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What Makes a Leader Stand Out?

How Leadership Evaluations Challenge the Full Range Leadership Theory and Reveal What People Value in Leaders

Master's thesis the Master's programme Design and Construction Project Management

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CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
Gothenburg, Sweden 2026
www.chalmers.se

MASTER THESIS TEKX08

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Management*

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Abstract

This study examines how leadership is interpreted, evaluated, and justified in an evaluative context by analyzing student assessments of award-winning leaders. The study is based on 232 student reports produced between 2017 and 2025 within a master-level leadership and communication course at Chalmers University of Technology. In the reports, students analyzed four leadership nominees using theoretical frameworks and justified which leader they considered most deserving of a leadership award.

Using a qualitative, interpretive, and abductive research design inspired by Gioia methodology, the study identifies recurring leadership dimensions through open coding, thematic categorization, and frequency analysis. The findings are further compared to the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), widely regarded as one of the most influential and widely applied frameworks in leadership research, in order to examine the extent to which the empirical findings align with or extend beyond these established frameworks.

The findings show that leadership evaluations consistently emphasize dimensions related to vision and inspiration, relational leadership, empowerment and development, communication, authenticity and values, team and culture building, and leadership balance. While many of the recurring leadership dimensions aligned with FRLT, several important aspects extended beyond the traditional framework and some leadership aspects were found to be more dominating than others. In particular, students repeatedly emphasized coaching, delegation, societal purpose, psychological safety, availability, relational closeness, and developmental support, regardless of whether they explicitly used FRLT-related frameworks or alternative leadership theories. The findings also demonstrate that leadership dimensions were used both as positive and negative justifications, highlighting tensions between empowering and controlling leadership practices.

The study contributes to leadership research by showing that while FRLT captures several leadership behaviors broadly associated with effective leadership, important relational and developmental dimensions as well as the dominance and tensions between dimensions remain underrepresented within the traditional framework. The findings therefore support previous critiques questioning whether FRLT can truly be considered a “full-range” theory of leadership and suggest that leadership evaluations in practice involve a broader set of dimensions than those explicitly represented in the model.

Keywords: Full Range Leadership Theory, Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Leadership Evaluation, Coaching Leadership, Relational Leadership.

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Acknowledgements

This master's thesis is the end of our studies in the master program Design and Construction Project Management at Chalmers University of Technology at the Department of Technology Management and Economics. The thesis was completed during the spring of 2026 in Gothenburg, Sweden.

We would like to thank our supervisor Martin Löwstedt at Chalmers University of Technology for the guidance, enthusiasm support and feedback throughout the study.

We would also like to thank our opponents Anna Hoang and Veroonika Taam for constructive feedback on how to improve the study.

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Gothenburg, 2026

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List of Acronyms

FRLT	Full Range Leadership Theory
MBE	Management-by-Exception
MBE-A	Active Management-by-Exception
MBE-P	Passive Management-by-Exception
MLQ	Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire
MPS	Managerial Practices Survey

1 Introduction

This section presents the background to the issue investigated in this master's thesis. It outlines broader context of the study and explains why the research is carried out.

1.1 Background

Large and small businesses, the government, public institutions and non-profit organizations all emphasize the need for more leadership. We are often told that nearly every challenge; from the global financial crisis and struggling schools to climate change and public health issues, can be addressed through stronger or more effective leadership (Day, 2014). As a result, millions of dollars and countless hours are spent on leadership development. Leadership has come to be viewed as a universal remedy, regardless of the situation. There is a widespread belief that whatever the problem may be, leadership is the answer (Day, 2014). Over many years, leadership studies have been focusing a lot on positive and normative models of leadership such as transformational leadership, authentic and servant leadership (Alvesson, 2020). These approaches usually highlight the characteristics that are desirable in a leader and link leadership to beneficial outcomes such as employee well-being, motivation, and performance (Alvesson, 2020).

However, several researchers have questioned whether this largely optimistic view of leadership really reflects everyday organizational realities. Alvesson (2020) for example, argues that contemporary leadership research has the tendency to promote "upbeat" leadership ideals that are attractive and publishable but not sufficiently grounded in the complexity of real working life. According to this critique, leadership is frequently defined in moral and positive terms, while less attention is paid to how leadership is actually practiced, perceived, and evaluated in real contexts. This is relevant because many organizational settings are known to be characterized by bureaucratic constraints and routine managerial work rather than inspirational leadership (Alvesson, 2020).

Previous research has identified a range of leadership traits and behaviors associated with effective leadership. Studies consistently highlight qualities such as integrity, communication, role modelling, empowerment, and the ability to create cohesion as important indicators of leadership quality (Hughes, 2017; Fransen et al., 2019). However, while leadership research has extensively examined the traits and behaviors associated with effective leadership, relatively little attention has been paid to how evaluators determine and justify leadership excellence when comparing multiple candidates (Day, 2014; Alvesson, 2020). Consequently, limited knowledge exists regarding which leadership dimensions become most influential, how they are weighed against one another, and whether existing leadership theories capture the criteria people use when identifying outstanding leaders.

To address this gap, this study analyzes 232 student reports from a leadership and communication course at a university in Sweden, in which students evaluated four leadership candidates based on interview material and theoretical frameworks before selecting one candidate as the most deserving recipient of a leadership award.

The reports provide a unique opportunity not only to test the generalizability of earlier findings but also explore whether existing leadership frameworks overlook relevant

evaluative dimensions that could refine or expand current understanding of what truly makes a leader stand out.

In the empirical material, many students relied on concepts related to the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), making it a relevant framework for the present study. Another reason for why the framework is relevant is because FRLT is one of the most influential and widely applied leadership theories in both research and practice, especially through its operationalization in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). At the same time, several scholars have questioned whether the framework fully captures the range of leadership behaviors that people associate with effective leadership, arguing that important dimensions may remain underrepresented (Antonakis & House, 2002; Michel et al., 2011; Day, 2014). Together, these reasons are the foundation for why FRLT is used as an important analytical point of comparison in this study.

1.2 Aim

The aim of the study is to examine how leadership is interpreted, evaluated, and justified in a structured evaluative context by identifying recurring and dominant leadership dimensions in student assessments of award-winning leaders. The evaluative context in this study is the process where students justify award-winning leadership in a similar structured approach nine years in a row. Through a qualitative analysis of student home exams, the study seeks to explore how leadership is constructed as valuable and effective, as well as how certain leadership behaviors are criticized or associated with less effective leadership.

More specifically, the study aims to identify which leadership dimensions emerge more frequently when students justify why one leader is considered superior to another, examine how these dimensions are used as both negative and positive justifications, and analyze their relative importance across evaluations.

Furthermore, the study seeks to compare the empirically identified leadership dimensions with the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) in order to examine the extent to which the findings align with, challenge, or extend beyond the framework.

In addition, the study seeks to examine whether leadership dimensions associated with the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) emerge across evaluations regardless of the specific theoretical framework applied by the students. Particular attention is given to whether students using alternative leadership frameworks still rely on concepts closely related to FRLT. By doing so, the study explores the extent to which FRLT-related leadership ideals appear to function as broader evaluative assumptions within leadership assessments, thereby contributing to discussions regarding the universality and broader applicability of the framework.

1.2.1 Research Questions

In line with the aim, the following research question and sub questions will guide the investigation:

- Which dimensions of leadership are recurring and dominating most frequently when motivating award-winning leadership?

- To what extent do these dimensions align with or extend beyond Full Range Leadership Theory?

The structured evaluative context allows the study to see both negative and positive justifications from the student reports. This means that the research can investigate further, in leadership dimensions, and highlight possible tensions within. This leads the study to the following second sub question:

- How are these dimensions used as positive vs negative justifications?

1.3 Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The first one is that a huge part of the empirical material consists of students' analyses of leadership rather than of leadership practice itself. This means that the study examines interpretations of interpretations which may be significantly different from actual leadership experiences.

Students' evaluations are shaped by their educational context, grading criteria, and the theoretical frameworks provided in the course as well as the theoretical frameworks they create in the home exams. As a result, their assessment may reflect academic ideals of leadership rather than what happens in real life in the workplace. While the course literature captures multiple dimensions of leadership, it may also influence what students attend to and how they assign value to different leadership behaviors.

Another limitation comes from the examination task as students are required to select one single winner, their analyses are structured around comparison and ranking. This format may exaggerate differences between leaders and oversimplify complex leadership practices into "better" vs. "worse". Furthermore, students may justify their choice of the best leaders after deciding on a winner, which may lead to rationalization rather than objective analysis. Some of their arguments should therefore be understood as post-hoc justifications rather than genuine evaluations.

Finally, the interpretive nature of qualitative research means that the authors' own assumptions about leadership and the authors' participation in the leadership and communication course, may influence how the material is coded and analyzed. Different researchers might identify other themes, dimensions, or tensions within the data. Additionally, the selection of leadership theories guiding the analysis will shape the aspects of leadership that become visible, and applying different theoretical perspectives could potentially lead to different conclusions.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces the full range leadership theory by outlining its origins, purpose, and underlying theoretical foundations. It also presents the measurement instrument associated with the framework and reviews prior research that has applied the theory. Particular attention is given to studies that compare the full range leadership theory with alternative frameworks, to critically assess the extent to which it provides comprehensive model of leadership.

2.1 Full Range Leadership Theory

In 1985, Bass introduced a leadership theory that, nearly two decades later, came to be recognized by Bryman in 1992 as the “new leadership” models (Antonakis & House, 2002). This approach differed from earlier leadership theories that focused on leaders’ personal characteristics, behaviors, or correlation between leadership style and situational factors (Antonakis & House, 2002). Rather than viewing leadership primarily as a set of traits or behaviors, the theory highlighted how leaders influence followers’ motivation, performance, and commitment and in this way, it has shaped contemporary understanding of leadership by shifting attention of leadership toward a relational process (Antonakis & House, 2002). Bass’s original theory was later developed further by Bass and Avolio (1994) into a model that provides a strong foundation for future research because it brings together previously separate traditions in leadership research (Day, 2014; Antonakis & House, 2002; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

A key element of the framework is the idea that leadership behaviors fall along a continuum of styles (Day, 2014). The first leadership style, which is transformational leadership, is composed of four distinct components presented in Table 1. The second style is transactional leadership, which includes two separate components focused on exchanges between leaders and followers. The third style is a single factor representing the absence of active leadership, referred to by Bass as laissez-faire leadership. Together, these leadership styles form what is known as the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) (Day, 2014).

This framework has been widely used to train thousands of leaders in both private organizations and public-sector institutions (Bass, 1996a). According to Antonakis & House (2002), FRLT has significant potential to explain leadership by translating its multidimensional aspects into measurable behaviors that can predict outcomes. Although earlier efforts have attempted to create unified leadership theories, Antonakis & House believe this approach is more effective because FRLT has gained widespread acceptance in leadership and management research and because FRLT is supported by extensive empirical evidence (Antonakis & House, 2002).

Table 1: Dimensions of FRLT

Leadership style	Dimensions of FRLT
Transformational	<i>Idealized Influence</i> <i>Inspirational motivation</i> <i>Intellectual stimulation</i> <i>Individualized Consideration</i>
Transactional	<i>Contingent reward</i> <i>Management by Exception (Active)</i> <i>Management by Exception (Passive)</i>
Laissez-Faire	<i>Laissez-Faire</i>

The Full Range Leadership Theory is considered a strong integrative framework because it is grounded in earlier theories that challenged conventional views of leadership (Antonakis & House, 2002). Transformational leadership challenged the assumption that effective leadership is primarily based on supervision, rewards, and corrective actions which were central ideas in transactional and contingency-based approaches (Jackman, 2024). FRLT introduced the idea that leaders can transform the followers' attitudes, values, and motivations by encouraging trust, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1996a). This represented a wider understanding of leadership as an adaptable relational process rather than a managerial function (Antonakis & House, 2002). Building on this integrative foundation that integrates multiple earlier approaches to leadership into a single model, the term full-range leadership is used. Antonakis and House (2002) highlight five key theories that are particularly important to understand FRLT and its main elements (Antonakis & House, 2002). These theories are presented and explained in the following section.

2.1.1 Theory behind Full Range Leadership Theory

According to Antonakis & House (2002), five important theoretical contributions that influenced the development of the Full Range Leadership Theory framework are outlined (Antonakis & House, 2002).

The first contribution originates from Weber (1924/2947), who introduced the concept of charismatic leadership, where leaders inspire strong emotional commitment through extraordinary personal qualities. Weber's ideas later became central within transformational leadership research, particularly the dimensions idealized influence and inspirational motivation, which Antonakis and House (2002) describe as representing the charismatic core of transformational leadership (Antonakis & House, 2002). The second contribution came from Downton (1973), who identified transactional, charismatic, and inspirational leadership. He distinguished between leadership based on exchanges and rewards and leadership based on inspiration, trust, and shared values, which later influenced the distinction between transactional and transformational leadership within FRLT (Antonakis & House, 2002). The third contribution came from House (1977), who explained charismatic leadership through psychological and motivational processes. House argued that leaders motivate followers through vision, confidence, emotional influence, and high expectations, which became important elements within transformational leadership theory (Antonakis & House, 2002). The fourth contribution came from Zaleznik (1977/1992), who distinguished managers from leaders by arguing that managers focus on structure and control, whereas leaders promote change, vision, and emotional engagement (Antonakis & House, 2002). Finally, Burns (1978) distinguished between transactional and transforming leadership. Burns argued that transactional leadership is based on exchanges between leaders and followers, whereas transforming leadership elevates followers' motivation and values. Bass later expanded Burns' ideas by operationalizing transformational leadership into measurable leadership behaviors and integrating transformational, transactional, and passive leadership into the Full Range Leadership Theory (Antonakis & House, 2002; Bass, 1996a; Day, 2014).

2.1.2 Leadership Styles and the Dimensions of FRLT

Building on Burns' ideas, Bass developed **transformational leadership** into four separate components, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Antonakis & House, 2002; Bass, 1996a).

