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Employee engagement and distance

A case study exploring the effects of directive and empowering leadership on employee engagement when employees are distant.

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between directive and empowering leadership styles and employee engagement when there is distance between leader and follower. In order to explore this relationship we employ a single-case study focusing on a multinational medical company. We anchor our study in existing research and definitions in order to make propositions that are in line with established theory. Based on qualitative interviews we propose that distance between leader and follower enhances negative effects on employee engagement caused by the leader's actions. We also identify a relationship between expanded control functions within an organization and employee disengagement, where expanded organizational control leads to a decrease in employee engagement.

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This thesis is written as part of a Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration at the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH). It is written in collaboration with the FOCUS program of the Institute of Strategy and Management.

My interest for the challenges related to leadership and management was my main inspiration for writing this thesis. Ever since I faced my first leadership challenge, I have been intrigued by the concept of efficient leadership in all its variations. The main objective of my research was to further explore the challenges faced by leaders and to expand on the understanding of these. I consider myself very privileged to have been given the opportunity to research such an interesting topic as part of the FOCUS program.

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1 Introduction

“... I can only see parts of what they are doing in the field. I can observe them for one or two days when we are visiting customers together, but this is also biased because I know they behave differently when I’m together with them at a customer site, and I know that they will do some things completely differently when they are on their own. Therefore, I always have the feeling that I never know what is really happening at the customer sites on a regular basis from day to day... Although I trust my colleagues and I always believe in what they are doing, I can never know if they do what they say they are doing, or if they are perhaps avoiding something because they don’t feel comfortable talking about it. Because of this I think it is hard to coach them, because it is not easy to find out where their problems are.”

(Supervisor, country 1)

In the quote above, a supervisor discusses the challenges he faces when managing employees at a distance. As evidenced by the quote; while leadership has always been considered challenging, it becomes more challenging when distance is a factor. In a world where more and more companies become internationalized, the concept of distance and its consequences has become increasingly relevant. Controlling and motivating distant employees, who might be based in an entirely different country or region, is thus a challenge many managers face today.

While many companies choose a strictly transactional approach to managing distant employees, in other words management through rewards and bonuses to encourage behavior, an increasing number of companies emphasize the importance of having engaged employees (Saks, 2006). Research has shown that engaged employees are fully invested in their role as employees, thus making them perform better than non-engaged employees in the same situation (Lepine & Crawford, 2010). Lepine & Crawford (2010) also found that engaged employees commonly exhibit proactive behavior, identifying and solving problems before they actually occur. They also identified high degree of self-censure in engaged employees because they take pride in, and feel responsible for, their own work performance to a greater extent than non-engaged employees.

In order to encourage employee engagement, leaders often employ a variation of empowering leadership, as this has been found to be an efficient leadership style for encouraging engagement (Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulos, 2011). An empowering leader allows his/her

subordinates to handle their own problems and learn from their own mistakes, constituting a support function for the performance of the employees, rather than as an authority figure that punishes unwanted behavior. In direct contrast to such empowering behavior is directive leadership, which manages employees with clearly stated objectives and goals, and sanctions employees who fail to complete their objectives.

In order to explore the effects of these two specific leadership styles on employee engagement when there is distance between leader and follower, the following research question will be explored:

“How does empowering and directive leadership influence engagement in employees at a distance?”

While the relationship between empowering leadership and engagement has been well-documented (Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulos, 2011), this thesis seeks to contribute to the increasingly relevant field concerning the impact of distance on employee engagement. By focusing on two contrasting leadership styles, and measuring the impact they have on employee engagement when there is distance between leader and follower, we hope to identify the impact of distance in the relationship.

In order to explore this relationship, we will focus on employees within a specific company who are working at a distance from their immediate supervisor. We will identify the leadership styles of the relevant supervisor, the employee engagement of their respective subordinates and the impact of distance on their relationship. Through such a case study we hope to establish a foundation for further research into this subject, while at the same time providing an overview of specific effects that managers must be particularly aware of when managing distant employees.

2 Literature review

Due to the fact that there is little existing literature on the impact of distance on engagement, we have focused our literature review on existing research which has been done on the constructs that influence the outcome of engagement in employees at a distance. We have specifically reviewed empowering vs. directive leadership, leadership distance and engagement separately. The purpose of our review of existing literature was to find clear definitions of key constructs, as well as to discover the resulting effects of the constructs on individuals. By reviewing existing literature in this manner, we anchor our research in well-established definitions and pre-existing theory related to our topic.

2.1 Empowering and directive leadership

Empowering leadership is defined as "... sharing power with subordinates and raising their level of autonomy and responsibility..." (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims jr., 2013, p. 573). In other words, a leader who uses empowering leadership will enable his or her employees to do their tasks efficiently by encouraging the employees to participate in decision-making, conveying confidence in their abilities and remove bureaucratic constraints (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005). Zhang & Bartol (2010) found that empowering leaders tend to enhance an employee's perception of meaningfulness of work through a focus on the contribution the employee makes to the organization as whole. Empowering leadership has also been found to encourage employee self-efficacy (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005).

In comparison, a directive leadership approach is defined as "... actively structuring subordinates' work through providing clear directions and expectations regarding compliance with instructions" (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims jr., 2013, p. 573). A directive leader is thus a leader who explicitly tells his or her employees what they need to do and when it needs to be done. Directive leadership is also often referred to as 'Initiating Structure', a term that stems from the so-called Ohio State studies performed in the 1940s (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004).

Due to the systematic difference in these two leadership styles, which is such that they cannot coexist in relation to the same task, they are often considered as opposite ends of the scale (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims jr., 2013; Martin, Liao, & Campbell, 2013). A leader might employ both directive and empowering leadership styles over time, however in relation to a specific task they are mutually exclusive due to their opposite natures. As such we include directive leadership as a contrast to empowering leadership in our study.

Research has shown that empowering leadership tends to result in several effects on the employees that are subject to it (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims jr., 2013). Lorinkova, et al. (2013) found that subordinates under an empowering leader tends to express opinions and ideas more often as well as share knowledge and experience with co-workers. Empowering leadership also tends to support collaborative decision-making. In other words, teams subject to an empowering leader tend to be collective-minded, enabling each other to perform more efficiently. They also feel a greater commitment towards their work. Ahearne et al., (2005) suggested that this inclusion effect lead to individual psychological empowerment which in turn increased employee engagement. This relationship was further researched and proven by Zhang & Bartol (2010).

