Bibb & Kourd, 2004, pp. 18-19; 67-68).

When we look at the outcome of trust on a relationship we will see why trust is so important. Trust increases productivity, reduces stress and creates a transparent environment. The increase of productivity in a relationship can be explained when we look at the absence of trust in a relationship. ‘People become uncertain, concerned, confused and ultimately demotivated: a fertile ground for failure, recrimination and a cycle of despair’ (Bibb & Kourd, 2004, p. 17). The opposite is also true: when people trust each other in a relationship the benefits are just as great. Leaders and followers who have the assurance that the other party will reciprocate their requests in an expected way can focus on their tasks and do not have to worry about the fate of their relationship. Both leader and follower can be straightforward in their communication without any form of ambiguity to please the other which leads to an environment of transparency.

4.2.2 Respect

Respect is perhaps the most important value that is absolutely essential to have in a relationship.
We are convinced that healthy relationships can never be developed or even exist in an environment without mutual respect. Respect is one of the three identifying characteristics of dyadic relationships according to Graen & Uhl-bien (1995). This is a form of respect that is identified as so called ‘professional respect’ (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Professional respect can be defined as ‘the perception of the degree to which each member of the dyad had built a reputation, within and/or outside the organisation, of excelling at his or her line of work’ (Liden & Maslyn, 1998, p. 49). A relationship with mutual respect at its core leaves room for growth and development of other features that we defined as ‘healthy’.

4.2.3 Well-being

A high level of trust in an organisation leads inevitably to a higher level of well-being for the people involved. Certain leadership styles like transformational, servant and authentic leadership have focused on the need for leaders to focus on the well-being of the followers and reward follower investment in the relationship (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hasel, 2013). In order to explain well-being properly and gain insight on the outcomes of it we turned to research that focuses on positive psychological capital (Luthans, et al., 2007; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Woolley, et al., 2011).

Leader well-being is found to be the antecedent of authentic leadership development which in turn is responsible for the development of followers’ psychological capital, (Luthans & Avolio, 2003 & Luthans, Youssef, et al., 2007, cited in Woolley, et al., 2011, p. 438). In these studies well-being is captured in the term “psychological capital” (PsyCap). PsyCap is defined as an individual’s positive psychological state of development based on self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience.

The necessity of a positive climate and individual well-being is something that was recognised in an early stage of organisational studies (Maslow, 1954; McGregor, 1960). Both the leader and the follower reap enormous benefits from a state of increased well-being in their relationship as they create a positive work climate. A few known consequences of individual well-being in the relationship are a higher level of job satisfaction and increased commitment and performance (Luthans, et al., 2007; Gardner, et al., 2011).
4.2.4 Commitment

Healthy relationships are characterised by high levels of commitment. Commitment is substantially different from obedience because obedience is shaped by fear and punishment while commitment is shaped by reward and recognition (Gal, 1985, as cited in Bass & Riggio, 2006, p.35). We have given our definition of commitment earlier in this thesis in section 3.2 but we would like to repeat it to emphasise its importance in a healthy relationship. Commitment, in the business field, can be described as ‘a psychological state which characterises the employee’s relationship with the organisation and has implications for the decision to continue membership in the organisation’ (Meyer & Allen, 1991, cited in Simosi & Xenikou, 2010, p. 1598). Increased level of commitment lead to higher performance for the organisation (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

4.2.5 Justice

We are convinced that a healthy relationship cannot exist without a perception of justice from both the side of the leader and the side of the follower. Justice can be defined as the ‘perceived fairness of rewards, decision-making procedures, and interpersonal treatment’ (Erdogan & Liden, 2006, p. 1). Only when both sides of the relationship have a perception of justice there will be space for a candid conversation and development.
V. Time for stories and their analysis...

In this chapter we will present and analyse the data we have acquired as described in section 2.7. Presenting and analysing qualitative data calls for a solid structure which we developed according to the methodological view we used. The combination of the analytical view and the systems view requires an analysis that leads to explanation of a system. This caused us to mix the data to construct a model of what a relationship looks like (see 2.3.1). Instead of giving a summary of every conversation we now show them altogether as bricks constructing a system.