Antonakis & House (2002) argue that the first two components of transformational leadership are closely connected to charismatic leadership theory and that they are conceptually very similar to the core elements. In this sense, transformational leadership did not emerge only from previous leadership traditions but rather integrated and developed important aspects of charismatic leadership research into the FRLT framework. ***Idealized influence*** refers to leaders acting as role models whom followers admire, respect, and trust. Followers tend to identify strongly with such leaders and strive to imitate their behavior (Bass, 1996a). Transformational leaders gain this respect by placing the needs of others ahead of their own, sharing risks with their followers, and acting consistently and fairly. They demonstrate strong moral and ethical standards, avoid misusing authority for personal benefit, and are seen as reliable individuals who can be trusted to make responsible decisions (Bass, 1996a). The second component is ***inspirational motivation***. Transformational leaders inspire and energize those around them by giving meaning and purpose to their work. They communicate a compelling vision of the future and encourage followers to pursue challenging goals (Bass, 1996a). Through enthusiasm, optimism, and clear expectations, they create a sense of collective spirit and commitment within the team. By actively involving followers in shaping and pursuing shared objectives, these leaders strengthen motivation and foster a deeper dedication to achieving common goals (Bass, 1996a).

The remaining two components of transformational leadership are closely connected to developmental and coaching-oriented leadership traditions (Bass, 1996a). Among these two there is the third component of transformational leadership which is ***intellectual stimulation***. Transformational leaders encourage followers to think creatively and approach challenges in new ways. They promote innovation by questioning existing assumptions, reconsidering how problems are framed, and exploring alternative solutions to familiar situations (Bass, 1996a). In this environment, creativity is welcomed and valued and leaders actively seek ideas and input from their followers and involve them in the process of solving problems. Rather than criticizing mistakes publicly, they treat them as opportunities for learning and improvement. Followers are encouraged to experiment with new approaches, and differing viewpoints are accepted rather than dismissed simply because they do not align with the leader's own ideas (Bass, 1996a). The fourth component is ***individualized consideration***. Transformational leaders give personal attention to each followers' needs for development and achievement. They act as mentors or coaches, helping individuals grow and reach higher levels of potential (Bass, 1996a). This involves creating opportunities for learning while maintaining a supportive and encouraging work environment. Such leaders recognize that individuals have different needs and motivations; some may require additional encouragement, others more independence, clearer structure, or stricter standards. Transformational leaders respect these differences and adapt their approach accordingly (Bass, 1996a).

Communication in transformational leadership is typically open and two-way. Leaders often engage directly with followers in their work environments, maintaining close and personal interaction. They remember previous discussions, understand personal

concerns, and treat followers as individuals rather than merely as employees (Bass, 1996a). Effective listening is an important part of this process and leaders also delegate responsibilities as a way to develop followers' skills and confidence. While they monitor progress to provide guidance and support when necessary, they aim to do so in a way that does not make followers feel overly supervised (Bass, 1996a).

Transactional leadership is based on an exchange process between leaders and followers (Bass, 1996a; Day, 2014), and "there is nothing holding the leader and follower together except for the mutual benefits each receives" (Day, 2014). In this approach, leaders respond to followers' performance by either rewarding successful outcomes or correcting inadequate performance (Bass, 1996a). The model relies on contingent reinforcement, which may take the form of positive rewards or corrective actions. These actions are typically categorized as contingent reward (CR) or management-by-exception (MBE), which can be active or passive (Bass, 1996a).

Contingent reward represents the more constructive side of transactional leadership. In this approach, the leader clearly communicates expectations and establishes agreements about what tasks must be completed. When followers successfully meet these expectations, they receive recognition or rewards. Research shows that this method can be fairly effective in motivating individuals and encouraging performance, although it generally has a weaker impact than transformational leadership behaviors in promoting higher levels of development and achievement (Bass, 1996a).

Management-by-exception (MBE) focuses on correcting problems when performance does not meet required standards. This leadership approach tends to be less effective overall but may still be necessary in certain circumstances where errors must be addressed quickly (Bass, 1996a). Management-by-exception can take two forms; in active management-by-exception (MBE-A), the leader actively monitors followers' work to identify mistakes, deviations from standards, or errors, and intervenes immediately when problems arise. In passive management-by-exception (MBE-P), the leader takes a more reactive approach, waiting until problems become noticeable before stepping in to correct them (Bass, 1996a).

Another leadership style often discussed alongside transactional leadership is **laissez-faire** leadership. Unlike transactional approaches, laissez-faire leadership is characterized by the absence or avoidance of leadership altogether. Leaders adopting this style provide little guidance, feedback, or direction to their followers (Bass, 1996a). Because of this lack of involvement, research consistently identifies laissez-faire leadership as the least effective leadership style. Rather than involving an exchange between leader and follower, it essentially represents a situation where no meaningful leadership interaction occurs (Bass, 1996a).

Although highly effective leaders may still use some transactional strategies when appropriate, the evidence suggests that the most successful leaders emphasize transformational behaviors to a greater extent. Additional studies have also demonstrated that leadership effectiveness and follower satisfaction can be improved through training programs designed to develop the four key components of transformational leadership. By learning and practicing these behaviors, leaders are better equipped to motivate followers, strengthen engagement, and improve overall organizational performance (Bass, 1996a).

2.1.3 Testing the Framework on Empirical Realities

To empirically assess the dimensions proposed within the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) and to explore how these leadership styles relate to the effectiveness and satisfaction of work units, Bass developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Lowe et al., 1996; Bass 1996a). The MLQ became the primary instrument used to operationalize and measure transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors across organizational settings (Carter et al., 2025; Lowe et al., 1996). Through MLQ, the theoretical dimensions of FRLT could be translated into observable and measurable leadership behaviors, allowing researchers to examine how different leadership styles relate to outcomes such as employee satisfaction, motivation, effectiveness, and performance (Lowe et al., 1996).

The MLQ is also a multidimensional tool that assesses leadership behavior through a 360-degree evaluation, incorporating perspectives from subordinates as well as managers across all organizational levels (Kanste et al., 2007). The theoretical structure of the MLQ is based on nine first-order latent constructs, which are grouped into three second-order constructs representing transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant leadership behavior. To assess individuals' perceptions of leadership, the MLQ includes four items for each of the nine leadership dimensions, resting in a total of 36 questions. In addition to assessing leadership dimensions, the MLQ also evaluates leadership outcomes related to perceived effectiveness, satisfaction, and followers' willingness to exert extra effort (Carter et al., 2025).

Although the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) is widely used to assess leadership, it has also been subject to criticism regarding its factor structure, perceptual biases, and inconsistencies between theory and measurement. Several studies argue that some transformational leadership dimensions overlap to such an extent that they may not represent clearly distinct constructs, thereby challenging the multifactorial structure of the instrument (Day, 2014; Muenjohn & Armstrong, 2008; Lievens et al., 1997; Carter et al., 2025). Difficulties have also been identified in distinguishing between dimensions such as idealized influence and inspirational motivation, as well as between passive management-by-exception and laissez-faire leadership which are not always clearly distinguishable in practice (Muenjohn & Armstrong, 2008). In addition, researchers have questioned whether the MLQ fully captures the complexity of leadership behavior and whether all relevant leadership dimensions are sufficiently represented within the framework (Hinkin & Tracey, 1999). One explanation for this issue is the presence of a halo effect, whereby followers form a general impression of a leader and later rate all leadership dimensions in a similar manner (Lievens et al., 1997).

Taken together, these critiques suggest that while the MLQ has contributed significantly to the empirical development and widespread application of FRLT, the framework's conceptual boundaries and comprehensiveness remain debated. This has contributed to broader discussions regarding whether the Full Range Leadership Theory can truly be understood as "full-range" model of leadership.

Empirical research across a wide range of sectors, including business, government, education, the military, and nonprofit organizations, has provided important insights into the relative effectiveness of the leadership styles included within the Full Range

Leadership Theory (FRLT) (Bass, 1996a). Much of this research, commonly conducted using the MLQ, shows that transformational leadership is consistently associated with positive outcomes such as leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction, motivation, and willingness to exert extra effort (Bass, 1996a; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

For example, Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that transformational leadership has a strong overall positive relationship with key leadership outcomes (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Similarly, Bass argues that leaders who demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors tend to be viewed as more effective and more satisfying to work with than those who rely primarily on transactional leadership approaches (Bass, 1996a). At the same time, transactional leadership, especially contingent reward, also shows positive relationships with these outcomes which indicates that it can be an effective leadership approach. In some cases, transactional leadership can even show effects comparable to, or even stronger than transformational leadership which highlights that both styles can be effective when applied appropriately. In contrast, laissez-faire leadership is consistently associated with negative outcomes and is described as ineffective and dissatisfying for followers (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

These findings are further supported by more recent meta-analytic research, which shows that transformational leadership has a strong positive effect, transactional leadership a moderate positive effect, and laissez-faire leadership a negative effect on outcomes such as job satisfaction (Goktas, 2021). Antonakis and House frame it in other words, saying that leaders should demonstrate transformational behaviors most frequently, followed by contingent reward leadership, then active management-by-exception, and then passive management-by-exception, while laissez-faire should occur rarely, if at all (Antonakis & House, 2002).

The widespread use of FRLT has also contributed to arguments that the framework possesses a degree of universality across different organizational and cultural contexts. Bass (1996b) argues that FRLT has a degree of universality, suggesting that core leadership concepts and their relationships to outcomes can be observed across different cultural settings, although their expression may change (Bass, 1996b). Lowe et al. (1996) have found that transformational leadership is consistently associated with higher work unit effectiveness across a wide range of studies and organizational contexts (Lowe et al., 1996). Antonakis and House (2002) argue that FRLT demonstrates applicability across diverse settings, while also noting that different situational factors influence how leadership is expressed and related to outcomes (Antonakis & House, 2002).

Support for this argument has also been found in empirical studies conducted outside the Western English-speaking contexts in which the theory was originally developed. For example, Kanste et al. (2008) assessed the full range leadership theory among nurses and nurse leaders in Finnish healthcare organizations. Their findings showed that transformational leadership behaviors were strongly associated with positive outcomes such as employees being more willing to put in extra effort, perceiving their leaders as more effective, and feeling more satisfied with the leadership. In contrast, laissez-faire leadership was associated with negative outcomes, including lower satisfaction and lower motivation among employees. The study concluded that the empirical data largely supported the main structure of FRLT and therefore lent support to the theory's broader applicability across professional settings. However, the same

study also concluded that leadership outcomes were shaped by situational and contextual conditions, suggesting that while FRLT may capture broad leadership tendencies, the way leadership is interpreted and evaluated can still vary depending on organizational and contextual factors (Kanste et al., 2008).

Additional support for the broader applicability of FRLT has been found in studies conducted outside both traditional organizational settings and Western cultural contexts. Pounder (2008) examined the full range leadership theory in university classrooms in Hong Kong and found support for the overall structure of FRLT, with transformational leadership positively associated with outcomes such as student satisfaction, perceived effectiveness, and extra effort. Pounder therefore argued that the findings lend to support to the cross-organizational and cross-cultural applicability of the full range leadership paradigm (Pounder, 2008).

Similar findings have also been observed in studies conducted in other non-Western organizational contexts. Luo et al. (2013) tested FRLT in China's hotel industry and found that transformational leadership was positively associated with leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction and employees' willingness to exert extra effort. However, the authors also found that the original nine-factor structure of the MLQ was not well supported in the Chinese context. Instead, the findings suggested a simplified two-factor structure consisting primarily of transformational leadership and passive leadership. The authors therefore argue that cultural and contextual factors may influence how leadership behaviors are interpreted and how the dimensions of FRLT are structured across different settings (Luo et al., 2013).

2.1.4 Is Full Range Leadership Theory Really Full Range?

Despite its widespread application, the universality of FRLT has also been questioned. The application of FRLT across industries and cultures has led to an implicit assumption that the dimensions captured by the model represent fundamental aspects of leadership. Despite this, cross-cultural research indicates that leadership behaviors are not equally interpreted or effective in all settings (Bass, 1996b; Luo et al., 2013). Antonakis and House (2002) further highlight that while FRLT has been supported across various contexts, its factor structure and relationships with outcomes may vary depending on environmental conditions and contextual influences (Antonakis & House, 2002).

In addition to external criticism, important limitations of the framework have also been acknowledged by scholars within the FRLT itself (Antonakis & House, 2002). Although FRLT has been widely supported empirically, several scholars, including Antonakis and House themselves, acknowledge that the FRLT is not presented as fully comprehensive as they acknowledge important limitations in its scope. In discussing the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), they note that it "does not capture all possible leadership behaviors," indicating that the range of leadership styles included in the model is incomplete. Furthermore, they argue that it is "not merely possible, but highly likely" that the theory can be improved and extended, suggesting that additional constructs and refinements are necessary (Antonakis & House, 2002).

Antonakis and House identify important gaps in the full-range leadership theory (FRLT), suggesting that certain aspects of leadership remain unaccounted for. To address this, they propose an inclusion of a broader category of leader behavior termed

instrumental leadership. This form of leadership is conceptually distinct from transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles, as it focuses neither on inspiring value-based change nor on managing exchanges or obligations. The concept of instrumental leadership draws in part on the work of (Nadler & Tushman, 1990), who describe leader behaviors extending beyond charismatic (transformational) leadership. It is also informed by earlier theoretical contributions from (Bowers & Seashore, 1966; House, 1971; Sashkin, 1988; Antonakis, 2001). Antonakis and House conceptualize instrumental leadership as comprising two main subclasses. The first is strategic leadership, which involves environmental monitoring as well as the formulation and implementation of strategy; this influences organizational performance indirectly through leaders' decisions and actions, along with those of their followers. The second is follower work facilitation, which includes behaviors such as clarifying paths to goals and monitoring outcomes, and has a more direct impact on followers' performance and goal attainment (Antonakis & House, 2002).

In another article, Michel et al. (2011) question whether the full-range leadership theory truly captures the entire spectrum of effective leadership behaviors. They compare two frameworks: the full-range leadership model, typically measured with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), and Gary Yukl's flexible leadership model, assessed by the Managerial Practices Survey (MPS). The authors note that some critics argue the term "full-range" may be inappropriate and misleading. This is because the MLQ excludes certain important leadership behaviors and combines others that are conceptually distinct. Supporting this critique, Yukl found that the three overarching categories in the MPS (task-, relations-, and change-oriented behaviors), accounted for more variation in leadership behavior than a simpler two-factor model based on transformational and transactional leadership. Additionally, a field study by Tracey and Hinkin in 1998 also showed that several leadership behaviors identified in the MPS as relevant for effective leadership are not represented in the full-range leadership model (Michel et al., 2011).