In comparison, directive leadership requires a higher degree of control from the leader. The leader gives clear instructions, which has been shown to benefit followers by resolving issues related to task and role ambiguity (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims jr., 2013). Furthermore, subordinates under a directive leader often get more direct feedback on their performance. The combination of these effects tend to lead to time-efficient employees who are able to execute decisions without extensive periods of training and coaching.

As such, both empowering and directive leadership have their merits, however they also both have their own specific drawbacks. While empowering leadership leads to higher employee interaction and knowledge-sharing, it also takes longer to establish such an ‘empowered’ employee in comparison to an employee under a directive leader (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims jr., 2013; Martin, Liao, & Campbell, 2013). By observing 60 different teams in an experiment, Lorinkova et al., (2013) found that empowered subordinates tend to outperform other subordinates over time. However, they also discovered that a directive approach can be more efficient in many cases, specifically where task ambiguity is high or the time-frame is short. As such there is no ideal leadership style, rather an ideal leader should employ the leadership style that is best suited to each specific task.

2.2 Leadership distance

“Leadership is an influencing process that results from follower perceptions of leader behavior and follower attributions of leader dispositional characteristics, behaviors, and performance” (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). In other words, the relationship between leader and follower is a continuous process which encompasses both follower perceptions and attributions. Furthermore “... the legitimacy of a leader is moderated by leader distance”

(Antonakis & Atwater, 2002, p. 677) and as such it is necessary to include this factor in any analysis concerning the effectiveness of specific leadership styles. Here we consider 'distance' to encompass both physical and social/psychological distance, as both of these have been found to impact the leader-follower relationship (Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Bogardus, 1927; Shamir, 1995).

In order to categorize the dimensions of distance in a set framework, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) defined three measures of distance which when combined serve as a measure of the leadership process. Perceived social distance, physical distance and perceived frequency of leader-follower interaction combine to clearly define the relationship between a leader and a follower and as such can be used in analysis of this relationship.

2.2.1 Perceived social distance

Social distance is a concept which is known by many different names, foremost of these psychological distance (Napier & Ferris, 1993) or psychosocial distance (Bass B. M., 1990). Park (1924, p. 339) defined it as a degree of "understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations". Social distance is a deciding factor in an individual's perception of differences in status, rank, authority, social standing and power which influence the relationship between a leader and a follower (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Social distance can have both an increasing and a diminishing effect on the strength of influence between a leader and a follower. "To the extent that leadership rests on sheer prestige, it is easily punctured by intimacy" (Bogardus, 1927, p. 177). In other words, close social distance can serve to dismiss overly positive attributions made by the follower. Whether close social distance has a positive or negative effect on the relationship between leader and follower is therefore dependent on the attributions made by the follower and the expertise of the leader. A weak leader might benefit from a great social distance where his shortcomings are less easily observable, while a stronger leader might benefit greatly from letting his followers observe his expertise closely.

2.2.2 Physical distance

Physical distance is defined simply by the actual distance between the follower and the leader. Kerr and Jermier (1978) found that physical distance can have great impact on the relationship between a follower and a leader, going as far as to claim that it in some cases can render effective leadership impossible. Howell et al. (1997) noted that physical distance changes the dynamic of the relationship between leader and follower, rendering many

leadership practices impossible to perform. Given the recent technological advances, these difficulties are not as great as they used to be, but the impact of physical distance on any relationship between a leader and follower is irrefutable (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Physical distance has usually been viewed as a concept one should strive to minimize in order to have an efficient relationship between leader and followers (Napier & Ferris, 1993; Bass B. M., 1990). However, these researchers dealt mostly with leadership on a supervisory level and as such this sentiment cannot be extended to all leader-follower relationships. In comparison, Howell et al. (1998) found that, in cases concerning charismatic leadership, a lack of physical distance would reduce the power of the leader's visionary message.

2.2.3 Perceived frequency of leader-follower interaction

The third dimension suggested by Antonakis and Atwater (2002) regards the perceived interaction frequency between a leader and a follower. Unlike the other two concepts, this one only indirectly implies a measure of distance through measuring how 'close' a leader is to their follower. The more frequent the interaction, the 'closer' the relationship will seem to both parties, independent of social and physical distance.

While this dimension has always been relevant due to the fact that it is possible for a physically close leader to have infrequent contact with a subordinate and vice versa, the concept has become increasingly relevant due to recent technological advancements which facilitate communication between supervisor and subordinate (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Antonakis and Atwater (2002, p. 687) define frequency of interaction as a concept "... related to the degree of direction and feedback followers will receive and seek". They also point out that unlike in previous theories, like the well-known leader-membership exchange theory (LMX) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), a high frequency of interaction does not necessarily constitute a good leader, rather the ideal frequency is decided by the relevant relationship and the nature of the work tasks of the subordinate (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Ambiguous work tasks might require more interaction than cases where the follower has to perform tasks of a more standardized nature.

2.3 Engagement

Engagement is defined as "the investment of an individual's complete self into a role" (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010, p. 617). In other words, an engaged employee will invest his or her full physical, cognitive and emotional energies in work performance (Kahn, 1990).

Unlike other constructs related to job performance, such as motivation and job ownership, employee engagement encompasses a fuller picture of the employee in question. An engaged employee is fully invested in job performance over three dimensions; physical, cognitive and emotional. Thus, engaged employees can be described as "... attentive, connected, integrated and focused in their role performances" (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010, p. 619). Naturally, engagement is therefore a characteristic most companies strive to encourage in their employees.

Rich, et al (2010) identified three antecedents of engagement; value congruence, perceived organizational support and core self-evaluations. Using the definitions of these constructs, provided by Kahn (1990) in his original exploration of the topic of engagement, Rich, et al. (2010) found that when combined, these three constructs represent a good predictor of an employee's level of engagement in his or her work. This engagement in turn affects task performance and organizational citizenship behavior.

Value congruence refers to a similarity between the role-requirements of a person's work and their own preferred self-image (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). This in turn leads to the person viewing his or her work as more rewarding, and thus they become more willing to engage themselves. In comparison, if the person feels that role-requirements contradict with their self-image, they feel devalued and are thus less likely to become engaged in their work roles. As such, a company which wishes to encourage engagement should strive for a match between company and employee values.