We had conversations with leaders and followers that can be found in the Appendices A & B. We then looked for the recurring themes in the conversations on both the side of the leader and the side of the follower. We have tried to construct this system with an objective view as described in the analytical view (see 2.3.1). We will use this data to come up with a conclusion in chapter 6.

The conversations we conducted have enabled us to confirm some tendencies. It gave us an insight view on the reality perceived by the actors of the relationships themselves. Their vision is essential for our research as we see it as a testing phase for the theories we formulated in the chapters 3 and 4. This chapter therefore will add new elements to answer our main research question.

After going through the data it caught our attention that there were keywords and themes that kept coming back in every conversation. It turned out to be hard for them to describe a relationship other than by defining it by some major concepts. We would like to use these themes to construct a model that represents the view that leaders and followers have on the relationships. All along this chapter the reader will find these keywords explained and illustrated with short stories coming directly from the leaders’ and followers’ experience.

After a brief overview of the description of a relationship by our leaders and followers, we will take an interest at their perception of a toxic relationship. Then we will look into their experience of healthy relationships. Eventually, we will focus on our leaders’ and followers’ desired outcomes of a healthy relationship.
5.1 “Relationship”… What is it?

It is important to keep in mind the importance of the relationships in an organisation. This has been emphasised by one of the followers we talked to, René Ranger (an intern in a German company), who describes relationships as ‘very important because [he] see[s] a working place as a highly interactive place between human beings’ (2014, pers. comm. 2 May). Every organisation – in the business field or in general – is mainly based on relationships between people and the social interactions they form.

Marion Faure (2014, pers. comm. 7 May), who has follower relationships with her swimming coach and her head lifeguard, describes a relationship as an ‘exchange, verbal or not, between two or more people’. Bruce Uhler, the VP of a Swedish company, sees it as a ‘communication between people’, leading to trust and even sometimes to friendship (2014, pers. comm. 29 April).

We believe relationships are quite hard to grasp and to catch in clear definitions from a neutral perspective. It is more revealing to go more in depth in toxic relationships to understand how to avoid them and to study healthy relationships in order to recognise how to create them. In the following section we will tackle the perception of toxic relationships by people who actually experienced them as leaders or followers.

5.2 Toxic relationships: roots and creation

5.2.1 The most common origin of toxicity: misunderstanding

It has not been a major surprise for us to hear from the people we talked to that toxic relationships between leader and follower are sometimes created by and based on an initial misunderstanding. When we talked with Anders Broberg, the director of Sales and Marketing of a Swedish company, he explained us that he once experienced a bad relationship with a colleague in his team because they were too different. They were so different they could not understand each other in the beginning. A conflict happened between the two persons and the relationship did not get better because none of them trusted the other one.

Bruce Uhler, as the VP of his company, reported us a similar story. He once had a toxic relationship with a colleague relied on an incomprehension. Bruce had the feeling that they could
not understand each other’s point of view. He then tried to be more empathetic and to understand the other person. That was however not sufficient and the relationship did not improve. Bruce had the impression that his subordinate was simply incompetent. So his perception towards the other changed because of the toxic relationship. According to the conflict escalation described by the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution, this opposition was located in the stage of ‘personification’: the simple disagreement was no longer the main issue; the issue had become the person (Vestergaard, et al., 2011, p. 6). In the end, this relation sometimes led Bruce to some fits of anger.

Sam Carlsson, the PhD student, also had a misunderstanding with one of his superior. Even though he did not describe the relationship he had with this person as toxic, we identified this as a toxin damaging the relationship. The problem came from the different field of expertise of the follower and his leader. While Sam was in the biology and chemistry domain, his superior was a mathematician and a statistician. She was naturally competent to understand Sam’s work but they did not perceive the same way the reliability of his results and this sometimes gave the PhD student the feeling not to be understood. He clearly told us that he would have liked to switch his superior with someone more knowledgeable in his field.

A toxic relationship can also emerge from character incompatibility. Michel Fontaine, the principal educational advisor, explained us that his relationship with a previous director was toxic because he could not bear the character of this person. He was particularly annoyed by the boastful side of the director. The latter pretended to know everything and to have done everything. Michel perceives this extreme bragging as a will to impress and put down the people around him. One of the outcomes of this bad relationship is that Michel avoided to communicate with his superior and worked more isolated.