They point out that, while the MLQ captures several important leadership behaviors, it fails to include a range of other effective practices such as consulting, empowering, recognizing, clarifying roles and objectives, and short-term planning. The authors also emphasize that many of these excluded behaviors are not new, they were already identified in earlier leadership research including Ohio State studies by Fleishman, the Michigan studies by Likert, and path-goal theory of leadership by House. Overall, the authors suggest that these exclusions indicate a gap in the full-range model, and that adding a broader set of established leadership behaviors could improve its ability to predict effective leadership outcomes (Michel et al., 2011). In their summary of findings, they conclude that leadership behaviors captured by MPS provide a stronger explanation of leadership effectiveness than those measured by MLQ. Specifically, the MPS dimensions consistently accounted for additional variance in both subordinate outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and boss-rated measures of managerial effectiveness, even after controlling for MLQ components. This means that MPS explains more of what causes or predicts the outcome than the MLQ does. In contrast, the MLQ did not explain any additional variance beyond what was already captured by the MPS. The findings further show that at least one of the MPS dimensions was the most important predictor of each outcome, highlighting the importance of behaviors not included in the full-range model, therefore the authors attribute this to the broader scope of MPS (Michel et al., 2011).

Additional criticism of FRLT has also emerged from research comparing the framework to implicit leadership theories (ILT), which focus on how individuals subjectively perceive and evaluate leadership. In a study comparing FRLT with implicit leadership theories, Schyns & Meindl (2005) found that a substantial proportion of leadership-related perceptions could not be categorized within the existing FRLT dimensions (Schyns & Meindl, 2005). Through qualitative analysis, 17 additional leadership categories that were identified, were not captured by the framework including behaviors related to communication, conflict management, team spirit, flexibility, humor self-reflection, and trustful delegation. Several of these categories were also found to explain leadership effectiveness beyond the dimensions already included in FRLT (Verlage et al., 2012; Schyns & Meindl, 2005). Taken together, these studies suggest that while FRLT captures several central dimensions of leadership, important leadership behaviors may still exist outside the boundaries of the framework.

Itzkovich et al. (2020) also offer a critical perspective on the full-range leadership model, questioning whether it is truly comprehensive. In response, they propose an extended framework, which is referred to as the “complete full-range leadership” model, designed to address its limitations. One key shortcoming they identify is the model’s failure to include certain leadership behaviors, particularly those associated with the “dark side” of leadership, including various forms of destructive leadership (Itzkovic et al., 2020). The authors argue that research shows negative leadership styles and behaviors have a stronger impact on employee attitudes than positive ones. While some contributions (Einarsen et al., 2007), attempt to integrate both the dark and bright sides of leadership within a single conceptual model, they contend that the underlying theoretical justification remains insufficient. Furthermore, these approaches tend to overlook the significant contributions of the full range leadership framework and fail to engage with broader critiques of it (Itzkovic et al., 2020). The authors further engage with critiques of the full-range leadership theory (FRLT), particularly its limited inclusiveness. Critics argue that the model overlooks important manifestations of leadership behavior, such as empowerment and delegation, and fails to clearly distinguish between empowerment and laissez-faire leadership. They also address concerns that FRLT does not really capture a substantial range of deviant leadership behaviors, those that are more active in nature yet still not effective. Within FRLT, the least effective style is characterized by passiveness; however, both theoretical and empirical evidence point to the existence of leaders who are highly active but nonetheless ineffective. These forms of leadership are commonly conceptualized through constructs such as abusive supervision, petty tyranny, destructive leadership, and toxic leadership, all of which represent harmful behavioral patterns (Itzkovic et al., 2020).

In summary, the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) and its assessing tool the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) provide a highly influential and widely applied framework for understanding leadership through transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire dimensions. The reviewed literature demonstrates strong empirical support for transformational leadership behaviors in relation to leadership effectiveness, satisfaction, and motivation across a variety of organizational and cultural contexts. At the same time, the chapter has also highlighted important critiques of the framework, particularly regarding its conceptual boundaries, measurement structure, and ability to fully capture the complexity of leadership practice. Several

studies suggest that relational, developmental, empowering, and even destructive leadership behaviors extend beyond the traditional FRLT dimensions, raising questions about whether the framework is truly “full range”. These tensions are particularly relevant for the present study, which seeks to examine how leadership is interpreted and evaluated in a structured evaluative setting.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach used in the study and explains how the empirical material was collected, analyzed and interpreted. It outlines the research design, analytical strategy, and ethical considerations guiding the study.

3.1 Empirical Material

This section presents the empirical material used in the study and explains its relevance to the research aim. The section describes the student reports that constitute the primary empirical material, as well as the theoretical frameworks and leadership literature used throughout the analysis.

3.1.1 Student Reports

The primary empirical material of this study consists of 232 written student reports produced between 2017 and 2025 within a master's-level course in Leadership and Communication at Chalmers University of Technology. The course attracts students from a variety of educational, cultural, and professional backgrounds, including engineering, architecture, economics, and project management. The course was organized around four overarching themes. The first theme focused on understanding managerial and leadership work and included perspectives on managerial practice, the nature of leadership, and feedback processes. The second theme centered on transformational and charismatic leadership and included theories related to vision, inspiration, and influence, including the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT). The third theme addressed coaching, empowerment, leadership development, and destructive leadership. The fourth theme introduced more critical perspectives on leadership and encouraged students to reflect on leadership as a contextual and socially constructed phenomenon.

As the final examination at the end of the course, students completed pair-based take-home assignment in which they were asked to evaluate and compare four leadership candidates and identify which candidate they believed deserved a leadership award. The examination was based on interview material collected from a real Swedish leadership award where the interviews were conducted in connection with a national leadership prize recognizing outstanding young leaders in the Swedish built environment sector. Four finalists nominated for the award participated in the interview process. To support the jury's evaluation, each finalist was interviewed together with one subordinate, and one immediate supervisor. The interviews were later translated from Swedish to English and incorporated into the course examination.

The material therefore differs from many traditional leadership cases used in educational settings because rather than presenting idealized leadership scenarios or polished stories about successful leaders, the transcripts contain relatively unpolished and conversational demonstration of leadership in practice. Students were given access to three interviews for each candidate: an interview with the leader, an interview with one of the leader's employees, and an interview with the leader's immediate supervisor. These perspectives provided a multifaced picture of each candidate's leadership style and everyday practices. The four nominees included Alfons, Emilia, Bob, and Matt. Alfons is a site manager at a construction company. He is nominated for his ability to create cohesive teams and deliver strong project outcomes, combining effective planning with a trust-based and inclusive leadership style. Matt is a strategy manager

at a construction company. He is nominated for his ability to drive organizational change through inclusive leadership, combining analytical competence with empathy to create alignment, commitment, and strong performance. Bob is a district manager at a real-estate company. He is nominated for his ability to engage employees and integrate social and economic objectives, resulting in strong performance, innovation, and high levels of commitment. Finally, Emilia is an operations manager at a start-up. She is nominated for her strong people-oriented leadership and her role in professionalizing and scaling the organization, fostering clarity, engagement, and a supportive work environment. Although these names are pseudonyms introduced to protect anonymity, the same names were used throughout the original examination material. For this reason, the study retains pseudonyms when presenting findings and examples. Doing so allows the reader to follow the analysis more easily and creates a more personal and coherent narrative than referring to the leaders only as Candidates.

Students had access only to written material and were not able to see the nominees or obtain detailed background information beyond brief role descriptions. They did not have access to photographs, organizational performance data, or additional background information. Their evaluations therefore relied entirely on the interview material and on the analytical frameworks they developed using course literature. Based on their analysis, students were required to select one candidate as the most deserving recipient of the leadership award and justify their decision through theoretically grounded arguments. Many reports also included reflective discussions explaining why certain candidates were not chosen, outlining the criteria for exclusion as well as selection.

The value of this empirical material lies not primarily in the similarities between student reports, but in their variation. Across a nine-year period, different groups of students analyzed the same leadership cases using different theoretical frameworks, perspectives, and analytical arguments. Despite these variations, the reports were all based on the same four leadership candidates and the same underlying interview material. This combination of diversity in interpretation and consistency in empirical material makes it possible to identify recurring leadership dimensions that appear important across different approaches. The material therefore provides a unique opportunity to examine which leadership qualities are repeatedly valued, criticized, and prioritized when individuals are asked to justify why one leader should be considered better than another.

3.1.2 Theoretical Frameworks

As part of the home examination, students were instructed to base their evaluations of the nominated leaders on relevant course literature and theoretical perspectives discussed throughout the course. The examination instructions were intentionally open-ended, allowing students considerable freedom in how they constructed their analytical frameworks. More specifically, students were encouraged to select approximately three to four theoretical perspectives or academic articles from the course literature to support and justify their evaluations of the leaders.

The course literature included a broad range of leadership perspectives and research traditions, such as transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, empowerment, coaching-oriented leadership, and toxic leadership. Among these perspectives, the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) occupied a relatively central position within the

course through lectures, discussions, and practical exercises. For example, students took the MLQ-test themselves as a part of the course activities.

Although students were not required to use FRLT in their evaluations, the framework nevertheless formed part of the educational context in which the reports were produced. This may have influenced how students interpreted and evaluated leadership behaviors, particularly because FRLT-related concepts such as inspiration, charisma, and empowerment were repeatedly discussed through the course. At the same time, the open examination format enabled students to combine, reinterpret, or move beyond FRLT by applying alternative leadership perspectives from the course literature. This context is important for understanding the analytical patterns identified in the empirical material. As presented later in the findings, approximately 60% of the student reports relied explicitly on FRLT-related frameworks and concepts, while approximately 40% primarily used alternative leadership perspectives. The coexistence of FRLT-based and other framework-based evaluations creates an analytically relevant setting for examining whether similar leadership dimensions emerge regardless of theoretical framework, and whether FRLT-related leadership ideals appear to function as broader evaluative assumptions within leadership assessments.

Leadership theories are studied alongside empirical analysis in an iterative process and provide concepts and perspectives that help make sense of the patterns identified in the empirical material. Theory is used to guide interpretation, explain how certain leadership dimensions are valued over others, and help identify possible tensions between positive and negative aspects of leadership. Leadership literature contributes to developing a more detailed and informed understanding of how leadership is constructed and evaluated. To ensure sufficient and contextualized study, literature was identified and used through searches in academic databases, such as Google Scholar, Elicit, Scopus, Science Direct & Chalmers Library Search.

Given the important role of FRLT within both leadership research and the course context in which the student reports were produced, literature related to FRLT and MLQ was reviewed as an important analytical point of comparison throughout the study. By engaging with the literature, the study examines whether the leadership dimensions emerging from the student reports align with those captured by the FRLT, or whether they extend beyond its established constructs. Furthermore, critical perspectives on the validity and limitations of the leadership theory are also considered. This includes research that questions its conceptual boundaries, measurement assumptions, and applicability across different contexts. Incorporating both supportive and critical literature allows for a more nuanced evaluation of how well the FRLT framework reflects the ways in which leadership is constructed and assessed in the empirical material.

3.2 Research Design

The study uses qualitative, interpretive, and abductive research design. A qualitative approach is suitable when the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon rather than to measure it using numbers (Bryman, 2016). This aligns with the purpose of this study as the aim is to investigate how leadership is interpreted and valued by individuals.

The study is based on an interpretive perspective and not a fixed view. The interpretive perspective is formed by people's perceptions, experiences, and interactions not viewed as fixed (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2025). Furthermore, the study follows abductive logic, meaning that the analysis moves iteratively between empirical material and theoretical frameworks. This approach allows theory on leadership and empirical findings from student reports to inform and refine each other throughout the research process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2025; Dubois & Gadde, 2017). The research moves back and forth between data and theory, allowing insights from one to inform the other instead of following a strictly linear way of working.

The study consists of four main phases. In the first phase, a systematic thematic analysis is conducted on student reports and summarized in a meta-analysis document. This document gathered information about students' choice of leadership framework and general notes about the statements students use to justify winners or non-winners of the leadership prize. In the second phase, the findings from this analysis are interpreted and categorized in relation to relevant leadership literature that is linked to Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) and justification that are in the empirical material. In the third phase the result of the first two phases is compared and discussed. In the last and fourth phase the comparison between the research findings and the literature findings is concluded and results are developed. These four phases together provide depth to the research. The large number of student reports offer broad insight into how leadership is described and interpreted, while the theoretical engagement allows for deeper interpretation and understanding.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

3.3.1 Open Coding and Thematic Categorization

The analysis began with an open and exploratory coding of all student reports. Each report was read carefully to identify recurring and meaningful patterns that related to how leadership is described, evaluated, and criticized. The initial stage draws on the open coding approach outlined by (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), where coding remains flexible and data-driven, allowing patterns and interpretations to emerge inductively from the empirical material. During this phase, words, phrases, and arguments expressed in the students' own terms were highlighted and assigned initial codes. In line with the Gioia methodology (Magnani & Gioia, 2023), these codes can be understood as *first-order concepts*, meaning that they were based directly on the students' own words and expressions. For example, expressions such as "vision," "purpose," "helps them understand why," and "passionate" were grouped under the first-order concept *inspiring purpose and direction*, see Figure 1.

Following the first-order analysis, the codes were further refined and grouped into more abstract categories that were also driven by the researchers, which in this study are referred to as *subcodes*. In Gioia methodology terms, these correspond to *second-order themes*, where the analysis moves from the students' descriptions to more theoretical interpretations. These second-order themes capture broader patterns in how leadership is constructed and evaluated across the reports.