The ability to be able to invest oneself in work without fear of negative consequences is referred to as perceived organizational support (Kahn, 1990). An individual that perceives organizational support will feel more valued and will be less afraid of making mistakes (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). However, this is not the same as saying that the company will forgive any mistake made by its employees, rather it is a matter of the employee being subject to clear expectations and instructions, as well as support in challenging or ambiguous tasks. Furthermore, this construct also reflects whether or not an employee believes that the employer values his or her contributions to the company.

Core self-evaluations refer to an individual's evaluations of his or her own abilities and status in the work-role (Kahn, 1990). The higher the employee's confidence in his or her own abilities, the more likely they are to be engaged in their work. Unlike the other two constructs,

who are both highly influenced by external factors in combination with internal factors, Kahn (1992) found that this confidence is a relatively stable, individual factor.

Together, the three outlined constructs determine the psychological and physical readiness of an individual to invest themselves in work-role performance, in other words their readiness to become engaged for their work.

2.4 Theoretical model

Based on our literature review we formulated the figure shown below in order to explore our research question: “How does empowering and directive leadership influence engagement in employees at a distance?”.

While previous literature has shown that empowering leadership leads to an increase in employee engagement (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), the impact of directive leadership on employee engagement is not explored to the same extent. These studies did also not account for the impact of distance on the impact, as such we believe our case-study will offer an initial understanding of the relationship outlined by our research model, which in turn can be used for further research.



Figure 1 – Research model

3 Methodology

This section will outline the methodology employed to perform the research done in this thesis. According to Hakim (2000) “design deals primarily with aims, uses, purposes, intentions and plans...” and as such these are the elements that will be reviewed in this section. Given the exploratory nature of our case study, and the risks associated with such studies, we also include a thorough review of our analysis-process for future reference.

3.1 Research purpose

The purpose of the research is to develop an initial understanding of the relationship between certain leadership styles and employee engagement when there is distance between leader and follower. Given the increasing trend towards internationalization, and thus the increasing trend in employees working at a distance from their leadership, we intend our research to serve as an initial foray into the increasingly relevant field of management at a distance.

3.2 Research design

Due to the limited research done within the field of employee engagement and distance up to this point, we have chosen a flexible, exploratory approach in our study, with the intention to discover hitherto undiscovered connections between leadership style and engagement when there is distance between leader and follower.

By utilizing a flexible case study design we are able to explore the relationship between the factors of our model in a specific setting, which can then be considered as a “... precursor to some more ‘hard-nosed’ experiment or survey...” (Robson & McCartan, 2011, p. 151). We have therefore chosen to focus our research on a specific company and a small sample of employees in order to perform this initial exploration. While single-case studies are ideal for explorative research, there are many aspects that must be considered when employing such a design. Due to the small sample size and the risk of interpretation or bias by us as researchers, we thoroughly review each aspect that has lead us to our conclusions. The potential risks and weaknesses of our design will be further discussed in chapter 5.

3.3 Context

In order to explore the outlined relationship, we wished to interview several groups within the same company where distance between leadership and employees were a factor. As such we had to identify groups which performed more or less the same work, where all the subjects

worked at a distance from their supervisor and where other contributing factors such as cultural differences were at a minimum or could be controlled for.

Given our criteria, we found an international medical company which provides medical training equipment and training to hospitals, universities and other relevant institutions all over the world. This company will henceforth be referred to as 'Medcom'.

Unlike many other actors in the medical industry, Medcom is not an organization which focuses purely on profit. While profit is still important, their main goal is that their products and training will contribute to the work of saving lives, in other words the company has a prosocial mission. Because of this mission, Medcom has a reputation and a standing within the industry as a 'good' company. The organization also has a non-profit sister company, which focuses on developing products and programs that contribute to preserving lives of newborns and mothers in low-resource countries.

As a multinational company, Medcom employs people in 23 different countries all over the world. In addition, their production facilities are spread out over several different locations. This means that the employees of Medcom are constantly working in an environment where distance is a factor. As such the organization offered us multiple opportunities to observe employees working at a distance from their immediate supervisor.

In order to isolate the impact of a leader's actions on subordinates we chose to focus on the relationship between employees of Medcom and their immediate supervisors. As such we had to identify groups of people to interview that fit our criteria, while also controlling for extraneous variables that would influence our findings. Our method of selecting and interviewing these subjects will be discussed in further detail in the following section.

We decided to interview three groups or 'sets' consisting of two employees and one immediate supervisor each. Our purpose in selecting such a small sample was to enable us to explore each subject's perceptions and experiences thoroughly in order to identify the impacting factors on the subordinates' engagement. By interviewing both supervisor and subordinate, we also achieved a better understanding of the actual relationship than we would have gotten if we only interviewed one side of the relationship.

3.4 Data collection

3.4.1 Subject selection

Given the criteria listed above, we identified the salesmen of Medcom as good candidates for our research. These salesmen are full-time employees that work independently. Their tasks include approaching customers in order to ascertain their requirements, suggesting a solution and selling a package containing both training resources and equipment to fit the customer's needs. In addition to this, the salesmen of Medcom have home offices as their personal place of business, making them physically distant from their immediate supervisor in all parts of their work barring scheduled meetings.

Medcom's company structure is such that each country or region has its own country/region manager who manages a team of salesmen, in addition to the support structure of the company within that country. The salesmen are in turn called territory managers, where each of the salesmen are responsible for one area within the country or region. Their responsibilities within their territory is to serve as a first point of contact with all customers, both when initiating sales themselves and when approached from interested parties within their territory. They also have the responsibility of developing and suggesting solutions to the clients within their territory and scheduling relevant training. As such, the territory managers are more or less completely autonomous within their territory, utilizing the rest of Medcom's sales organization as a support structure in order to meet their client's needs and expectations. Due to their responsibility in suggesting tailored solutions to each client, most of the salesmen consider themselves as more of a consultant than a salesman in the strictest sense of the word. They are not only trying to push products to clients, they are trying to build mutually beneficial long-term relationships with the clients.

In order to identify differences in our relevant factors we chose three countries in Europe where we expected to uncover differences, both when it came to physical distance and potentially also social distance due to cultural differences. We also took into account the current lifetime of the regions in question. Given the fact that Medcom is a company that is still developing, we wished to focus on already well-established regions where we could expect the general company culture to have an influence, rather than the culture being based purely on the attitudes of the supervisor of that region as is common in newly established regions. Given these criteria, we identified Germany, Norway and the Benelux region (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) as candidates of interest.