5.2.2 Another origin: lack of ethics

Toxic relationships can have multiple roots. One of the followers we talked to (Marion Faure) related us a toxic relationship she had with her head lifeguard. The problem came from the fact that she did not rely on him because she saw him as incompetent and irresponsible. She was afraid to be in trouble and be responsible of mistakes because of his decisions and orders. She knew that the direction and vision of this person was different from the one of his superior, who
directs all the head lifeguards. The absence of ethics of the leader was damaging the relationship. She was wondering if she should follow him and risk being in trouble with the main head or disobey her direct superior and be in trouble with him. It appeared to us a better solution to talk with the main head about the behaviour of the direct superior. However, solutions often appear easier for an observer than for someone actually involved in the toxic relationship.

Table 4 – Origins of toxic relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can we learn?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The people we talked to experienced toxic relationships coming from:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mainly an incompatibility between persons leading to misunderstanding and conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• But also sometimes a lack of ethics of the leader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: authors’ table

5.2.3 Who is responsible?

The conversations we carried out led us to the confirmation that both leaders and followers can create toxins in the relationship. Danny Dressler, the CEO of a Swedish start-up, related us an experience of one of his friends with a leader damaging the relationship. The latter established toxins in the relationship mainly by lacking respect to the followers. He was not straightforward and lacked integrity, as he was speaking badly of his employees behind their back. He thus created an unhealthy relationship, which made this friend willing to quit the organisation as soon as possible. A leader may also generate a toxic relationship by taking all the decisions themselves, and simply giving orders and directions to their followers, without explaining the reasons of these (Faure 2014, pers. comm. 7 May).

Followers can also harm the relationship. René Ranger pointed out that there is usually more bond among the followers than between them and the formal leader, so they are closer to one another (Ranger 2014, pers. comm. 2 May). To some malicious followers this can give the power to damage the relationship with the formal leader, as they can be themselves followed by the other followers in the creation of a toxic environment. They can then undermine the relationship for instance by spreading rumours and gossip about the leader (Broberg 2014, pers. comm. 29 April; Ranger 2014, pers. comm. 2 May).

According to Lee Park, who worked in a Vietnamese company during years, both leader and
follower have an influence on the relationship but the follower is more sensitive. They indeed care more about the quality of the relationship than the leader does because they have more to gain and lose than the leader (Park 2014, pers. comm. 10 May). This may be especially true in Eastern companies, where the hierarchy has an important place and where the managers have a propensity to focus more on the results than on the welfare of the followers.

Figure 9 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Who creates toxins?

Source: authors’ figure

We have seen in this section that the roots of toxic relationships are multiple and that these relationships can be created by both the leader and the follower, as suggested by the “toxic triangle” theory (Padilla, et al., 2007). In the following section we are going to see what the key elements of a healthy relationship are for the people engaged in these relations.

5.3 Healthy relationships: main components

One of the leaders (Bruce Uhler 2014, pers. comm. 29 April) we talked to described a healthy relationship as a ‘smooth relation’ where ‘everybody knows what they have to do’. We have also heard that a perfect relationship occurs when people work in harmony in an organisation, because the follower fully agrees with the leader on the direction and has the possibility to take initiatives (Fontaine 2014, pers. comm. 7 May). The following part goes more in depth in the description of the main features of a healthy relationship.

5.3.1 Distance

Eva-Marie Hagström, the managing director of a Swedish company, pointed out the closeness between leader and follower as one indication – among others – of a healthy relationship (2014, pers. comm. 30 April). The hierarchy exists in her company but she does not care too much about it. Even if she is responsible for fifty people, they can freely talk to her and she is close to them.
It usually matters to leaders to be close to their followers but to a certain extent. It is actually important to distinguish business and friendship and to avoid being too personal (Dressler 2014, pers. comm. 30 April). According to Corry Hulleman, a HRM in a Dutch company, a leader can be friendly with a follower but cannot be his or her friend (2014, pers. comm. 28 April). She believes that when things go wrong, a leader must be able to take the right and hard decisions without being influenced by friendship. If followers see the so-called leader as a fellow colleague, they may be more reluctant to follow his or her instructions (Faure 2014, pers. comm. 7 May; Fontaine 2014; pers. comm. 7 May).