After that, connections between second-order themes were examined in order to identify patterns that were overarching. These higher-level categories can be understood as *aggregate dimensions*, which represent more general ways in which

leadership is assessed by the students. In this study, these dimensions are referred to as *main categories*. The progression from first-order concepts to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, reflects an iterative movement between data and theory, characteristic of Gioia-inspired analysis (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

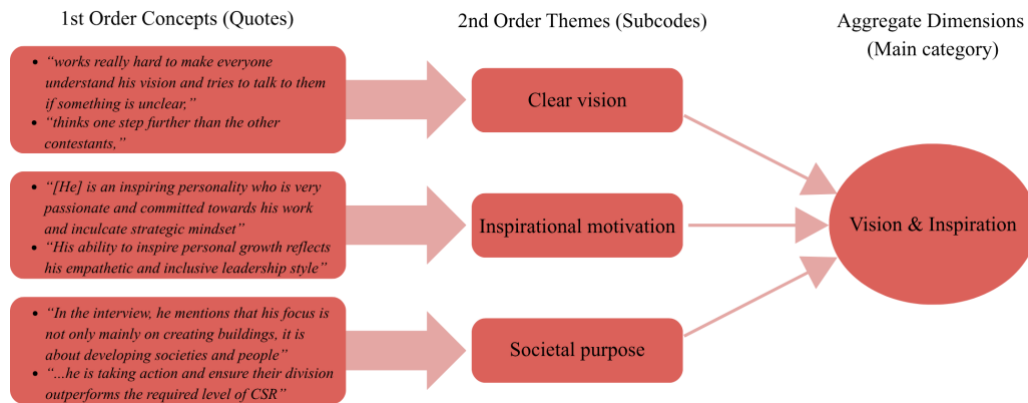


Figure 1 Coding process, inspired by GIOIA-methodology

For each second-order theme (subcode), definitions were developed based on the authors’ interpretations of the student reports. To ensure transparency, the findings include tables where each subcode is supported by representative quote examples from the empirical material. These quotes illustrate how specific statements were categorized and provide insight into the reasoning underlying the students’ evaluations. To improve readability and maintain anonymity, references to specific leaders in the quotes were replaced with pronouns.

During this analysis, it became evident that certain second-order themes were used differently depending on context. Some were used as positive justifications for selecting a leader as the winner, others as negative arguments for excluding candidates, and some appeared in both positive and negative evaluations, see Figure 2. To capture this variation, subcodes were assigned evaluative markers: positive (+), negative (-), or both (+/-). These distinctions are presented in the findings and help illustrate how different leadership dimensions are valued or criticized across reports.

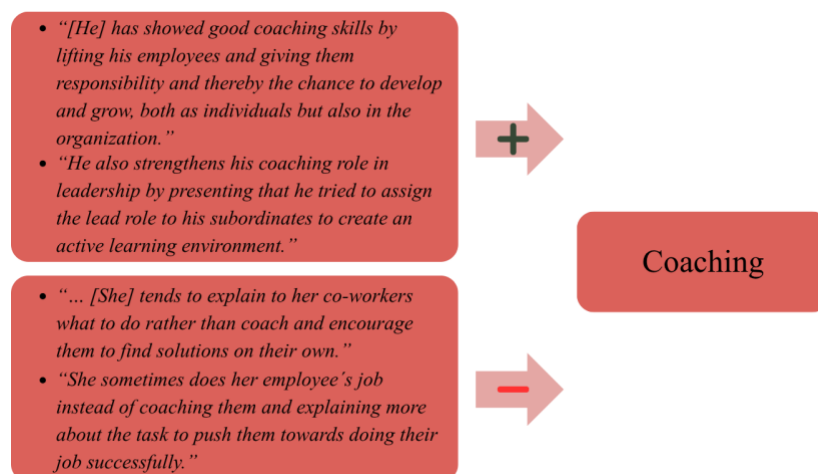


Figure 2 Examples of tensions in a subcode

In addition, the analysis of the 232 student reports included identifying which leadership theories and frameworks were used by the students in their evaluations. This was conducted manually by compiling a summary table in which the researchers recorded the framework components applied in each report. These components included for example transformational leadership, authentic leadership and empowerment. This mapping enabled an overview of how frequently different theoretical frameworks were used across the reports. In particular, it made it possible to distinguish between reports that explicitly applied FRLT- related frameworks, those that did not, and those that appeared to draw on FRLT-related concepts without explicitly referring to them.

3.3.2 Frequency Analysis

The leadership dimensions that are found are also examined more closely to understand their importance and internal contradictions. The analysis explores which dimensions appear most frequently in the student reports, which are most strongly to justify good leadership, and which are justified as factors for justifying negative leadership aspects. This analysis is conducted using frequency analysis based on the second phase described in section 3.1. To examine the recurrence of each subcode, both positive and negative justifications are counted from each report. Rather than focusing on isolated words, the analysis considers complete statements in the student reports, ensuring that each justification is clearly linked to the winner or the non-winner, which allows for a more accurate assessment of frequency. Each report contributes a maximum of one count per statement or justification for both the positive and negative side.

Special attention is given to how the same leadership dimension can be perceived as both value-creating and problematic. The analysis makes it possible to identify dominant leadership dimensions as well as tensions between their positive and negative aspects. A frequency analysis of the student's choice of framework was also conducted. This was done to see if there would be any difference in justifying the winner and non-winner based of frameworks that include parts of MLQ or frameworks that do not.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

In consultation with the master thesis supervisor, the student reports are treated as public academic documents and are used only for research purposes. No student names are exposed or used in this report or during the work of this report.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT were used to aid and support the frequency analysis by identifying relevant statements in the reports and assisting with the compilation of framework frequency statistics. All identified statements were manually verified before inclusion in the dataset. ChatGPT and Grammarly were also used in this study to assist improvement of sentence structure and spelling.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the 232 student reports, focusing on how leadership is interpreted, evaluated, and justified in the selection of award-winning leaders. The findings are represented through a Gioia-inspired analytical structure, where recurring statements and arguments in the empirical material were first identified as first-order concepts, then grouped into more interpretive subcodes (second-order themes), and finally organized into broader main categories (aggregate dimensions).

Although the analysis was primarily inductive and grounded in the student's own descriptions and justifications, the findings were interpreted in relation to leadership theory throughout the analytical process. In particular, the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) functioned as an important analytical point of comparison when interpreting and discussing the identified leadership dimensions. However, the categories and subcodes presented in this chapter were not directly derived from the FRLT framework itself but emerged through the researchers' iterative coding and aggregation of recurring patterns in the empirical material.

The chapter first presents findings related to the students' use of leadership frameworks, including explicit and implicit use of FRLT-related reasoning. Thereafter, the identified main categories and subcodes are presented together with representative quote examples from the empirical material. This structure makes it possible to examine both how leadership dimensions emerged inductively from the student reports and how these dimensions relate to, align with, or extend beyond the traditional FRLT framework.

4.1 Evaluations Across FRLT and Other Frameworks

To identify overall patterns in the students' leadership evaluations, all 232 reports were reviewed and categorized based on which nominee was ultimately selected as the award-winning leader. The results are presented in Table 2, which shows the percentage distribution of how frequently each nominee was chosen across the reports.

Table 2: Award-winning percentage of the four different nominees

Alfons	Bob	Emilia	Matt
34.5%	48.7%	10.3%	6.5%

Bob was the most frequently chosen leader, accounting for 48.7% of all selections, followed by Alfons with 34.5%. In comparison, Emilia and Matt were selected far less frequently, receiving 10.3% and 6.5% respectively. These findings indicate that the students consistently perceived Bob and Alfons as stronger or more desirable leaders in relation to the criteria and leadership dimensions emphasized in their evaluations. The relatively stable preference for these two nominees across a large number of reports suggests that certain leadership qualities were repeatedly interpreted as particularly valuable in the evaluative setting. This also provides an important foundation for the following analysis, which examines how different leadership frameworks and leadership dimensions were used to justify these selections.

To further examine the relationship between leadership evaluations and established leadership theory, the student reports were categorized according to the extent to which

they relied on Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) logic in their justifications of the award-winning leader. This analysis aimed to identify whether students explicitly used FRLT-related frameworks, or whether they based their evaluations on other leadership frameworks. Two categories were identified as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Framework frequency

Category	Number of reports	%
FRLT-based frameworks	140	60,3%
Other frameworks	92	39,7%

The first category, FRLT-based frameworks, includes reports that explicitly referred to transformational, transactional or laissez-faire leadership in their analysis and justifications. It also includes reports that did not explicitly mention transformational leadership or FRLT but nevertheless relied on central FRLT dimensions such as charisma/idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation when motivating the winner. The second category, other frameworks, includes reports that did not rely on FRLT-related dimensions and instead based their evaluations on alternative frameworks or self-constructed leadership models based on course literature, such as authentic leadership, emotional intelligence, coaching-oriented leadership, or relational leadership perspectives.

By distinguishing between framework usage, the analysis makes it possible to examine whether the choice of framework influenced how leadership excellence was justified, and whether similar leadership dimensions emerged regardless of theoretical approach as shown in Table 4. Table 4 presents how the student reports were categorized based on their use of FRLT logic and which leader was most frequently selected within each category.

Table 4 Most Frequently Selected Leader by Framework Type

Framework Type	Most Frequently Selected Winner
FRLT-based frameworks	Bob
Other frameworks	Bob

Bob emerged as the most frequently selected winner in both framework categories. This indicates that similar leadership qualities were repeatedly valued regardless of whether students explicitly relied on FRLT or other frameworks. In other words, although students used different theoretical perspectives and terminology, they often emphasized similar leadership behaviors when motivating why a leader deserves the award. For example, students using FRLT framework often chose Bob because he was inspiring, empowering, trust-building and developmental. Similarly, the students using other frameworks often still valued behaviors that closely aligned with transformational leadership, even if they described them using different terminology. Within authentic leadership perspectives, they emphasized honesty, values and consistency which overlaps with the concept of idealized influence. In reports framed by emotional intelligence, students highlighted empathy, active listening, and understanding

employees' needs, reflecting aspects of individualized consideration. Likewise, students applying relational leadership emphasized trust, openness, inclusion, and psychological safety, all of which are also strongly associated with transformational leadership. These findings suggest that FRLT-related leadership ideals influenced leadership evaluations even in reports that did not apply FRLT as the primary analytical framework. Even when students did not explicitly draw on transformational leadership theory, they consistently valued leaders who inspired employees, fostered personal development, built trust, communicated a clear vision and empowered followers.

To better understand what constituted the category of other frameworks, the alternative leadership perspectives used throughout the student reports were further categorized in Table 5. The purpose of this analysis was to examine the diversity of theoretical perspectives applied by the students and to explore whether recurring leadership dimensions emerged despite differences in analytical framework.

Table 5 Frequency of Non-FRLT Frameworks Used in the Student Reports

Framework	Reports (n)	%
Coaching leadership	35	15%
Authentic leadership	18	8%
Emotional intelligence	14	6%
Relational leadership	16	7%
Self-made / hybrid frameworks	9	4%

As shown in Table 5, the students applied a broad range of leadership perspectives when evaluating the nominees. Coaching leadership emerged as the most frequently used other framework, followed by authentic leadership, relational leadership, and emotional intelligence. Despite this theoretical diversity, several recurring leadership dimensions appeared consistently across the reports. Many of the dimensions emphasized within the alternative frameworks showed substantial conceptual overlap with FRLT-related leadership behaviors, particularly transformational leadership dimensions. At the same time, some dimensions appeared to extend beyond the traditional FRLT framework.

To further examine these relationships, the dimensions identified within the students' other frameworks were compared with the dimensions represented within FRLT. The purpose of this comparison was to explore whether leadership dimensions from the other frameworks nevertheless aligned with, partially overlapped with, or extended beyond the traditional FRLT model. Figure 3 illustrates how the dimensions identified in the other frameworks were connected to FRLT dimensions. Different symbols were used to present different levels of conceptual alignment. A one-directional arrow represents a partial connection, meaning that the dimension touches upon aspects included in FRLT but is not fully captured by the framework. A bidirectional arrow represents a direct connection, meaning that the dimension closely aligns with and is substantially represented within FRLT. Finally, the plus sign (+) indicates dimensions that extend beyond FRLT, where no clear equivalent dimension could be identified within the framework.

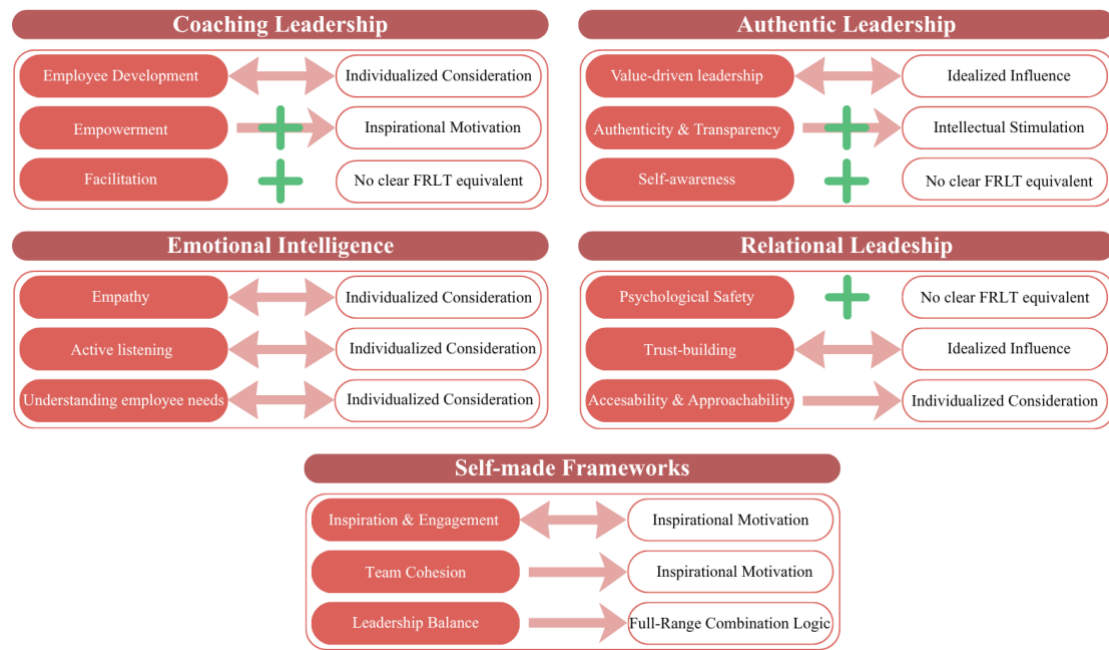


Figure 3 Types of Connections Between Dimensions Identified in Other Frameworks & FRLT

As illustrated in Figure 3, several leadership dimensions identified in the student reports showed strong conceptual overlap with FRLT, even when students relied on alternative leadership frameworks. Dimensions such as inspiration and engagement, empathy, active listening, and trust-building were repeatedly connected directly to transformational leadership dimensions, particularly individualized consideration, idealized influence and inspirational motivation. At the same time, the analysis also identified several dimensions that were only partially represented within FRLT or that extended beyond the framework entirely. For example, facilitation, psychological safety, authenticity, transparency, and self-awareness were repeatedly emphasized in the evaluations but lacked clear equivalents within the traditional FRLT dimensions. Similarly, some dimensions partially aligned with FRLT while simultaneously containing aspects that extended beyond the framework.