Our reasoning for including Norway was the fact that we expected cultural factors to be an influencing factor. As such we included Norway as a comparison group for this dimension due to the fact that we are familiar with the general work culture for leader-follower relationships in Norway. We also included questions related to this in our interview guide for further control. Through this approach we intended to compare the responses from Norway with the responses from the other two countries in order to identify relationships that could be attributed to categorical differences between our subject regions caused by general cultural differences.

After identifying the countries we wished to interview, we approached the relevant country managers through the central HR department of Medcom. The HR department then addressed their country/region managers, who then provided us with two subjects each who worked at a distance from them. As such we had three groups, or sets, consisting of three people, one supervisor and two subordinates, each group from a different country.

3.4.2 Interviews and coding

Once we had identified the specific subjects, we approached them via e-mail, requesting their cooperation in our research project. Due to the international aspect of the research, the interviews were all conducted via Skype in the closest common language possible between ourselves and the subjects in question. As such, we interviewed the subjects from Germany and Benelux in English, while the Norwegian subjects were interviewed in Norwegian. Quotes from the Norwegian subjects have therefore been translated as directly as possible in order to present these in English as part of our findings.

In preparation for the interviews we created an interview guide in order to uncover the factors relevant to our model, as well as their relationship with each other. We used a structure containing both open and specific questions. This structure allowed us to encourage the subject to be as elaborate as possible while at the same time enabling us to trace specific cases and the influencing factors in those cases. The more specific questions functioned as a tool for controlling the answers of the open questions, as well as to give us a more general understanding of the subjects' perceptions. Due to the explorative nature of our research we also made an effort to approach each interview with an open and inquisitive mindset, exploring new paths as they became apparent during the interview. Ideally we would have preferred to talk to the subjects a second time in order to delve deeper into the interesting relationships we discovered during the first interview, however due to time-constraints we

were not able to do this in our case. After the interview was completed, we transcribed it in order to facilitate our coding process.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, we employed a thematic coding approach in order to structure our findings and extract information from the interviews. Thematic coding is considered a generic approach to analyzing qualitative data that are not necessarily linked to any particular theoretic perspective (Robson & McCartan, 2011) and as such it is the best approach considering our exploratory mindset.

Thematic coding is performed by labelling all parts of the collected data based on their implications for the constructs of the model (Robson & McCartan, 2011). Data with the same label are then grouped together and used to identify the ‘values’ of the constructs of the model. These groups are then used as a basis for interpretation, allowing us to observe the relationship between leadership style and engagement for each subject, and the distance and its influence in each case.

In line with the principles of thematic coding we assigned labels to the statements of each subject, grouped statements with the same label together and used the combination of these statements to create a general picture of the specific subject’s perception of the constructs. For most of the cases we employed a high/low scale in order to assign a ‘value’ to each construct for comparison with the other subjects. Low perceived social distance meant that the subject perceived a close personal relationship between himself/herself and the supervisor and vice versa. We measured both physical distance and perceived frequency of interaction directly as these were not aggregated based on multiple statements from a subject, but rather on answers to one of our specific questions. An example of our coding process is shown in table 1 in chapter 4.

With the purpose of identifying each subject’s level of engagement, we coded the three antecedents of engagement discussed in our literature review. Each antecedent was coded on a high/low scale. High value congruence meant that there was a good match between company values and the subject’s values, high perceived organizational support meant that the subject felt safe in the work-environment and high core self-evaluations meant that the subject felt confident in his/her work. Together these three antecedents were used to identify employee engagement, where a high score on all three antecedents identified the subject’s level of engagement as high.

The leadership style employed by specific supervisors was identified based on a combination of statements made by both the supervisors themselves and their subordinates. As such we grouped all of these statements together in one table in order to identify the leadership style of the supervisor in question. We measured this factor on the aforementioned directive/empowering scale as we consider these to be opposites. Examples of quotes from our interviews and their coding is shown in table 2 in chapter 4.

After creating an overview of the 'values' for each specific subject we used a level 2 coding process in order to identify the outcomes of the different leadership styles on employee engagement. Outcomes of interest that were suggested by a single subject were marked, and if another subject suggested something relatively similar these statements were then grouped together. If such an outcome or effect was suggested by a sufficient amount of our subjects, we treated it as a valid finding. These findings are discussed in the next chapter.

4 Findings

This section will outline the findings we made during our analysis of the interviews. Our purpose in our analysis was to uncover relationships related to our research question: “How does empowering and directive leadership influence engagement in employees at a distance?”. As such this section will review our findings related to the impact of distance on employee engagement.

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the statements made during the interviews. Where possible we have shown the basis of our identifications using direct quotes, however in many cases the identification is a result of a longer exchange between interviewer and interviewee, and as such these quotes are not easily displayed in context without showing large excerpts of the interviews. Table 1 and 2 below show examples of our coding as it was discussed in chapter 3.4.2. Our identification of the different factors per subject are shown in table 3, which is then used as a basis for the identifications made in the last two parts of this section. All quotes are followed by a country-code which can be used to keep track of statements for each of the country sets in relation to each other.

High distance:	Low distance:
N/A	I am not sensing any problems between myself and her in physical or emotional distance. Like what I can or can't tell her. I never had the thought well it would be nice if our businesses are more close together in physical distance. Because if I want to talk to her and I think it has to be face to face, we make an appointment to meet each other face to face.
	Good. Yeah I can tell her everything I'd like to tell her, also personal things.
	<i>Do you feel like you know her personally?</i> Yeah.
	I know the name of her husband or children and I know what she is doing for hobbies.

Table 1 – Examples of quotes related to social distance and their coding

Directive leadership style:	Empowering leadership style:
“So I would say that today, one year later I am also much more controlling the behavior on a micro level on a weekly basis.”	“...my decision in this case was to give her as much freedom as possible.”
“Now it's more about how many customer visits they have next week and if there is more we can do to get even more customer visits...”	“... I try to trust them and try to tell them that I'm trusting in their skills and their abilities to make right decisions and to manage their territories on their own very well.”

Table 2 – Examples of quotes related to leadership style and their coding

4.1 Leadership style

Our purpose in exploring leadership style was to discover what kind of leadership style the three supervisors in question employed. We limited ourselves to looking at whether or not the leaders in question employed a more directive or a more empowering leadership style. As already mentioned we consider these two styles to be on opposite sides of a scale and as such they cannot coexist in the same observed instance. A leader might switch between the two, but it is impossible to employ both of them at the same time. As such we attempted to identify each leader on a scale where a leader was either considered empowering or directive in his/her general leadership style, with qualifications of high/ medium/ low where relevant.