Leader and followers have to respect some professional limitations and not mix private and professional life. (4.1.6.1)

Figure 10 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Distance

Source: authors’ figure

5.3.2 Communication

The leaders we talked to often insisted on the importance of three elements in a healthy relationship with their followers, to wit communication, trust and respect. Eva-Marie Hagström, the managing director, told us in a personal conversation that these components are ‘crucial to have a good relationship’ (2014, 30 April). Anders Broberg, the director of Sales and Marketing, has the same vision, even though he replaced the term ‘communication’ with ‘open communications’ and ‘open discussions’, where people can both talk and listen (2014, pers. comm. 29 April). It is important to talk and explain to followers the reasons behind the decisions. Bruce Uhler (2014, pers. comm. 29 April), the VP of a Swedish company, also used the expression ‘open communication’ as an important feature of a relationship with followers, but it does not have the same meaning as previously. Focusing on the business field that he knows well, he thinks it is important that there is shared information within the organisation and that everyone has the possibility to know how the other departments work.
Table 5 – A component of healthy relationships: communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can we learn?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaders tend to insist on the importance of communication in their relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with the followers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicate to make the decisions understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Open discussions, where everyone can talk and listen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: authors’ table

5.3.3 Trust and respect

All the people we talked to during these interviews agreed that mutual trust from both leader and follower is necessary in a healthy relationship. The trust is especially indispensable in long-term relationship for one leader (Anders Broberg). He personally succeeds to build this trust by being open, communicating on decisions, making people participate, and respecting them. Even if she agreed that trust must be mutual in relationship with followers, Eva-Marie Hagström thinks the leader has to set the example and ‘show the respect and the trust first’ (2014, pers. comm. 30 April). She believes it is hard for a follower to do it in the other way around.

The kind of trust differs when it comes from the leader or from the follower. Followers trust their leader when they know that he or she will stand up for them if they make a mistake or have an issue with another superior (Ranger 2014, pers. comm. 2 May; Fontaine 2014, pers. comm. 7 May; Dressler 2014, pers. comm. 30 April; Park 2014, pers. comm. 10 May). This trust towards the leader is particularly important in the sport field. Marion Faure explained us that in order to realise the objective she fixed together with her coach, to wit a qualification for the French Championship, it was important to know that he will invest himself entirely to help her towards this goal. This trust for her coach enables her to increase her own confidence and her motivation and probably permitted her to have better results.

On the other hand, a leader gives his or her trust to followers when he or she delegates and gives them responsibilities (Fontaine 2014, pers. comm. 7 May). He or she does not control everything the followers do but rather give them some space to be creative and work as they wish. Leaders should give the followers the freedom to figure out themselves how to achieve the best results; they need to be able to use their creativity and their talents as long as the results are good (Hulleman 2014, pers. comm. 28 April).
Most of the leaders and followers we talked to described respect as a key element of a healthy relationship. René Ranger, the German intern, told us in a personal conversation that relationships without respect are dedicated to backfire (2014, 2 May). He once worked in a company where, when he did some mistakes, one of his bosses screamed at him. This manager even sometimes made fun of his mistakes instead of helping him and explaining him how to avoid them. He made him feel like if he did not know anything. Lack of respect can have a tremendous impact on motivation and then outcomes.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 11 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Trust and respect**

Source: authors’ figure

### 5.3.4 Motivation

The aforementioned manager, by doing so, created an environment where learning became impossible. This had a disastrous impact on the motivation and work of René, who told us he hated going there (2014, pers. comm. 2 May). As a consequence, he just did the work asked and nothing more. He did not try to help the company by sharing all his knowledge and talent. He was terribly bored, waiting for the end of the day to leave the company. This is a situation of toxic relationship as we described it in the subsection 4.1.1. There was indeed no space for René to express his potential in the organisation and his welfare was low. Furthermore, the unfriendly environment for learning did not enable him to grow. To use a term of Wiseman and Mc Keown, the toxic relationship “diminished” the talent of René.