The findings therefore suggest two parallel patterns where on the one hand, students across different frameworks consistently valued leadership behaviors that strongly resemble transformational leadership ideals, supporting arguments regarding the broader universality of FRLT-related leadership qualities. On the other hand, the recurring emphasis on coaching, relational closeness, psychological safety, and developmental support indicates that important leadership dimensions extend beyond what is fully represented within the traditional FRLT framework. Together, these findings suggest that while FRLT appears to capture several leadership behaviors that students repeatedly associate with effective leadership, the evaluations were not fully constrained by the framework itself. Instead, students across different theoretical approaches consistently incorporated additional relational and developmental dimensions when justifying leadership excellence.

While the previous analysis focused on how students used different leadership frameworks to justify their evaluations, the following section shifts attention toward the leadership dimensions that emerged inductively from the empirical material itself based on students using all types of frameworks. Through the coding process, recurring statements and arguments across the student reports were organized into broader main

categories and subcodes capturing how leadership was interpreted, evaluated, and justified in practice. This makes it possible to examine which leadership dimensions appeared most central in the students' assessments, regardless of the specific theoretical framework applied.

4.2 Emerging Leadership Dimensions

The analysis of the student reports resulted in the identification of several overarching main categories that capture the key dimensions of leadership that are emphasized in the data. Each main category represents a set of behaviors and qualities that students associate with leadership when justifying their choice of award winner and non-winner.

Table 6 provides an overview of the identified main categories, the corresponding subcodes within each category, and their frequency of occurrence in the empirical material.

Table 6: Main categories that emerged from the subcodes

Subcodes	Main Category
Clear vision Inspirational Motivation Societal Purpose	Vision & Inspiration
Empathy & care Trust-building Availability	Relational Leadership
Delegation Coaching Self-leadership	Empowerment & Development
Clarity Meaning-making Inclusion & dialogue	Communication
Self-awareness Values-driven leadership Consistency	Authenticity & Values
Engagement Cohesion Learning Culture	Team & Culture Building
Style integration Adaptability Pace & pressure	Leadership Balance

4.2.1 Subcodes

After organizing the findings into main categories, more specific subcodes were identified to enable a more detailed analysis. Each subcode was assigned a positive (+) or negative (-) value based on how it was described in the empirical material. For example, behaviors such as control were typically interpreted negatively, whereas trust-building was viewed positively.

4.2.1.1 Vision & Inspiration

The category *Vision & Inspiration* captures how leaders articulate direction, motivate followers, and connect work to a broader sense of purpose. Across the 232 reports analyzed, three subcodes emerged within this main category: *clear vision*, *inspirational motivation*, and *societal purpose*. Together, these dimensions reflect both the cognitive and emotional aspects of leadership, highlighting how leaders not only define goals but

also inspire commitment towards them. Table 7 provides an overview of the identified subcodes, including their definitions, assigned values, and frequency of occurrence.

Table 7: Subcodes under Vision & Inspiration

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
<i>“works really hard to make everyone understand his vision and tries to talk to them if something is unclear,”</i>	Positive (+) 35%	Ability to articulate a clear and meaningful future direction	Clear vision
<i>“thinks one step further than the other contestants,”</i>			
<i>“his way of involving, developing and motivating his employees, he not only leads them, but also prepares them to become possible future leaders.”</i>			
<i>“By involving people in the processes, helping him solve problems, he motivates his followers.”</i>			
<i>“struggled with prioritizing tasks due to unclear long-term objectives.”</i>	Negative (-) 20%		
<i>“[He] could benefit from incorporating clearer frameworks and guidelines, ensuring that his team’s creativity is effectively channeled toward organizational goals.</i>			
<i>“[He] is an inspiring personality who is very passionate and committed towards his work and inculcate strategic mindset”</i>	Positive (+) 48%	Ability to energize and motivate followers beyond task requirements	Inspirational motivation
<i>“[He] tries to find intrinsic motivation in his workers and awaken their passion for their work so that they truly enjoy working”</i>			
<i>“His ability to inspire personal growth reflects his empathetic and inclusive leadership style”</i>			
<i>“Although she is described as a ‘people person’, there is no other indication that she possesses clear inspirational nor charismatic traits”</i>	Negative (-) 16%		
<i>“However, inspirational motivation is limited. He does not articulate a clear vision or express leadership through optimism or enthusiasm, but instead motivates through duty and adherence to established routines”</i>			
<i>“Inspirational motivation is present, but expressed through calm optimism and clarity rather than visionary rhetoric”.</i>			
<i>“In the interview, he mentions that his focus is not only mainly on creating buildings, it is about developing societies and people”</i>	Positive (+) 20%	Linking work to a broader social or ethical purpose	Societal purpose
<i>“While other leaders might talk about the importance of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) in a branding purpose, he is taking action and ensure their division outperforms the required level of CSR”</i>			
<i>“While all candidates showcased admirable traits, one consistently stood out by fostering individual growth, strong engagement both for the society and his team members, and the ability to create involvement and empower others”</i>			
<i>“His passion that is supported through the interviews contributes to his commitment in developing the society and fostering a positive and creative atmosphere”</i>			

The subcode **clear vision** refers to the leader’s ability to articulate a logical and understandable direction that guides action. In the empirical material, this is reflected in descriptions of leaders who communicate clear goals, explain future direction, and help employees understand how their work contributes to broader objectives. Leaders demonstrating this quality are often portrayed as proactive communicators who ensure alignment within their teams. For instance, one student noted that a leader *“works really hard to make everyone understand his vision and tries to talk to them if something is unclear,”* highlighting the importance of continuous clarification and dialogue. Similarly, another student emphasized forward-thinking behavior, describing how the

leader “*thinks one step further than the other contestants*,” suggesting an ability to anticipate and guide future developments. In contrast, the absence of a clear vision is associated with challenges in coordination and prioritization. Some reports indicate that when long-term direction is unclear, teams struggle to effectively structure their work. For example, one student observed that a team “*struggled with prioritizing tasks due to unclear long-term objectives*.” Illustrating how a lack of clarity can hinder performance. This subcode is a recurring but not dominant justification, which appears in approximately one-third of the reports. It is more frequently used to support the selected winner than to disqualify other candidates, which indicates that it functions mostly as a positive leadership attribute rather than a critical deficiency.

The subcode ***inspirational motivation*** captures the leader’s ability to excite and inspire followers to engage beyond formal role expectations and is one of the most dominant subcodes and frequently distinguishes winners from non-winners. In the data, this is expressed through descriptions of leaders who create a sense of enthusiasm, commitment and purpose which often motivate employees intrinsically rather than through external rewards. For example, one student described a leader as “*an inspiring who is very passionate and committed towards his work*,” emphasizing both emotional engagement and dedication. Similarly, another student highlights how a leader “*tries to find intrinsic motivation in his workers and awaken their passion*,” illustrating an active effort to cultivate internal drive among team members. At the same time, this subcode is not evenly present across all cases. Some reports mention that inspirational motivation is less evident, which makes leaders rely more heavily on task execution without fostering a comparable level of enthusiasm or emotional commitment. For instance, one student noted that “*inspirational motivation is limited, [the leader] does not articulate a clear vision or express leadership through optimism or enthusiasm but instead motivates through duty and adherence to established routines*,” illustrating a more task-oriented approach. Inspirational motivation appears to be one of the most important justifications for leadership excellence, emerging in nearly half of the reports. It is used substantially more often to support the chosen winner than to critique non-winners, indicating that the ability to inspire and energize followers’ functions as a key distinguishing factor in leadership evaluation.

The subcode ***societal purpose*** refers to the extent to which leadership is connected to broader social, ethical, or community-oriented goals that go beyond immediate organizational outcomes. In the empirical material, this dimension is reflected in descriptions of leaders who position their work as meaningful in a wider societal context. Leaders demonstrating societal purpose are often described as going beyond internal performance metrics and actively contributing to social impact or community development. For example, one student emphasized that a leader’s “*focus is not mainly on creating buildings, it is about developing societies and people*,” highlighting a broader orientation toward long-term societal value. Similarly, another student notes that while others may treat corporate social responsibility as a branding tool, the leader “*is taking action and ensures their division outperforms the required level of CSR*,” indicating a more action-oriented approach. Societal impact subcode appears in approximately one-fifth of the reports and is primarily used to strengthen the case for the selected winner rather than to critique alternatives. This suggests that broader social purpose functions as a higher-order evaluative criterion, distinguishing particularly strong leaders rather than serving as a baseline expectation.

4.2.1.2 Relational Leadership

The category *Relational Leadership* captures how leaders build, maintain, and manage relationships with their employees. It reflects the interpersonal dimension of leadership, focusing on behaviors that foster trust, understanding and accessibility within the team. The following Table 8 presents the subcodes identified within this category, including *empathy and care*, *trust building* and *availability*, along with their definitions, assigned values, and frequencies of occurrence.

Table 8: Subcodes under Relational Leadership

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
"...we are convinced that his self-awareness, morality and ethical features will contribute to something greater..." "His experiences and influences in others and in the organization appears to be extraordinary compared to other candidates." "...expresses a lot of empathy in his interview, he is devoted to getting people involved and finding what drives them." "...he likes to coach and give feedback to his team members, supporting a work culture where everybody is seen and safe, ..." "[He] can personalize his communication and is an attentive listener, ..." "[Her] relational focus is evident in her active involvement in daily operations and problem-solving, while her open-door policy fosters strong interpersonal relationships and trust within her team."	Positive (+) 14%	Understanding and responding to employees' needs and perspectives.	Empathy & Care
"...[Him] as a manager makes him feel safe..." "[He] gives high level of freedom to his employees and at the same time acts as a safe net for mistakes..." "[He] creates an open atmosphere where employees feel safe to express themselves and at the same time, [he] interacts with employees' mistakes with honest but firm communication about potential improvements." "[He] places trust in his subordinates by encouraging them to think and try their ideas themselves, while still being available for support and feedback." "...[he] "allowed failures and focused on learning", which further adds to a safe and trusting environment with emphasis on development." "...his followers trusted and admired him, creating a safe space where their point of view always mattered."	Positive (+) 41%	Creating psychological safety through consistent and fair behavior.	Trust-building
"She clearly shows she is accessible as she makes time for each employee, values listening and talking to improve the workplace and create a good environment." "[She] presents herself as a leader focused on clarity, development, and accessibility." "[He] needs to provide more time to other people..." "...[he] is unaware of how his lack of availability affects his team." "...one notable drawback is his tendency to take on too many responsibilities, which can impact his work-life balance and limit his availability for employees."	Positive (+) 23% Negative (-) 29%	Being accessible and present for employees.	Availability

The subcode *empathy & care* reflects the reader's ability to understand and respond to employees' needs, perspectives, and well-being. In the empirical material, this dimension appears in descriptions of leaders who demonstrate genuine concern for individuals, adapt their behavior to employee needs, and actively support personal and professional development. Leaders characterized by empathy and care are often portrayed as attentive listeners who foster inclusive and supportive environments. For

example, one student highlighted how a leader “*can personalize his communication and is an attentive listener,*” emphasizing the importance of individualized interaction. Similarly, another student describes a leader who “*likes to coach and give feedback to his team members, supporting a work culture where everybody is seen and safe,*” illustrating how empathetic behavior contributes to psychological safety and employee development. Empathy and care appear relatively infrequently as primary justifications for leadership selection, these qualities seem to be perceived more as baseline expectations than as distinguishing characteristics of exceptional leadership.

Moving on to the subcode ***trust building***, this subcode refers to the creation of psychological safety through consistent, fair, and transparent leadership behavior. In the empirical material, this is visible when leaders are described as reliable, open and able to create environments where employees feel safe to contribute, take risks, and express ideas without fear of negative consequences. Leaders who foster trust are often described as balancing autonomy with support. For instance, one student noted that a leader “*gives a high level of freedom to his employees and at the same time acts as a safety net for mistakes,*” highlighting how trust is built through both empowerment and reassurance. Similarly, another student emphasizes the creation of an open environment, where a leader “*creates an atmosphere where employees feel safe to express themselves,*” while also addressing mistakes through constructive and transparent feedback. Trust-building emerges as a central evaluative criteria, appearing in over 40% of reports as a justification for the selected leader. Its relatively high presence in winner descriptions suggests that trust functions as a distinguishing strength in leadership evaluation.

Availability captures the degree to which leaders are present, accessible, and engaged in day-to-day interactions with employees. In the data, this subcode appears most strongly in non-winner justifications, where lack of time, limited presence, or insufficient interaction with employees is highlighted as a key leadership weakness. Leaders who are perceived as available are described as approachable and attentive, making time for employees and fostering open communication. For example, one student noted that a leader “*clearly shows she is accessible and makes time for each employee,*” emphasizing the importance of being present and engaged in creating supportive work environment. In contrast, lack of availability is often associated with reduced support and weaker connection between the leader and the employee. Some reports highlight how limited time and presence can negatively affect team dynamics, with one student noting that a leader “*is unaware of how his lack of availability affects his team*”. This suggests that even when other leadership qualities are present, insufficient accessibility can undermine their effectiveness. Availability is more frequently used to criticize non-winning candidates than to justify the selected leader, suggesting that it functions as a threshold condition for effective leadership rather than a distinguishing characteristic of excellence.

4.2.1.3 Empowerment & Development

The category *Empowerment & Development* captures how leaders enable employees to grow, take responsibility, and develop their capabilities within the organization. Across the empirical material, this category highlights the importance of leaders who not only assign tasks but also actively invest in developing their employees through guidance, feedback and opportunities for growth. The following Table 9 presents the subcodes

identified within this category along with their definitions, assigned values, and frequencies of occurrence.