“He is a fair boss really. The words he is choosing.. He is very fair and very friendly so that makes it nice to work with him. Even when he has sent me three reminders today, he wrote a nice text and said “Hey, don’t forget to do this until Tuesday” (C1)

“[she] has a great deal of trust in us so that she lets us work on our own.” (C2)

“... She knows that I have a lot of experience in sales, not only in Medcom, but also with my previous company, and therefore she is not holding my hand all the time... And when we have an issue or a question we know where she is and we can contact her.” (C3)

As evidenced by the statements above, and others like it, we identified that the supervisors in all our subject countries employed an empowering leadership style in general, allowing their employees freedom to develop their own solutions, only offering support and making decisions when approached by their subordinates.

However, while they all exhibited a general preference for empowering leadership, they also employed a more directive approach in some cases. Specifically, this behavior was attributed to a recent change in reporting systems within the organization, but they also mentioned cases where they reverted to a more directive approach due to personal preference or in times of crisis.

“... today, one year later I am also much more controlling the behavior on a micro level on a weekly basis. If they have reached their customers, if they are doing this, if they are doing that and really a very close follow up, and I think this is different to the way I managed them last year.” (C1)

A supervisor stated this after elaborating how his leadership style had changed due to a change in higher management.

“... now it is more about how many customer visits they have next week and what can you do to increase this when you are visiting this or that city. So we are more detail-oriented now...”
(C2)

This change in behavior, which was exhibited to different degrees in each of the three supervisors, allowed us to place them on different places on the scale of empowering vs. directive leadership, thus allowing for interpretation in relation to the other factors of our model.

“She is not detail-oriented at all, except when we are especially challenged.” (C2)

Interestingly, we observed that in the cases where the supervisors indicated a change towards a more directive leadership style, the subordinates of those leaders did not comment on this change, but rather contradicted it as evidenced by the following statements made by a supervisor and a subordinate within the same set.

“... I am also much more controlling the behavior on a micro level on a weekly basis. If they have reached their customers, if they are doing this, if they are doing that and really a very close follow up and I think this is different to the way I managed them last year.” (C2)

“... Very engaged and available, and very open for solutions, possibilities and dialogue. Very equal-minded. The opposite of dictatorial.” (C2)

While the increase in control exerted by the supervisor cannot be debated, the fact that the subordinates do not mention this change when talking about their immediate supervisor is interesting. This might be explained by their approach to how they exercise this control, as the subordinates in the relevant sets stated they perceived that the control in question came out of concern and a willingness to help, rather than an intent to control. This in turn might be related to the low degree of the social distance in these cases, as we will discuss in the next section and as such it can indicate that a closer personal relationship ‘softens’ the negative impact of controlling the employees more closely. Although this relationship was not directly related to our initial research question we wished to include the identification of this potential relationship as it is an interesting relationship that might merit further research.

4.2 Leadership distance

Our purpose in measuring leadership distance was to discover whether or not distance played a part in determining the engagement of employees, subject to certain leadership styles. We

wished to measure the actual and perceived distance between a supervisor and subordinates in order to discover potential relationships between distance and engagement.

4.2.1 Perceived social distance

As mentioned in chapter 3, the purpose of including Norway as one of the subject countries was primarily to control for social distance, including a country where we expected that social distance would be low. However, we did not discover as much variation in social distance as we initially expected in the other countries. When prompted to discuss the personal relationship between themselves and their supervisor the subjects stated:

“It’s like a friend. We have a lot of same interests and we have also the same taste in food. We go often together in different restaurants. I think he is like a friend.” (C1)

“Very close might be an exaggeration, but you can’t have a much better relationship in my opinion (with one’s supervisor).” (C2)

“... in one way I don’t see her as my boss, but I respect her decisions. We talk in the same language, but she has to make some decisions and I am aware and conscious about that.” (C3)

Through these statements, which represent all three sets, and others like this, we identified that social distance between supervisor and subordinate was low in all the subject countries in our specific case. They all felt that they had a good, collegial relationship with their supervisors, with knowledge of each other’s family situation and personal preferences. In some cases, the subjects pointed out that they felt that social distance was uncommonly low in their case when they compared it to impressions they had from friends working in the same sector in other companies. This difference was generally attributed to the company culture of Medcom, which our subjects stated felt encouraged low social distance. This lack of variation along one of the dimensions of distance must be taken into account when evaluating the implications of our research, as the subjects only represent cases of low perceived social distance.

4.2.2 Physical distance

Given the categorical differences in size between the subject countries, we expected some difference in the observations when it came to physical distance between supervisor and subordinate. However, we chose to measure physical distance in travelling time rather than in

kilometers due to the fact that this would serve as a better measure of distance in relation to its potential impact on the leader-follower relationship and employee engagement.

“With airplane it’s three and a half hours.” (C1)

“With direct flights it will take me three hours.” (C2)

“I think about four and a half, or five hours sort of.” (C3)

Because of this approach, we found less difference in physical distance than we initially expected. With some notable exceptions where supervisor and subordinate were geographically located close to each other due to random, out-of-company, factors, most of the subordinates had to travel for around four hours to see their supervisor, or vice versa. It is worth noting here that with only one exception, all of our subjects worked out of home offices as is the Medcom norm for salesmen. Whether working from home or not had a specific impact cannot be concluded, however it ensures that all of our subjects were isolated from other parts of the company which could potentially have functioned as surrogates for the immediate supervisor, and therefore influenced our identifications.

4.2.3 Perceived frequency of interaction

We expected frequency of interaction, in other words the amount of times that a supervisor and subordinate communicated in some way, to vary with the type of leadership style the supervisor in question employed. Given the fact that an empowering leader should allow their subordinates freedom to make their own decisions, we expected the frequency of interaction to decrease in cases where the leader employed a highly empowering leadership style. However, based on the statements below and others like it we found no evident difference in frequency of interaction between the three supervisors.