Motivation can be brought about by different means. The main head lifeguard of Marion Faure had for instance a particular way to motivate his followers. Marion explained us that before the summer begins, the lifeguards have one week of intensive training and selection. The best ones
are kept for the summer whereas the others have to find another municipality to work for. This week looks like a military training, where a high motivation is necessary to succeed. In order to enhance the motivation of his team of lifeguards, the leader often gives them high challenges. He asks from people more than what they thought they were able to do. He sets the bar high and justifies it: “I do not tell you it will be easy, I tell you it will be worth it.” Trust from the leader and rise of motivation are linked. Marion told us her motivation increase was double: first, when she saw that her leader believed more in her than she did herself and second, when she realised the results of her hard work and many efforts. Creating challenges and trusting their followers is a good way for a leader to create motivation.

Lack of motivation is a key outcome of toxic relationships. (4.1.5)

Figure 12 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Trust and respect

Source: authors’ figure

Table 6 – An outcome of healthy relationships: motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can we learn?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation results from healthy relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One way to create motivation is to set the bar high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The trust from the leader is essential to create this motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: authors’ table

5.3.5 Feedback

Another important element in the leader-follower relationship is the feedback provided by the leader. The way it is – or not – provided often influences the quality of the relationship. Marion Faure had for instance this experience with her swimming coach who was always giving negative feedback and never positive one. He could always find imperfections and failures but almost never talked about the successes of his swimmers. Even though this was not a major problem
because the coach had some skills in other domains, this at least did not affect positively the motivation of his swimmers. When feedback is appropriately given though, it can have a very positive effect on the relationship and the outcomes of the follower. The PhD student Sam Carlsson describes it as a very important ingredient in the relationship he had with one of his previous superior. He was receiving both positive and negative feedback on a daily basis, even if the scales tipped more in favour of the positive. In the end, the positive feedback kept him confident and motivated and the negative feedback gave him a path for improvement. He told us: ‘I dug deeper and improved my knowledge much more with the negative feedback’ (Carlsson 2014, pers. comm. 27 April).

It is important that a follower received comments about their performance in order to correct it and avoid doing mistakes twice. (4.1.6.2)

If the feedback is only negative the welfare of the follower decreases and so does their commitment. (4.1.6.2)

Figure 13 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Feedback

Source: authors’ figure

5.3.6 Well-being

All the leaders and followers we talked to agreed on the fact that the well-being on the followers is primordial for the good results of the organisation. In healthy relationships, leaders care for their followers. Eva-Marie Hagström told us in a personal conversation that ‘the welfare of the employees is really crucial’ (2014, 30 April).

René Ranger (2014, pers. comm. 2 May) also brought up the importance of an atmosphere of fun and games in the organisation. According to him, it makes people being closer and allows them to enjoy more the time spent in the organisation.

Some of them yet think that the importance of this well-being depends of the kind of role played by the follower. They claim that the more the position requires intellectual and thinking efforts,
the more the welfare of the person is essential (Ranger 2014, pers. comm. 2 May; Dressler 2014, pers. comm. 30 April). In the business field, a leader neglecting human relationships may have some positive short-term results; but this will provoke a ‘brain drain’ and the company will decline eventually (Uhler 2014, pers. comm. 29 April).

**Figure 14 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Well-being**

Source: authors’ figure

### 5.3.7 Other components

Followers consider that a relationship is healthy when the leader shows interest into them (Faure 2014, pers. comm. 7 May) and when mistakes do not lead to repression but to explanation and learning (Faure 2014, pers. comm. 7 May; Ranger 2014, pers. comm. 2 May).

One follower described a good relationship as one close to friendship, with a lot of freedom; but also demanding and very supporting, in the sense that a follower should be supported by the leader in case of trouble (Ranger 2014, pers. comm. 2 May).

Finally, honesty appears to be fundamental in a good relationship (Broberg 2014, pers. comm. 29 April; van den Berg 2014, pers. comm. 30 April).