Table 9: Subcodes under Empowerment & Development

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
"She is very good at some of the mentioned leadership skills like... Delegating... and Giving feedback..." "...he mentions that he like to delegate responsibility to the people he leads and takes a backseat so as to allow his colleagues to operate with greater degree of freedom." "By delegating work, and trying not to interfere when not necessary, he instills trust in his employees and gives them the chance to develop." "he sees his own shortcomings (he has huge need for control but he also improved his delegation skills) so he really lives as he teaches which builds trust."	Positive (+) 21%	Granting responsibility and autonomy to employees	Delegation
"...we can see that he lacks the skill of delegating. From that also we can see that he doesn't have self-awareness as he doesn't know that he is weak in delegating and also he didn't mention that he wants to improve any skill." "...everyone applied a coaching approach except. for possibly [her] who had a tendency to take over her employees' work." "[He] admits in the interview that he has problems with delegating work and that this is something he is working with to become better at." "[He] lacks the trust in his subordinates to delegate more tasks, which leads to himself being overworked."	Negative (-) 25%		
"[He] has showed good coaching skills by lifting his employees and giving them responsibility and thereby the chance to develop and grow, both as individuals but also in the organization." "He also strengthens his coaching role in leadership by presenting that he tried to assign the lead role to his subordinates to create an active learning environment." "His leadership style emphasizes empowering his foremen to solve problems independently, fostering a culture of autonomy and growth. by standing in the background and offering feedback, [he] ensures his team takes ownership of their responsibilities..."	Positive (+) 52%	Supporting employee development through feedback and guidance	Coaching
"... [She] tends to explain to her co-workers what to do rather than coach and encourage them to find solutions on their own." "... she still needs to boost her conflict management skills, since she does not seem to have so much experience with conflicts in her work environment." "She sometimes does her employee's job instead of coaching them and explaining more about the task to push them towards doing their job successfully." "She fails in both the coaching and empowerment pillar with her lack in receiving feedback, and how she to some extent controls her employees in detail, which prevents empowerment."	Negative (-) 27%		
"In leadership development he strives to create self-sustained teams that become less dependent on him and more self-empowered." "It could also be claimed the [his] awareness of others is what makes him "good at combining... teams"; it also explains how [he] was able to help the subordinate to "find [his] drivers", which suggests that with his leadership [he] coaches others to gain self-awareness." "[His] ability to inspire and. let others lead themselves is mentioned by his employees..." "We can recognize here the importance in sense making where he trains the people working for him to become their own leaders."	Positive (+) 14%	Enabling employees to act independently and take initiative	Self-leadership

The first subcode ***delegation*** refers to the leader's willingness and ability to distribute responsibility and grant autonomy to employees. In the empirical material, this is reflected in descriptions of leaders who trust employees to make decisions and solve problems independently, as well as in criticisms of leaders who retain control or micromanage. Leaders who demonstrate effective delegation are often portrayed as empowering their employees by stepping back and allowing greater autonomy. For example, one student described how a leader *"likes to delegate responsibility to the people he leads and takes a backseat to allow his colleagues to operate with a greater degree of freedom,"* highlighting a conscious effort to enable independence. Similarly, another student emphasizes that by *"delegating work, and trying not to interfere when not necessary he instills trust in his employees and gives them the chance to develop,"* illustrating how delegation contributes to both trust-building and employee growth. In contrast, insufficient delegation is frequently associated with control-oriented behavior and reduced employee autonomy. Some reports describe leaders who *"have a tendency to take over their employees' work"* or *"lack the skill of delegating"* suggesting limited trust in subordinates and difficulty letting go of control. This not only constrains employee development but may also lead to inefficiencies, as leaders become overburdened with tasks that could otherwise be distributed. Delegation is slightly more frequently used to criticize non-winning candidates than to justify the selected leader, indicating that it functions primarily as an operational requirement. Its absence is perceived as a clear limitation, while its presence alone is not sufficient to distinguish exceptional leadership.

Coaching captures the leader's active role in supporting employee development through guidance, feedback, and improvement of learning. In the data, this is the most prominent subcode, appearing both as a strong justification for winners and as a key shortage among non-winners. It includes helping employees grow, reflect, and develop their capabilities rather than simply directing tasks. Leaders who demonstrate strong coaching behavior are often described as actively supporting development while still encouraging independence. For example, one student noted that a leader *"has showed good coaching skills by lifting his employees and giving them responsibility and thereby the chance to develop and grow,"* highlighting how development is linked to both support and autonomy. Similarly, another student describes how a leader creates learning opportunities by assigning responsibility and then *"standing in the background and offering feedback,"* allowing employees to take ownership while still receiving guidance. In contrast, a lack of coaching is associated with limited employee development and reduced learning opportunities. Some reports describe leaders who *"sometimes do their employees' job instead of coaching them,"* suggesting a tendency to solve problems directly rather than helping employees learn. Other examples point to limited time and availability, which reduces opportunities for feedback and support. These patterns indicate that without active coaching, employees may struggle to develop their skills and take on greater responsibility. When including negative expressions such as micromanagement and over-involvement, coaching emerges not only as the most prominent positive justification for leadership excellence but also as a major source of criticism. This indicates that employee development is a central evaluative dimension, where both the presence and absence of coaching behaviors significantly influence leadership assessments.

The subcode ***self-leadership*** refers to the extent to which leaders enable employees to take initiative, act independently, and manage their own work. Empirically, this appears

when leaders are described as creating self-sustaining teams (teams that are less dependent on direct supervision) or encouraging ownership and initiative, although it is less frequently observed than other empowerment-related subcodes. Leaders who support self-leadership are often described as focusing on long-term independence rather than short-term control. For example, one student noted that a leader “*strives to create self-sustained teams that become less dependent on him and more self-empowered,*” highlighting a deliberate effort to build autonomy within the team. Similarly, another student suggests that by helping employees understand their own motivations and strengths, leaders enable them to take greater responsibility for their work and development. Self-leadership appears relatively infrequently as a primary justification, suggesting that while the ability to foster employee autonomy and initiative is valued, it is not a central criteria in leadership evaluation. Instead, it often reflects a more advanced outcome of effective delegation and coaching rather than a standalone driver of leader selection.

4.2.1.4 Communication

The category *Communication* reflects how leaders communicate information, create understanding, and involve employees in dialogue and decision-making processes. The following Table 10 presents the subcodes identified within this category, along with their definitions, assigned values, and frequencies of occurrence.

Table 10: Subcodes under Communication

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
“...uses a lot of daily communication to reach the best solutions and results.”	Positive (+) 41%	Communicating goals and expectations clearly	Clarity
“She also communicates calmly and clearly.”			
“...communicates a clear strategic vision exemplifies the principles of transformational leadership”			
“... he is not distinctively communicating his vision on a daily basis to get his followers to adapt his vision...”	Negative (-) 21%		
“Sometimes he is too quick in his communication and has a tendency towards impatience.”			
“... he can be too straight forward thus risking to miss the conversations regarding softer issues.”			
“... he does also present a whole image in his communication... an advantageous part of picturing and giving purpose words.”	Positive (+) 10%	Explaining the purpose and significance of work	Meaning-making
“He frequently explains why decisions are made and how tasks relate to broader goals...”	Positive (+) 41%	Involving employees in discussions and decisions	Inclusion & dialogue
“... creates an environment where people can throw in and try their strange ideas as well, just like he tries his strange ideas.”			
“He gives his employees room to be creative, letting go of the control and let them try their visions, striving to generate cooperation, confidence and enthusiasm.”			
“...he is not the expert, the people around him are and they are the ones with the knowledge, thus, they are the ones who can come up with the best solutions.”	Negative (-) 16%		
“His focus on participation helps mitigate misunderstandings and promotes a collaborative spirit.”			
“... when it comes to the employees he manages he seems to busy and not having time to listen to their concerns and issues.”			
“... he prioritizes his own speed and drive to do things quickly, instead of focusing on communicating what should be done. This overshadows his lack in delivering consistent communication, preventing empowerment.”			

The subcode **clarity** refers to the ability to communicate goals, expectations and information in a clear and understandable way. From the empirical material clarity comes from descriptions of leaders that reduce ambiguity and ensure that employees understand how to proceed and what is expected from them. Leaders demonstrating this quality are often consistent communicators who ensure shared understanding within their teams. In one report students write that a leader “*uses a lot of daily communication to reach the best solutions and results,*” highlighting how continuous interaction can reduce ambiguity and support alignment. Another student described how a leader “*communicates calmly and clearly,*” suggesting that both tone and structure contribute to clarity. The absence of clarity is associated with difficulties in aligning employees with the leader’s direction. For example, from one report it is observed that a leader is “*not distinctively communicating his vision on a daily basis to get his followers to adopt his vision,*” illustrating how insufficient communication can weaken shared understanding. Being overly direct may also reduce clarity, as it is noted in another report that a leader “*can be too straight forward thus risking to miss the conversations regarding softer issues,*” suggesting that clarity also requires nuance. Clarity emerges as a central operational dimension of leadership, appearing in over 40% of reports as a justification for the selected leader. Its substantial presence in both winner and non-winner descriptions indicates that clear communication of goals and expectations is both a key strength and a common source of deficiency in leadership evaluation.

The subcode **meaning-making** refers to the ability to explain why the work matters and how it connects to goals and values. In the empirical material it is clear that meaning-making appears when leaders help their employees to understand the significance of their work tasks which are often connected to a larger purpose. Leaders demonstrating this quality often link everyday tasks to broader goals and purpose. For instance, it is noted in a report that a leader “*frequently explains why decisions are made and how tasks relate to broader goals,*” highlighting how meaning is constructed by connecting daily work to overarching objectives. In another report students described how “*the coaching is done by truly understanding the employees and thereafter helping them to understand their work... rather than just telling them what to do,*” suggesting that meaning-making emerges through dialogue and support rather than directive communication. Meaning-making appears relatively infrequently in the reports, suggesting that while the ability to create a sense of purpose is recognized, it is not a primary criteria in leadership evaluation. Instead, it functions as a higher-order justification that strengthens the case for particularly strong leaders rather than serving as a baseline expectation.

The subcode **inclusion & dialogue** refers to the involvement of employees in communication, decision-making, and knowledge sharing. In the empirical material this subcode is frequently brought up as weaknesses for leaders, where lack of participation, limited dialogue, or insufficient involvement is pointed out as main factors. Leaders demonstrating this quality often facilitates participation and creates space for employees. One student noted in a report that a leader “*creates an environment where people can throw in and try their strange ideas as well,*” highlighting how inclusion enables openness and idea-sharing. In contrast, the absence of inclusion and dialogue is associated with reduced employee engagement and limited understanding. For example, students observed in one report that a leader “*seems too busy and not having time to listen to their concerns and issues,*” illustrating how lack

of dialogue can weaken connection and responsiveness. In another report it is noted that a leader “*prioritizes his own speed... preventing empowerment,*” suggesting that insufficient involvement can limit employees’ ability to contribute and take ownership. Inclusion and dialogue emerge as a central relational dimension of leadership, appearing in over 40% of reports as a justification for the selected leader. Its stronger presence in winner descriptions compared to non-winners indicates that employee involvement in communication and decision-making functions as a key distinguishing characteristic of effective leadership.

4.2.1.5 Authenticity & Values

The category *Authenticity & Values* captures how leaders understand themselves, act in line with their values, and demonstrate consistency between what they say and what they do. It reflects the extent to which leadership is grounded in self-awareness, integrity, and alignment between beliefs and behavior. In the empirical material, this category highlights the importance of leaders who are perceived as genuine, reflective, and guided by values in their decision-making and interactions. The following Table 11 presents the subcodes identified within this category, along with their definition, assigned values, and frequencies of occurrence.

Table 11: Subcodes under Authenticity & Values

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
“... he is the one which according to me, articulates his flaws and the way he tries to improve them in the most convincing and clear way...”	Positive (+) 15%	Understanding one’s own strengths, weakness and impact	Self-awareness
“He also has a good understanding on what he needs to improve and it is clear in the script that he is working on it.”			
“... he knows that he at times can be impatient to take action and too fast... he is working on this issue and has over the years improved this “flaw” and learned how to adapt more to others.”			
“... both his superior and subordinate have been aligned with what he himself has stated...”			
“... she takes credit, without to mention those who she has delegated the work to. in our perspective it lacks of self-awareness.”	Negative (-) 5 %		
“He did not give any constructive leadership skills that were his weakness. Showing a lack of self-awareness and inability to set adequate self-improvement goals.”			
“He points out a few moral central values he believes in... This links tightly to his leadership style which he describes to get people involved and committed by providing ethical values.”	Positive (+) 26%	Acts with integrity and responsibility	Value-driven leadership
“He describes himself as a reflective person and also shows clear personal values that reflects his role as well his personality.”			
“... we see him as the stronger candidate, seeing that he actually states clear individual values and in the way we see that they are implemented in the followers.”			
“He always acts according to his own beliefs and uphold ethical standards for the benefit of others...”	Positive (+) 17%	Aligning actions with stated values	Consistency
“... [he] tells him to fit in some “air” in the calendar, which is something he himself would not do. This points out that he does not live as he teaches...”	Negative (-) 12%		
“... he prioritizes his own speed and drive to do things quickly, instead of focusing on communicating what should be done. This overshadows his lack in delivering consistent communication ”			

The subcode **self-awareness** refers to people's understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, and impact on others. This is reflected in the empirical material from the leaders who acknowledge limitations, their own behavior, and actively work on personal development. Leaders demonstrating this quality are reflective and capable of critically evaluating their own behavior. For instance, it is noted in one report that a leader *"knows that he at times can be impatient to take action and too fast... he is working on this issue and has over the years improved this 'flaw'";* highlighting how self-awareness involves both recognition of limitations and active efforts to improve them. Lack of self-awareness is associated with limited personal development and misalignment with others. An example of this is observed from a student who notes that a leader *"takes credit, without to mention those who she has delegated the work to,"* suggesting a lack of awareness of their impact on others. Self-awareness appears in a relatively small proportion of reports and is primarily used to support the selected leader rather than critique alternatives. This suggests that while reflective capacity is recognized as a valuable leadership trait, it is not a central criterion in students' evaluations and may be less visible or harder to assess compared to more behavioral dimensions.