“Daily or almost daily? I think it’s around six times in a week.” (C1)

“It’s a lot. Mail is of course the most common, but it does not have to be personal mail, it might as well be a mail for several people, but it is back and forth constantly. E-mail and SMS is very, very often. Several times a day at least.” (C2)

“Daily basis on mail. As I mentioned, by phone it must be twice a week.” (C3)

Granted, we have identified all our subject supervisors as relatively empowering in their approach, however, they all had some sort of interaction with their subordinates on a daily basis. It is also worth mentioning that the subordinates did not perceive this interaction as

control, but rather as concern from a leader who wished to be of assistance. Some of this effect might be attributed to the low degree of social distance, which, according to statements made by the subjects, made them perceive these calls as friendly and supportive, rather than controlling. In the few cases the subjects mentioned where frequency of interaction was more seldom, during specific time intervals during their employment, they all expressed that a higher frequency of interaction might have engaged them more. However, when asked about whether or not they wished to be controlled, they all answered that this would have a negative impact on their engagement. As such it seems that a high frequency of interaction, coupled with a low social distance, might allow leaders who are perceived as empowering to control their subordinates without the negative engagement effects associated with the subject feeling controlled.

4.3 Engagement

Our purpose in measuring engagement was to discover whether or not there is any difference in the outcome of this factor when there is distance between a leader and a follower. Our initial expectation was that engagement would be influenced by the leaders' choice of leadership style, regardless of distance. Given that we are focusing on engagement that occurs through external factors, it is here most relevant to consider the effect of perceived organizational support on the subordinates' engagement. While the other two antecedents discussed in the literature review are equally important in predicting employee engagement, value congruence and core self-evaluations largely stem from intrinsic factors and are as such not influenced by a supervisor's leadership style. As such, we have chosen to focus on organizational support in this section, while showing our identification of all three antecedents in table 3.

Given our identification of all the supervisors as empowering leaders, and the well-established relationship between empowering leadership and organizational support as discussed in the literature review, we expected perceived organizational support to be high for most of our subjects.

“If someone has a complaint he protects us.” (C1)

“Yes we had a large bid a while back where she was very engaged, very supportive and regularly in contact with us to keep us going and motivate us.” (C2)

As evidenced by the statements above, and others like it, our expectation held true. We identified organizational support as high for all our subjects as you can see from table 3. However, we did identify cases where there was a discrepancy between organizational support from immediate supervisor and the rest of the organization. This discrepancy, and the outcome of it, is discussed more extensively in chapter 4.6.

4.4 Summary

Based on our observations during the interviews we created the following table in order to highlight the relationship between the different factors which we have used to make our identifications. The high/ low ‘values’ in the table are a result of summation of statements, with the exception of physical distance and perceived frequency of interaction who are both based on direct quotes. See section 3.4.2 for a more thorough explanation of how the specific values were measured and identified.

Country	Subject	Leadership style of supervisor	Perceived social distance	Physical distance	Perceived frequency of interaction	Value congruence	Organizational support	Core self-evaluations
C1	S1	Empowering, trending towards more directive.	Low	“3 hours”	“10 times per week.”	High	High	High
C1	S2	Empowering, trending towards more directive.	Low	“3,5 hours”	“Once a day.”	High	High	High
C2	S3	Empowering, but with a high degree of control.	Low	“3 hours”	“Once or twice per day.”	High	High	High
C2	S4	Empowering, but with a high degree of control.	Low	“6 hours”	“Several times a day at least.”	High, but decreasing due to organizational changes	High	High, but decreasing due to increased control
C3	S5	Highly empowering.	Low	“4-5 hours”	“Almost daily.”	High	High from immediate supervisor, but low from rest of organization	High
C3	S6	Highly empowering.	Low	“1 hour”	“Daily”	High	High	High

Table 3 – Summary of the data collected from our interviews (subjects are all subordinates, the results of the interviews with the supervisors are shown in the “Leadership style of supervisor” column.)

4.5 The impact of leadership style on engagement

Based on the implications suggested by our literature review, we expected to find that empowering leadership made employees more engaged, regardless of distance. As previously mentioned, we identified all of the supervisors in our case as empowering leaders. As such, we did not have a directive leader as a contrast for comparison, however most of our subjects stated that their supervisor's actions made them engaged, which was in line with our expectation and established theory related to empowering leadership and engagement.

"She brought to my attention she had an idea for a solution and we discussed it and then I followed up on her idea to make a specific demonstration appointment with the customer." (C1)

"She was very supportive and kept in touch regularly to keep us motivated." (C2)

"... if you explain a very complicated product and you make mistakes then he is in a very nice way he is helping you to do it the right way." (C3)

We did however uncover some interesting relationships based on statements made by several subjects. We observed that employees perceived a different kind of leadership from managers higher up in the firm than from their immediate supervisors. Specifically, this was tied to the control systems employed by Medcom, which is a reporting system where each salesman has to record his/ her actions. These reports are then used in order to determine the efficiency of the employee in relation to end-of-year bonuses et cetera. As such, many of the subjects viewed this control system as a substitute for leadership from higher management, and the nature of the system was perceived by the employees as clearly directive.

Due to this occurrence we were able to identify a relationship of interest between a directive leadership style and employee engagement.

One employee, when asked about the value congruence between himself and the company stated the following:

"... There is a change that has been going on in the last years that is turning Medcom into more and more of a 'counting' firm. With specific actions and a reporting system that counts specific tasks. And as a person you become less visible and uninteresting." (C2)

The subject in question went on to expand on the result of this:

"... it is a very bad development because you remove the feeling that you matter. And that is something I do not like. Everything is counted and statistics, statistics, statistics. And

everything that is not counted is not observed at all. It makes you very cynical about your own actions.” (C2)

When prompted about the effect of this development on his engagement he stated:

“I know that this is not good over time because it does not engage. I do not think it is good for the customer either, because we have always been best when it comes to being close to our customers, and we no longer have time for this because it is not measured.” (C2)

Another subject, when discussing whether he could think of any tasks that he has to perform without knowing the purpose stated the following in relation to the control system and its customer visit requirement:

“So on a weekly basis we have to make twelve visits a week. So every three months we must have 130 visits. For me it’s not the number of the visits which is the most important, for me it’s more about the quality of the visits. So sometimes we are doing some visits just to do visits, without any satisfaction.” (C3)

The subject goes on to indicate that this type of control, combined with a lack of an understanding of the purpose of the control, leads to increased disengagement.