### 5.4 A desired outcome: multiplying talents

#### 5.4.1 Giving responsibilities and empowering

We are convinced that a healthy relationship functions as a catalyst of talents in the organisation, which logically leads to better results. The importance of the concept of multiplying talents in the relationship has been emphasised by both leaders and followers. Eva-Maria Hagström, the managing director, told us in a personal conversation that a leader needs to ‘coach people to make them grow’ (2014, 30 April). She once met a leader who makes her grow by pushing her to
accomplish tasks she did not think she would be able to. He asked her to work on some projects harder than usual and gave her more responsibilities. All along the duty he kept encouraging her and telling her he trusted her for this work. This resulted in a higher self-esteem of Eva-Marie and in the success of the projects. She told us the key was that her leader had more belief in her than she had herself. We already saw that setting the bar high was a good way to raise the motivation; combined with encouragement and trust, this illustrates that it also increases the self-esteem of the follower and enables him or her to grow. Now that she is herself a leader she tries to develop the people around her in the same way.

Bruce Uhler advocates for more responsibilities for the followers. He even told us in a personal conversation that everybody in an organisation should be able to lead and take over in the field they are the best (2014, pers. comm. 29 April). Michel Fontaine thinks similarly. As a main educational advisor he is responsible for some supervisors in his high school and often gives them responsibilities and allows them to take initiatives. He noticed that this results in better relationship with them, and they feel valued and work better as a consequence. Eva-Marie also emphasises the importance for a follower to have the possibility to take their own initiatives, to be creative and more generally to try. According to her, a leader giving to their follower an environment where they can take initiatives makes them more engaged with the organisation (2014, pers. comm. 30 April). Followers also appreciate this empowerment. By the process of receiving some responsibilities and having some choices in the way to do his or her tasks, the follower feels more important and competent (Faure 2014, pers. comm. 7 May). It results that he or she is more involved in the mission and thus is likely to have better outcomes.

The conversations we carried out therefore confirm the idea of Wiseman & McKeown, according to which giving responsibilities – and therefore trust – is a good way to multiply talents (2010, p. 168). This is however not the unique way to multiply the talents and involving people in the decisions making process is another one.
5.4.2 Mutual influence and decisions making process

In Anders Broberg’s company, decisions are usually taken on common agreement. This permits followers to know and above all to understand the direction of the company. The decisions make sense to them because they are more involved in the decision making process. The influence is not only downward. Followers often appreciate to understand the reasons why they are doing something rather than simply execute orders without thinking (Faure 2014, pers. comm. 7 May; Fontaine 2014, pers. comm. 7 May). Anders even told us in a personal conversation that ‘many of the best ideas come from people who are working [in the lower layers]’ (Broberg 2014, pers. comm. 29 April). This makes sense because in the business field, these are the people who face on a daily basis the concrete problems of the organisation. They can therefore more easily think and find possible improvements to these issues than a manager who is far from the frontline realities. He also explained that people should be encouraged to give their ideas and this can be done by rewarding and promoting people with good ideas. The culture of Anders’ company is to recognise and promote talent to make people grow.

Most of the leaders and followers we talked to agreed that the influence should be mutual between leader and follower and not only be downward from the leader. A leader can get much information and inspiration from a follower (van den Berg 2014, pers. comm. 30 April). One follower, René Ranger, even related us that he had, as an intern, a consequent influence on the other members of the organisation. He indeed once presented a workshop for the employees of his company and sometimes taught the leader some aspects of his work. His good results combined with a willingness to have more responsibilities allowed him to have this influence in the organisation.

Sam Carlsson, the PhD student, told us that feedback is a first means to influence a leader. He
thinks having conversations with the leader about their leadership style is a good way to establish and maintain a healthy relationship and enhance the outcomes of the team (2014, pers. comm. 27 April). Another follower (Michel Fontaine) told us he influences his leader by giving propositions and ideas while working on a project. He does that to feel more involved and to feel less like someone just executing orders.

Figure 16 – Confirmation of a theory with empirical data – Mutual influence

Source: authors’ figure
VI. Conclusion

A leader is only as good as his or her ability to create constructive relationships and maintain them. – Romain Ferrec & Petrus Oskam

This is the chapter where we accumulate the theoretical framework and empirical data to come to a conclusion. This conclusion can be interpreted as both the answer to our major research question and as our view on leadership.