The subcode **value-driven** leadership refers to internal principles, ethics, and moral convictions rather than goals. This is reflected upon in the empirical material when leaders are described as acting based on beliefs, showing integrity, and aligning actions with personal values. Leaders demonstrating this quality are often grounded in their leadership with clearly articulated values that guide both behavior and decision-making. For instance, one student noted that a leader *"points out a few moral central values he believes in... providing ethical values,"* highlighting how leadership can be anchored in shared principles that foster commitment. Another student described how a leader *"shows clear personal values that reflects his role as well his personality,"* suggesting that consistency between values and actions strengthens both credibility and leadership identity. Value-driven leadership appears in approximately one-quarter of the reports and is primarily used to strengthen the case for the selected leader rather than to critique non-winners. This suggests that ethical and principle-based leadership functions as a positive differentiator, but not as a core requirement in students' evaluations.

The subcode **consistency** refers to alignment between stated values and actual behavior. In the empirical material it is highlighted that coherence between what leaders say and what they do, as well as when inconsistencies undermine perceived authenticity. Leaders that are consistent are often portrayed as acting in accordance with their stated values and principles. For instance, one student noted that a leader *"always acts according to his own beliefs and uphold ethical standards for the benefit of others,"* highlighting how consistency reinforces credibility and trust. Leaders that lack consistency is associated with reduced authenticity and weakened leadership effectiveness. A student noted in a report that a leader *"prioritizes his own speed... overshadows his lack in delivering consistent communication,"* suggesting that inconsistent behavior can create confusion and reduce clarity within the team. Consistency appears as a moderately important evaluative dimension, used both to support the selected leader and to critique non-winners. Its presence reflects credibility and alignment between values and behavior, while its absence highlights a lack of authenticity. However, compared to value-driven leadership, students more frequently emphasize stated values than their consistent enactment (taking action on it).

4.2.1.6 Team & Culture Building

The category *Team & Culture Building* captures how leaders foster a collaborative, supportive, and development-based team environment. The following Table 12 presents the subcodes identified within this category along with their definitions, assigned values, and frequencies of occurrence.

Table 12: Subcodes under Team & Culture Building

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
"... his passion and commitment to the tasks will inspire the team to get dedicated as well. He wants them to give the little extra in everything they do."	Positive (+) 25%	Motivating employees to contribute beyond expectations	Engagement
"He describes himself as a very committed work, both to the cause and to his employees... With this commitment he brings an emotional aspect to his work and to his employees."			
"His passion and commitment is contagious and creates a united sense of mission among the employees to do something great."	Positive (+) 34%	Creating a sense of unity and belonging in the team	Cohesion
"He nurtures relationships, builds cohesive teams and create the organizational conditions for others to success."			
"According to his employees he helped them grow and achieve goals and still keeps a good atmosphere and makes sure that everybody is listened to and feel good, he takes time for his employees which they appreciate."	Positive (+) 10%	Encouraging learning through experimentation and reflections	Learning culture
"... while they both created an environment of trust that enabled their people to feel inspired and motivated by them, thus bringing that extra leadership quality..."			
"He focuses on learning from it rather than failures..."			

The subcode **engagement** refers to the ability to create collective commitment and active involvement among the employees. Descriptions are shown in the empirical material of employees going beyond expectations, showing initiative, and feeling motivated to contribute. Engaged leaders often foster dedication by expressing strong personal commitment and emotional involvement in their work. For instance, one student noted in a report that a leader's "*passion and commitment to the tasks will inspire the team to get dedicated as well,*" highlighting how engagement can be transmitted through the leader's own behavior. Another student described how a leader is "*a very committed worker, both to the cause and to his employees... bringing an emotional aspect to his work,*" suggesting that emotional investment plays a key role in creating collective motivation and involvement. Engagement appears in approximately one-quarter of the reports and is primarily used to support the selected leader rather than to critique non-winners. This suggests that the ability to create collective commitment and active involvement functions as a positive differentiator, reflecting the leader's impact at the team level rather than a baseline requirement.

The subcode **cohesion** refers to the making of unified and collaborative team environments. In the empirical material it shows that leaders are described as bringing people together, promote belonging, and creating a shared team identity. Leaders that have the quality to create a cohesive environment often have a strong sense of unity and shared purpose within their teams. An example of this is the note from one student, that a leader's "*passion and commitment is contagious and creates a united sense of mission among the employees,*" highlighting how cohesion can emerge through shared

motivation and collective direction. Another student described how a leader “*nurtures relationships, builds cohesive teams and create the organizational conditions for others to success,*” suggesting that cohesion is actively constructed through relational work and supportive team structures. Cohesion appears in approximately one-third of the reports and is primarily used to justify the selected leader. This suggests that the ability to create a unified and collaborative team environment is an important distinguishing factor in leadership evaluation, reflecting effective team-level outcomes rather than baseline expectations.

The subcode *learning culture* refers to when leaders encourage reflection, experimentation, and learning from mistakes. In the empirical material it is reflected that leaders who allow their employees to try ideas, accept failure as part of their learning, and promote continued development stand out. Leaders demonstrating this quality often create environments where employees feel safe to learn and develop through experience. In one report it is noted by a student that leaders “*created an environment of trust that enabled their people to feel inspired and motivated,*” highlighting how psychological safety supports learning and experimentation. Another student described how a leader “*focuses on learning from it rather than failures,*” suggesting that reframing mistakes as learning opportunities is central to for continuous development. Learning culture appears infrequently in the reports, suggesting that while the promotion of reflection and learning is recognized as valuable, it is not a central criteria in leadership evaluation. Instead, it functions as a higher-level, long-term dimension that complements more immediate and observable leadership behaviors such as coaching and communication.

4.2.1.7 Leadership Balance

The category *Leadership Balance* captures how leaders manage and adjust different aspects of their leadership approach in response to varying demands and situations. It reflects the ability to combine different leadership styles, adapt behavior when needed, and maintain an appropriate balance between performance expectations and employee well-being.

The following Table 13 presents the subcodes identified within this category along with their definitions, assigned values and frequencies of occurrence.

Table 13: Subcodes under Leadership Balance

Quotes	Frequency	Definition	Subcodes
“Not only is he able to effectively yet humbly lead and support his employees by employing effective communication and adopting several leadership styles...”	Positive (+) 20%	Combining different leadership styles effectively	Style integration
“... he fails to encourage people to manage their work.”			
“He is very keen on involving people and coach them according to their personal needs in order for them to develop and seem to be very emotional flexible in these situations.”	Positive (+) 16%	Adjusting leadership behavior to the situation	Adaptability
“[He] is able to act decisively if the situation requires it but is able to consider all aspects in a emotional flexible way if there is room for that.”			
“He is open to the new things and he is very keen to learn more and more about leadership and we think that this will give him more flexibility which will let him handle all kinds of situations and will give him more than one meaning of leadership itself.”			

<i>"Colleagues praise his communication skills, adaptability, and motivational insight."</i>			
<i>"... appears more consistently balanced across motivational, developmental, and adaptive dimensions."</i>	Positive (+) 18%		
<i>"His main default would be to go sometimes too fast that could result in some employees to be left on the side of the highway."</i>	Negative (-) 21%	Managing workload and expectations sustainably	Pace & pressure
<i>"... he prioritizes his own speed and drive to do things quickly..."</i>			
<i>"He can sometimes act too quickly, which he is aware of, and this can cause confusion within his team."</i>			

The subcode ***style integration*** refers to the ability to use several leadership approaches effectively. The empirical material shows that leaders are described as flexible in combining different behaviors rather than relying on a single leadership style. Leaders that have this quality are often adaptable in their leadership, combining different approaches to meet demands. In one report a student notes that a leader is *"able to effectively yet humbly lead and support his employees... adopting several leadership styles,"* highlighting how flexibility in behavior enables more effective leadership. A lack of style integration is associated with a limited ability to support an empower employees. Style integration appears in approximately one-fifth of the reports and is primarily used to justify the selected leader. This suggests that the ability to combine multiple leadership approaches is valued as a sign of well-rounded and sophisticated leadership, but is not a core requirement in students' evaluations.

The subcode ***adaptability*** refers to the ability to adjust behavior based on the situation as well as context or individual needs. In the empirical material, this is reflected in descriptions of leaders who demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness rather than relying on a fixed leadership style. Leaders who have adaptability are often described as capable of balancing different approaches depending on the circumstances. For example, one student highlighted how a leader is *"able to act decisively if the situation requires it but also consider all aspects in a flexible way,"* illustrating the ability to shift between directive and reflective leadership when needed. Similarly, another student emphasizes how leaders tailor their approach to individuals, noting that they *"coach according to personal needs,"* which supports employee development in a more customized way. Adaptability is also evident in how leaders respond to change and new challenges as some reports describe leaders who are open to new ideas and continuously seek to improve their leadership, while others highlight the ability to manage organizational growth and transformation effectively. These examples suggest that adaptability is not only about personal flexibility but also about responding to broader changes in the work environment. Adaptability appears in a moderate proportion of reports and is primarily used to support the selected leader rather than criticize non-winners. This suggests that while flexibility and responsiveness to context are valued, they are not central criteria in students' leadership evaluations and may be overshadowed by more observable and immediate leadership behaviors.

The subcode ***pace & pressure*** refers to the ability to manage expectations, overall tempo of work, and workload. This often appears as a negative subcode in the empirical material, where high intensity, fast pace, or pressure are seen as problematic for the effectiveness of the leadership. Leaders who struggle with managing pace are often described as moving too quickly or placing high demands on their teams without adjustment to employees' capacity. For example, one student noted that a leader *"sometimes goes too fast, which can result in employees being left behind,"* highlighting

how unbalanced pace can negatively affect the team’s cohesion and inclusion. In a similar way, another student points out that a leader “*prioritizes speed and drive to do things quickly*,” which, while potentially beneficial for performance, may also create stress and reduce clarity within the team. In some cases, this fast-paced approach leads to unintended consequences, such as confusion or reduced alignment. As one student observed, acting too quickly “can cause confusion within the team,” which shows that not taking time to reflect or communicate can make leadership less effective. These findings indicate that while some certain level of drive and efficiency is valuable, too much focus on speed can come at the expense of employee well-being and coordination. Pace and pressure are more frequently used to criticize non-winning candidates than to justify the selected leader, indicating that the management of workload and expectations functions primarily as a risk factor. Ineffective handling of pressure is perceived as a limitation, while effective management is less often highlighted as a distinguishing strength.

4.3 Dominant Subcodes and Extensions to FRLT

The findings show that leadership behaviors related to development, inspiration, trust-building, and employee involvement were valued most highly in the evaluations. *Coaching, Inspirational Motivation, Trust-building, and Inclusion & dialogue* were the most common positive subcodes as shown in Table 14. These dimensions reflect the importance of leaders who support employees, create trust, inspire motivation, and involve employees in communication and decision-making. The most common negative subcodes were *Availability, Coaching, Delegation, and Pace & pressure*. These behaviors were often connected to weaker leadership evaluations, as they were seen to reduce support, communication, and employee development. The findings suggest that effective leadership is associated with relational, supportive, and developmental leadership aspects.

Table 14 Most Dominant Dimensions

Positive (+)	
Coaching	52%
Inspirational Motivation	48%
Trust-building	41%
Clarity	41%
Negative (-)	
Availability	29%
Coaching	27%
Delegation	25%
Pace & pressure	21%

The following analysis examines how these dimensions relate to FRLT. Many of the subcodes show clear connections to existing leadership frameworks, mostly towards transformational leadership. The next table therefore presents how the identified subcodes are connected to leadership dimensions as shown in Figure 3 together with informative Figure 2 to simplify the connection type between subcode and leadership dimensions. Several subcodes identified in the findings did not have any clear or direct equivalent within the FRLT. The subcodes societal purpose, availability, delegation, coaching, self-awareness, and pace & pressure extended beyond the traditional FRLT

dimensions. Although some subcodes partly overlapped with transformational leadership dimensions, they represented distinct leadership behaviors and evaluations in the empirical material.

The subcode *Societal purpose* reflected leadership behaviors connected to broader meaning, contribution, and organizational values extending beyond immediate organizational goals. Students described leaders who connected work to societal contribution, ethics, sustainability, or a broader sense of purpose. While inspirational motivation includes elements of vision and collective goals, societal purpose appeared as a more explicit focus on broader external and societal meaning. *Availability* reflected leadership behaviors connected to leaders being accessible, present, approachable, and emotionally available in everyday interactions. Students repeatedly emphasized leaders being reachable, listening actively, and maintaining regular relational contact with employees. Although individualized consideration includes attentiveness toward followers' needs, availability appeared as a more continuous and everyday relational presence in the empirical material. *Delegation* emerged as a separate subcode connected to trust, autonomy, and responsibility distribution. Students described effective leaders as willing to delegate responsibility, trust employees' competence, and allow autonomy in work processes and decision-making. Delegation was also associated with balancing employee independence and leadership support. *Self-awareness* reflected leadership behaviors connected to leaders' awareness of their own actions, emotional impact, and interpersonal behavior. Students described leaders being reflective, emotionally conscious, and aware of how their behavior affected employees and workplace dynamics. Self-awareness was therefore connected to reflexivity and emotional understanding rather than direct influence or motivation alone. Lastly, *Pace & Pressure* reflected leadership behaviors connected to workload management, organizational tempo, stress, and performance expectations. Students evaluated leaders based on how they handled pressure, workload intensity, and employee strain. Leadership was described negatively when leaders created excessive pressure, unrealistic demands, or stressful working conditions, while leaders who created balance, stability, and manageable expectations were evaluated more positively.

Together, these subcodes represented leadership dimensions that extended beyond the direct FRLT categories identified in the analytical framework. The findings therefore included several relational, developmental, and reflective leadership behaviors without clear one-to-one equivalents within the traditional FRLT dimensions.

5 Discussion

The discussion focuses on two central aspects emerging from the analysis. First, it examines the extent to which the empirically identified leadership dimensions in “other frameworks”; including coaching leadership, authentic leadership, emotional intelligence, relational leadership and self-constructed frameworks as presented in section 4.1, align with, challenge, or extend beyond the traditional FRLT framework. Special attention is given to dimensions that repeatedly appeared important in the student evaluations but were only partially represented, or entirely absent, within the existing model.

Second, the discussion addresses the tensions and weighting of leadership dimensions identified throughout the analysis in section 4.2. Together, these discussions contribute to a broader understanding of how leadership is interpreted and assessed in practice, and what this may imply for the continued development of leadership theory.