Based on statements like these, and other related indications across all the subject sets, we identified that expanded control, combined with a low degree of communication related to the purpose of the control, leads to increased disengagement in the employees. All our subjects attributed this increased control to higher management, making the subordinates in our set perceive these managers as directive managers. The subjects stated that because of this approach, they feel like their contributions to the company that are not measured by the control systems are not observed by higher management and because of this they change their behavior in order to reach the observed numbers rather than seeking to achieve what they believe would be the best possible outcome for the client. In turn, this leads to increased disengagement because they feel like the expanded control stops them from performing their job in the way they believe is ideal, effectively limiting the freedom that they require to function as individual salesmen. While this effect is not strictly related to distance, we felt that the finding in itself was interesting enough to be included. We did not uncover enough evidence to suggest whether or not this impact was felt more keenly due to distance, however based on indications from some of the subjects we believe that this might be the case. Given the importance for companies to both maintain control, while also engaging its employees, we propose that this relationship merits further research.

4.6 The impact of distance on engagement

As evidenced by table 3, there was not a great degree of variation in the antecedents of engagement measured in the interviews. This outcome was not entirely unexpected due to the nature of the work and hiring policy of Medcom. The sales department values the ability to work individually highly, and this ability is tied to an employee's intrinsic motivation and core self-evaluations. In addition, because of the prosocial attitude of the company, they tend to attract applicants who are interested in working for a company that prioritizes 'the greater good', in other words value congruence will also be generally high.

As mentioned earlier, we did uncover some particularly interesting relationships when discussing organizational support with the subjects. Due to the empowering leadership style employed by all of the immediate supervisors, we explored the relationships further, expanding the scope to higher management within the organization where it was relevant during the interviews. Several subjects in all of the sets pointed out that while they felt their immediate leader was highly supporting, support from higher up in, or in other parts of, the hierarchy was often very hard to obtain, and as such they perceived this as one of their main sources of disengagement.

When asked about reasons for disengagement one of our subjects stated the following:

"At the moment we have an issue with one of our projects in a large university hospital and this has been dragging on for almost a year now." (C3)

After exploring this topic the subject stated that his/ her disengagement came as a result of him being held responsible, by the customer, for things that were outside of his control, in this case the development and introduction of a new product that the hospital in question had already purchased. A different subject in the same country set, when asked about aspects that caused disengagement, stated:

"... It [the product] was at the end of its life last year and the new version would normally have come out last year as well. We are still waiting for it. And every two or three months I have to postpone it to my customer and say that it will come out later. So I feel a little bit on my own island." (C3)

Based on these statements and others like it we identified that while an immediate leader can be perceived as highly supportive, it is possible for an employee to feel unsupported by other parts of the organization, which in turn negatively influences employee engagement. In the interest of uncovering the impact of distance on such a relationship, we explored whether or

not they felt that this impact would be reduced if there was less distance between the subject and the relevant department. The subjects all stated that they believed closer proximity would negate the negative effects, as they would then be able to obtain the information they needed more easily and personally. When asked how he felt closer physical distance would change his perception of such problems, one of the subjects made the following statement.

“... I would stand a lot of times in his office and drink coffee together so the communication would be closer.” (C1)

Based on such statements we identified that distance increases the impact of negative effects on employee engagement. When employees are distant from the relevant parts of the organization for a specific task, it enforces the impact of issues that negatively affect employee engagement. While our subjects stated that they believed they would feel this effect more keenly under a directive leader, we do not have the observations to support their claim, however such a statement is in line with our identified impact of leadership style on employee engagement as discussed in chapter 4.5. Due to the potential implications such a relationship can have on established theory, related to management of distant employees, we believe that this merits further research.

5 Discussion

In this study we have explored the following research question: “How does empowering and directive leadership influence engagement in employees at a distance?”. By applying this research question to the specific case of Medcom, we intended to highlight the impact of distance. This section will therefore evaluate our aforementioned findings in relation to existing theory.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The main finding of this study is that, in the case of Medcom and in line with the findings of Tims et al. (2011), empowering leadership can be considered an efficient leadership style for encouraging employee engagement, even at a distance.

Using the antecedents of engagement suggested by Rich, et al (2010), we expected engagement to vary based on three factors: value congruence, perceived organizational support and core self-evaluations. While it is well-established that these three constructs can be used to effectively predict employee engagement, we propose that a measure of distance should be included. While leader-follower distance cannot be considered an antecedent of employee engagement, it could potentially affect the engagement outcome, where high distance can negatively impact the effects of the three constructs on the employee’s engagement, as suggested by our findings in chapter 4.6.

We also propose that perceived organizational support must be measured for more than one part of the organization. As suggested by our findings in chapter 4.5, it is possible for an employee to feel supported by immediate supervisors, positively affecting his/ her engagement, while at the same time feeling a negative impact on his/ her engagement due to lack of organizational support from other parts of the organization.

5.2 Practical implications

Based on our findings we consider some practical implications of our propositions. Given that this is a case-study on a specific company, these practical implications will be decreasingly relevant the more dissimilar another company is. However, the implications can be used as both general guidelines and as propositions for further research.

Our first proposition, that distance enforces the negative impact of effects on engagement, means that supervisors with distant subordinates have to be extra careful in their treatment of

subordinates if they wish to encourage engagement. What one might consider a small change in a close-proximity situation, might be perceived as a far greater change by distant employees, particularly if the purpose of such a change has not been clearly communicated. This means that companies that wish to encourage engagement in their subordinates should go to great lengths to make their distant employees feel included, both when making decisions and when communicating information within the company.

Another implication of our research is that, in line with general assumptions, distance makes it easier for an employee to feel isolated. When distant employees struggle to obtain the support they need in order to perform their work tasks, they become disengaged. As such, it is important that a company that wishes to encourage engagement in subordinates ensure that the distant employees has the support and means required to perform his/ her work tasks efficiently readily available, despite the distance.

Based on our findings in chapter 4.5, we also suggest that while a certain degree of control is necessary to manage distant employees, one should be careful when implementing quantitative measures of control. While such measures can be effective in many situations, it does not necessarily measure the actual work performance of an employee, and it can lead to both disengagement and a change in working behavior, as evidenced in our findings. We therefore propose that a company that wishes to encourage engagement in distant employees, while at the same time exercising some measure of control over their work performance, should include the relevant employees in developing good measures of work performance, rather than focus on specific quantitative measures.

5.3 Limitations

In this section we will consider the limitations of our study that we have identified during our research. The purpose of this is twofold: (1) to make you, as a reader, more aware of the potential shortcomings of our research that we have identified ourselves and (2) to help you as a reader understand our reasoning and assumptions, so that you are more easily able to identify the relevant challenges should you wish to use our research, either for further research into the subject or for practical applications.