All along this thesis we have tried to describe the relationship between leaders and followers with as much accuracy as possible. We have begun our research with a neutral perspective, trying to give the reader a required basis, upon which we would be able to build more knowledge. Then we have shifted the focus on the features and outcomes of healthy and toxic relationships. We have then confronted these findings with the real world, by talking with leaders and followers about their experienced relationships. This last chapter aims to conclude this research and answer the main research question, ‘by what means can a healthy relationship be built between a manager/executive and a follower, enabling the manager to become a leader by releasing all the available talents of the team members?’ We will do so by giving to the reader the key elements of a healthy relationship.

Two points appeared to us necessary since the discussions leading to the creation of the subject a few months ago. The first one is that both leader and follower be more aware of the possibilities and good outcomes allowed by a healthy relationship. Some of them – in both groups – seem to be unconscious of the tremendous benefits of the multiplication of talents in a team. Some leaders indeed prefer to lead with authority and take all the decisions by themselves, convinced that they are the only ones able to fix problems and find solutions. Some followers – the conformers – accept toxic relationships without trying to fight or improve them. The second point is that, once they know the benefits and have the willingness to experience such a positive and strong relationship, leaders and followers have the sufficient knowledge about healthy and toxic relationships in order to establish the first one while avoiding the dangers of the second one.

We do not have the pretention to give the reader a magic solution to build in a few days a healthy relationship. However, we hope that with the benefit of our work, the reader would be able to
recognise and foster features of healthy relationships, and similarly identify and get rid of toxic behaviours. The identification of these cues is the first step in the improvement of one's relationships.

6.1 What have we learnt?

In the previous chapter some of the theories we formerly had had been confirmed and some new ideas came up. We would like here to gather what has appeared to us as the most relevant, striking and/or unexpected in these findings. We want to present them in the form of advice that can benefit both leaders and followers.

We would first like to advise the reader to keep in mind that a healthy relationship between a leader and a follower appears to be composed of mutual trust, respect, communication and the presence of negative and positive feedback. The importance of the three first components have been emphasised by the majority of the leaders and followers we talked to. The last component enables the follower to learn and to improve their performance. The combination of both negative and positive feedback enables to keep the follower’s motivation in a high level. The well-being of the follower is another key component of a successful relationship, as it directly affects their outcomes. The importance of human relations within their organisation should therefore not be neglected. Healthy relationships between a leader and a follower are often close ones, but different from friendship, which could reduce too much the role of the leader and disturb the good functioning of the organisation.

When one thinks of toxic relationships, one may easily picture a toxic leader domineering and bullying his or her followers. However, leaders are not the only ones who create toxins in the relationship. The followers and the environment play an important part too. Conformers and colluders are followers who participate in toxic relationship by not reacting to and even – for the second kind – approving the creation of toxins. What’s more, an unstable environment or a perceived threat influences negatively the relationship too. When facing a relationship with toxins, both the leader and the follower should remember that this kind of relationship often comes from a simple misunderstanding between two different persons. In this case, one option would be to try to stop seeing the other as a stranger, but show some empathy towards the other
and try to understand the other’s point of view. The other is in general not as different as one can picture in the first place. It is sometimes possible to find some point of mutual interest and thus get closer to the initial stranger and enhance an originally toxic relationship. Being open-minded appears to us as the key to improve a relationship based on a misunderstanding.

The ultimate positive outcome of a healthy relationship is the catalyst of talents of the team members. The followers’ potential and talent may be unleashed and thus bring about great outcomes. This may be reached when followers are given more responsibilities and when they have some space to effectively influence their leader, who listens to them and takes into account their remarks and propositions.

After writing the thesis we are stunned by the complexity and versatility of the phenomenon we call leadership. We would like to define leadership in words to get a clear picture of what leadership means to us.

Leadership is the ability to connect to other people in a social environment and to construct a relationship that is based on mutual trust, respect, well-being, communication and both negative and positive feedback, with as goal the multiplication of talents among team members.