5.3.1 Practical challenges

Access to subjects

Even though we identified the company we wished to research at an early stage during the research project, it took us a long time to gain access to the individual subjects we wished to

interview. Due to the nature of the research as a master thesis with a formal deadline, this meant that we were not able to perform follow-up interviews of the more interesting relationships that were uncovered during the interviews. Although we mitigated this effect to some extent by adopting an explorative approach, where we explored the subjects' suggestions during the interviews, there were some relationships that we would have preferred to delve into more deeply through a follow-up interview. Even though we are convinced that our results and findings are valid, we feel that follow-up interviews would have allowed for an even deeper understanding of the relationship between the factors, which in turn would increase our research's reliability further.

Language barriers

Due to the multinational nature of our research we expected that language might lead to some challenges related to misunderstandings, as well as increasing the risk of not being able to establish the necessary trust between interviewer and subject due to language barriers. With the exception of the interviews in Norway, all the interviews were performed in English. While Medcom's company language is English, we correctly expected the English proficiency of our subjects to vary, and this could in turn affect our findings. In order to prevent this, we took great care in the introduction to each interview to both define relevant terms used during the interview and to guarantee that the subject felt safe, both when it came to anonymity and also making sure they felt at ease with the situation. We believe that this structured approach to the beginning of each interview, which we implemented as part of our interview guide, allowed us to overcome the challenges related to language barriers.

Quality of our research design

When evaluating the quality of a research design one has to consider four criteria: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Yin, 2014). Due to the exploratory nature of our research it is not relevant to consider the internal validity, however the other three constructs will be discussed.

When assessing construct validity, one has to consider to what extent the test we have performed measures what we claim that it does. Construct validity is often considered one of the main weaknesses when one is performing case studies, and as such it merits discussion (Yin, 2014). It is well-documented that through extensive work with a subject such as ours, the researcher often develops a 'feel' for the subject, which in turn will influence the researcher's findings (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2011). We believe that our awareness of these challenges, coupled with a structured approach and a thorough presentation of our

findings help mitigate the challenges related to construct validity. We have also performed a thorough literature review, reviewing well-established articles and research that helped us define and understand the factors that make up our research model.

External validity is related to the generalizability of our findings. Given the nature of our research, as an explorative case study where we have looked at one specific company, we have no evidence to suggest that our findings are generalizable. However, one cannot assume the contrary either. Given the lack of previous research into the impact of distance on employee engagement, we hope that our research can be used as a basis and inspiration for further research into the subject.

When evaluating reliability, one has to consider the extent to which the analysis and data collection techniques will yield consistent results (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2011). Given the fact that this research is performed as a case study, it is reasonable to expect that the exact results will not be observed in a similar study in another company, however we believe that if one were to conduct similar research on another company with the same characteristics, the main findings would be the same. It is also important to consider whether or not there is transparency in how we reached our conclusions, and we believe that this is the case as we have given a thorough description of the whole process, from subject selection to analysis and identifications. Another threat to reliability that is particularly relevant when one is conducting a qualitative study with interviews is the risk of observer error and bias, in other words that we perform interviews and interpret the statements made by the subjects in a different way than the subject meant. By employing a structured approach, where only one person performed the interviews and asking clarifying/ summarizing questions to the subjects during the interviews, we believe that we have handled this risk sufficiently.

5.4 Further research

Based on our findings and propositions we have identified two relationships that we believe merit further research. First and foremost, we found that distance between supervisor and subordinate can be considered a mediating factor to the negative impact of the leader's actions on employee engagement. In other words, when the employee perceives a situation that negatively impacts his/ her engagement, this effect is increased when there is distance between supervisor and subordinate. While we found strong indications of this throughout all of our interview sets, there are some related relationships we did not uncover enough information about. One such relationship is the impact on engagement of situations that the

employee perceives as positive. We have not found indications as to whether or not this effect is changed due to distance, and while one can assume so, it would be interesting to research this effect further in order to better understand the impact of leader-follower distance on engagement.

Another aspect that merits further research is the impact of perceived social distance and physical distance on employee engagement. While our research included and measured these factors as well, we uncovered little to no variation in our subjects regarding these factors, and as such we cannot say whether or not the propositions we have made can be generalized beyond companies where perceived social distance is low and physical distance between supervisor and subordinate is around four hours. We are also not able to identify whether or not these constructs also have a potential specific impact on employee engagement. As such we believe this merits further researcher in order to identify the potential impacts of variations in these dimensions of distance as well.

Based on the general lack of observed variation among several of the dimensions that make up our research model, we suggest that further research should involve employees in different companies, in order to possibly observe greater variation and thus deduce more generalizable relationships.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the relationship between empowering and directive leadership styles and engagement, given distance between leader and follower. Using a case study of a medical company, we explored the following research questions: “How does empowering and directive leadership influence engagement in employees at a distance?”.

We identified two particularly interesting effects: (1) distance increases the impact of situations that negatively influence employee engagement. In other words, negative influences are made ‘more’ negative when there is distance between supervisor and subordinate. Our subjects all stated that the negative impacts on their engagement would be less if they were physically closer. (2) Expanded organizational control makes the subjects less engaged in their work, due to the fact that they feel that their actual efforts are unobserved. We also found that such a control structure can lead to a change in the behavior of the employees, from prioritizing work quality to prioritizing the aspects that are measured by the organization’s reporting system. This means that companies have to be particularly careful when formulating the measures they use to control employees. While this relationship is not strictly related to distance, we propose that the feeling of ‘disconnection’ such control measures lead to, according to our subjects, is enforced by distance, however due to the fact that we have not observed subjects with little to no distance we cannot say whether or not this is the case.

Through our interviews we observed little to no variation along the dimensions of social distance and physical distance, nor did we observe a strictly directive leadership style in any of the supervisors. This means that while we have a strong foundation for our identifications, we have not observed cases where these factors were different and thus we cannot identify the particular effects of changes in social and physical distance. While we observed some variation in leadership style, we would have preferred to observe a dedicated directive leader in order to give our identified effects increased reliability. We also found a low degree of general variation of engagement in all our subjects, however this was handled through focusing on specific cases that affected their engagement, as well as qualifications and elaborations made by the subjects during the interviews. While their general engagement was high, they had all experienced situations that made them more and/ or less engaged, which gave us relationships to analyze.

7 References

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