We both see the multiplication of talents as a necessary objective for an organisation. As potential leaders of tomorrow, we will keep this in mind for our future careers. We hope that this thesis has enabled the reader to grasp the interest and strength of this Multiplying effect, and above all how strong and healthy relationships can lead to this state.
6.2 Discussion

‘Good leadership in industry depends more than any other single thing on the manager’s conception of what his job is or of what management is. Second, it depends on his convictions and on his beliefs about people.’ - McGregor, 1960, pp. 32-33

After completing this thesis we have come to a point where we would like to discuss some of our findings and point out some areas that we left untouched. The Italian philosopher Niccoló Machiavelli asked himself whether a leader should be loved or feared by his/her followers (Snook, 2008). This thesis tries to reveal how leaders do not have to make this choice but can build on healthy relationships in which they can both execute the power needed and have a healthy environment and great results.

We learned a lot from the leader member exchange theory (see section 3.3) because it revealed the essential development trajectory of a relationship. However we feel that we could not go as much in depth as we would have wanted to. We only had enough time to touch the surface of this theory and could not answer interesting questions like, ‘what is the role of the LMX theory in the personal development of the leader?’ and ‘what is the influence of justice/injustice on vertical dyads?’

Another important question that we did not answer is ‘what is the influence of the deliberately created relationships among people working in an organisation?’ Building on the LMX theory it would be very interesting to discover how both leaders and followers can gain influence in the organisation through the creation of additional relationships.

As potential leaders of tomorrow we learned a lot from writing this thesis. We believe that the key to success is to know authentically the values of a healthy relationship and live them as a leader. This corresponds with the view on leadership of Plato, and the motto of our course, ‘the art of leading others comes from the art of leading oneself’.
VII. References


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VIII. Appendices

Appendix A - Conversation with a leader

Two initial questions:

- Do you agree that we record this interview digitally?
- Do you agree that we use the content of this interview for our Master Thesis?

What is your role/status in the organisation?

1. “Relation”, in general. (What does that mean for you? How do you describe it?)
2. For people in the business field: “Relation with colleagues” (superiors, fellow colleagues, subordinates?)
   (What does that make you think of? What appears to be important to you?)
3. How would you describe the current relationship with your followers?
4. Have you already experienced a particularly bad relationship? If yes, can you describe it?
5. Have you already experienced a particularly good relationship? If yes, can you describe it?

What do you think about the following assertions? The idea is to comment and give your opinion about them.

6. “A healthy (good) relationship cannot exist without mutual trust from both the leader and the follower.”
7. “A leader can damage a relationship and so can the followers.”
8. “The leader has to choose between optimal success of their organisation and optimal well-fare of their followers.”
   (Should the leader sacrifice the well-fare of the followers for the success of the organisation?)
9. Which assertion is the most accurate (and why?):
   - “The leader is the one who influences the rest of the organisation.”
   - “Relationships are based on mutual influence of the leader and the follower.”

10. How would you describe your leadership style?
11. According to you, what qualities enable you to lead efficiently?

Other thoughts about the subject?
Appendix B - Conversation with a follower

Two initial questions:

- Do you agree that we record this interview digitally?
- Do you agree that we use the content of this interview for our Master Thesis?

What is your role/status in the organisation?

1. “Relation”, in general. (What does that mean for you? How do you describe it?)
2. *For people in the business field:* “Relation with colleagues” (superiors, fellow colleagues, subordinates?) (What does that make you think of? What appears to be important to you?)
3. How would you describe the current relationship with your leader?
4. Have you already experienced a particularly good relationship? If yes, can you describe it?
5. Have you already experienced a particularly bad relationship? If yes, can you describe it?

What do you think about the following assertions? The idea is to comment and give your opinion about them.

6. “A healthy (/good) relationship cannot exist without mutual trust from both the leader and the follower.”
7. “A leader can damage a relationship and so can the followers.”
8. “A follower has the choice between jeopardising their personal outcomes or the relationship they have with their leader.”
9. **Which assertion is the most accurate (and why?):**
   - “The leader is the one who influences the rest of the organisation.”
   - “Relationships are based on mutual influence of the leader and the follower.”
10. According to you, what qualities are mandatory to lead efficiently?

Other thoughts about the subject?