5.1 FRLT: Supported, but What is Missing?

The findings from this study provide substantial support for the broader applicability and universality of the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), while at the same time indicating that the framework does not fully capture all leadership dimensions valued in evaluative contexts. Across the 232 student reports, similar leadership qualities were repeatedly emphasized regardless of whether students explicitly relied on FRLT-based frameworks or “other frameworks”. As presented in section 4.1, Bob emerged as the most frequently selected leader both among students using FRLT frameworks and among students using “other frameworks”, as shown in Table 4. This suggests that certain leadership dimensions were consistently perceived as valuable independent of the theoretical lens applied.

This finding strongly connects to the literature that describes FRLT as a framework that has demonstrated broad applicability across organizational and cultural contexts (Bass, 1996b; Antonakis & House, 2002; Lowe et al., 1996). Empirical studies reviewed in the theoretical framework consistently show that transformational leadership behaviors are associated with positive outcomes such as effectiveness, satisfaction, trust, motivation, and willingness to exert extra effort (Bass, 1996a; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Goktas, 2021) and the present findings support these arguments, as students repeatedly valued leaders who were perceived as inspiring, empowering, developmental, trust-building, and relationally supportive.

What makes this particularly interesting is the context in which these evaluations were done. Unlike many previous empirical studies testing FRLT in organizational settings, this study examines leadership evaluation within an educational context, where students analyzed and assessed leaders as part of a structured home exam assignment. The educational context is interesting because students were not organizational members evaluating their own managers. Unlike many studies of leadership perceptions (Fransen et al., 2019; Hughes, 2017), the evaluators had no direct dependence on, loyalty to, or any prior relationship with the leaders that were being assessed. Instead, they evaluated the same leaders based on common set of interview transcripts. This reduces the influence of many aspects such as organizational politics, personal experiences with the leaders, and workplace dynamics that often shape leadership evaluations. The setting therefore makes it possible to examine which leadership dimensions people consider

important when explicitly comparing leaders and justifying why one leader should be considered better than another.

Furthermore, the empirical material consists of reports written by students from diverse cultural, professional, and educational backgrounds, including engineering, architecture, economics, and project management. Despite these differences, students still demonstrated remarkably similar leadership preferences and repeatedly emphasized comparable leadership dimensions when justifying award-winning leadership. Although FRLT encompasses transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership, the dimensions most strongly reflected in the present findings were primarily transformational in nature. This strengthens the argument presented by Bass, Antonakis and House that transformational leadership behaviors may reflect broader and relatively universal leadership ideals that extend across contexts (Bass, 1996b; Antonakis & House, 2002). At the same time, the findings also support earlier studies (Pounder, 2008), who found support for FRLT within university classroom settings, suggesting that the framework may retain relevance even outside traditional organizational environment. However, the present study extends this discussion further by showing that FRLT-related leadership logic emerged not only in formal leadership assessments, but also in students' own self-constructed evaluative frameworks. This indicates that transformational leadership ideals may have become deeply embedded in how leadership is generally understood and evaluated, even among individuals with different educational, cultural, and professional perspectives.

The findings also reveal an important pattern regarding the reports categorized as "other frameworks". Although these reports did not explicitly rely on FRLT terminology, many of the leadership dimensions used to justify the award-winner still aligned closely with transformational leadership logic. As illustrated in Figure 2, several frameworks outside FRLT overlapped with dimensions associated with inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. For example, students using authentic leadership frameworks frequently emphasized ethical behavior and value-based leadership, both of which are dimensions that closely relate to idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and the role-model aspect of transformational leadership (Bass, 1996a). Similarly, reports using coaching-oriented or relational leadership perspectives repeatedly highlighted employee development, listening, support, and empowerment, which strongly resemble individualized consideration and inspirational motivation within FRLT (Bass, 1996a; Day, 2014). Other self-made frameworks by the students emphasized team cohesion and leadership balance, aspects that partly align with inspirational motivation and a combination of FRLT.

This suggests that even when students moved away from FRLT as an explicit framework, they often continued to evaluate leadership through assumptions and ideals that were conceptually similar to transformational leadership. One interpretation of this is that transformational leadership logic may function as a broader normative understanding of what constitutes "good leadership", regardless of the specific theoretical language being applied. This interpretation can be connected to implicit leadership theory (ILT), which argues that individuals develop cognitive prototypes of what a "good leader" should look like, and that these prototypes shape how leadership is interpreted and evaluated (Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Lord et al., 1984). Research further suggests that transformational leadership behaviors such as inspiration, trust-

building, vision, and developmental support are frequently associated with positive leadership prototypes across contexts (Bass, 1996a; Den Hartog et al., 1999). The findings of the present study therefore indicate that transformational leadership ideals may have become embedded not only within FRLT itself, but also within broader societal and educational understanding of effective leadership.

However, the findings also demonstrate that the “other frameworks” did not merely reproduce FRLT dimensions. Several leadership aspects repeatedly emphasized by students extended beyond what could clearly be connected to the traditional FRLT framework. In particular, dimensions such as psychological safety, self-awareness, and facilitation were difficult to directly locate within the existing FRLT dimensions. Students frequently valued leaders who created environments where employees felt psychologically safe to express opinions, make mistakes, and participate openly. Similarly, facilitation was repeatedly described not only as supporting followers individually, but as actively enabling collaboration, participation, and collective functioning within the team. These findings therefore support earlier critiques arguing that FRLT does not fully capture the broader relational and developmental dimensions of leadership. Antonakis and House themselves acknowledge that FRLT does not include all possible leadership behaviors and argue that the framework likely requires extensions and refinements. In response to these limitations, they propose instrumental leadership as an extension to FRLT, particularly emphasizing follower work facilitation, which includes behaviors such as clarifying goals, supporting employees, facilitating performance, and enabling followers to succeed (Antonakis & House, 2002). Several of the dimensions emerging in the present study, particularly facilitation, empowerment, and enabling team functioning, closely resemble these proposed extensions. Similarly, Michel et al. (2011) argue that FRLT and MLQ exclude important leadership behaviors such as empowerment, consulting, and developmental support (Michel et al., 2011). The present findings therefore support these critiques by demonstrating that several of the dimensions most strongly associated with effective leadership in student evaluations were either only partly presented or entirely absent within the FRLT structure.

When turning to the findings presented in Section 4.2, a more nuanced picture of leadership evaluation emerges. While many of the subcodes identified inductively from the student reports aligned with transformational leadership and other established leadership frameworks, several dimensions also extended beyond both FRLT and the alternative frameworks used by the students. In particular, subcodes such as *societal purpose*, *self-awareness*, *availability*, *delegation*, *coaching*, and *pace & pressure* emerged as recurring leadership dimensions that were difficult to fully locate within the traditional FRLT structure. This finding is particularly interesting because it supports earlier critiques questioning whether FRLT can truly be understood as a fully comprehensive or “full-range” model of leadership (Antonakis & House, 2002; Michel et al., 2011; Verlage et al., 2012). The findings do not reject FRLT entirely, but they suggest that the framework captures several important leadership dimensions while at the same time leaving important relational, developmental, and contextual leadership behaviors underrepresented. This becomes particularly visible in subcodes such as coaching and delegation which emerged as recurring dimensions in the empirical material, and they were frequently associated with both positive and negative leadership evaluations.

Although delegation partially overlaps with inspirational motivation and contingent reward, and coaching overlaps with individualized consideration, the findings propose that students treated these subcodes as more explicit and important leadership aspects than traditional FRLT descriptions typically explain. The findings suggest that delegation was articulated in more concrete and relational ways as students repeatedly emphasized leaders who trusted employees with responsibility, encouraged autonomy, allowed independent decision-making, and avoided excessive control or micromanagement. This finding aligns with previous research questioning whether FRLT fully captures important empowering and developmental leadership behaviors. Michel et al. (2011) for example argue that the MLQ excludes several leadership practices that are strongly associated with effective leadership including empowering, consulting, clarifying responsibilities, delegation, and supporting employee development (Michel et al., 2011). Their comparison between the MLQ and the Managerial Practices Survey showed that these additional leadership behaviors explained leadership effectiveness beyond what was captured within the traditional FRLT framework. The findings from this study support this critique, as delegation and coaching repeatedly emerged not only as a complementary aspect of leadership, but also as a recurring highly valued dimension in itself.

Similar arguments are also found in comparison between FRLT and Implicit Leadership Theories (ILT) (Verlage et al., 2012) as their study identified several leadership categories extending beyond traditional FRLT dimensions. What is particularly relevant to the findings from this study is that delegation emerged as an important leadership behavior associated with the effectiveness but not sufficiently represented within the original framework. Itzkovich et al. (2020) further extend this critique by arguing that FRLT overlooks important manifestations of leadership behavior, particularly empowerment and delegation (Itzkovich et al., 2020). The authors also highlight that FRLT overlooks the “dark” and “destructive” side of leadership and does not distinguish between it and laissez-faire leadership. This tension also becomes visible in the present findings, where delegation functioned as both positive and negative evaluative dimension. Leaders who delegated responsibility while remaining supportive, available, and engaged were generally evaluated positively, whereas leaders perceived as absent or lacking sufficient guidance were evaluated more negatively. The findings therefore suggest that students did not interpret delegation itself as problematic, rather evaluated how delegation was practiced and balanced in relation to support, follow-up, and leader involvement. In this tense, the findings support earlier critiques suggesting that FRLT does not fully capture the complexity of empowering leadership behaviors and their distinction from passive or ineffective leadership.

Availability also emerged as an important leadership dimension extending beyond traditional FRLT descriptions. Students repeatedly emphasized leaders being approachable, emotionally present, attentive, and accessible in everyday interactions. While the absence of availability is partly captured by laissez-faire leadership, the findings suggest that students valued a more continuous and relational form of leader presence than what is explicitly described in FRLT. This aligns with findings from literature that important relational qualities such as communication, flexibility and interpersonal interaction extend beyond existing FRLT dimensions (Verlage et al., 2012). The findings from this study suggest that leadership evaluations are influenced

not only by visionary or inspirational behaviors, but also by leaders' relational accessibility in everyday organizational practice.

Another dimension extending beyond FRLT was societal purpose. Students frequently evaluated leaders, particularly Bob, positively when they connected organizational work to broader societal contributions, social responsibility, and value creation beyond immediate organizational performance. While inspirational motivation partly captures meaning-making, collective vision, and the ability to motivate followers around shared goals, the present findings suggest that students valued a broader societal orientation extending beyond internal organizational objectives and employee motivation alone. This is theoretically interesting because societal purpose was not explicitly represented as a central leadership dimension within the FRLT framework or within much of the empirical critique literature reviewed in this study. Earlier critiques of FRLT have primarily focused on relational, developmental, empowering, or destructive behaviors (Michel et al., 2011; Verlage et al., 2012; Itzkovich et al., 2020), whereas broader societal and moral dimensions of leadership received more limited attention. Because of this, the findings suggest that contemporary evaluations of leadership may increasingly involve expectations that leaders contribute not only to organizational effectiveness, but also to wider societal legitimacy and social value creation. This is interesting because FRLT mainly focuses on leader-follower influence, motivation, inspiration, and performance outcomes but the subcode societal purpose shifts the evaluation toward moral legitimacy, social contribution and broader purpose.

The emergence of societal purpose may also reflect broader developments in contemporary leadership discourse, where leaders are increasingly expected to address ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility alongside traditional organizational objectives. This aligns with research on responsible leadership, which argues that leadership is increasingly evaluated in terms of broader stakeholder relationships and societal value creation rather than solely leader-follower influence and organizational performance (James & Priyadarshini, 2021). The findings from the present study may indicate that leadership evaluations are not limited to organizational effectiveness alone, but also involve perceptions of broader societal contribution and responsibility. This aligns with research connecting transformational leadership to corporate social responsibility and stakeholder oriented leadership practices, where leaders are increasingly expected to contribute to social and ethical value creation beyond internal organizational performance (Rashid Khan et al., 2018).

5.2 Tensions in Dimensions and Weighting of Subcodes

An important finding in this study is that the same leadership dimensions were often used both as positive and negative justifications depending on how they were enacted and interpreted in context. This suggests that leadership dimensions cannot be understood as universally positive or universally negative in themselves. Instead, the empirical material indicates that tensions exist within many of the identified subcodes, where behaviors associated with effective leadership could also become problematic when taken too far, applied inconsistently, or disconnected from other leadership dimensions. This supports critical leadership perspectives arguing that leadership effectiveness depends on context rather than fixed ideal behaviors (Alvesson, 2020). This was particularly visible in dimensions connected to vision, inspiration, empowerment, and relational leadership. Visionary and inspirational leadership behaviors were frequently associated with positive evaluations when leaders created

meaning, motivation, and direction for employees. At the same time, students also criticized leadership when visions were perceived as abstract or disconnected from day-to-day work. In these cases, inspirational leadership risked creating uncertainty rather than clarity. The findings therefore indicate a tension between inspiration and practical grounding, where behaviors perceived as motivating in one context could become problematic in another. This partly supports Alvesson's (2020) critique that leadership research often overemphasizes inspirational and optimistic ideals while paying less attention to organizational complexity and practical constraints.

Similar tensions emerged within empowerment and delegation. Empowerment could also be interpreted negatively when leaders were perceived as too absent, unclear, or insufficiently supportive. In these situations, delegation risked being interpreted as lack of guidance rather than trust. The findings therefore suggest that empowerment was not valued in isolation, but depended on leaders simultaneously maintaining clarity, support, and involvement. This also supports previous criticism arguing that leadership behaviors related to coaching, empowerment, and developmental support are more complex than many traditional leadership models imply (Michel et al., 2011; Itzkovich et al., 2020). Relational leadership dimensions also showed some tension. Behaviors connected to empathy, trust-building, openness, and availability were among the most positively valued dimensions in the material. Students consistently emphasized psychological safety, supportive interaction, and relational closeness as important aspects of leadership quality. Similar relational dimensions have previously been identified as important for leadership evaluations in empirical leadership research (Fransen et al., 2019; Hughes, 2017). At the same time, some students also described situations where relational closeness risked reducing decisiveness and creating ambiguity. This indicates that relational leadership was not evaluated as only positive, but rather as dependent on balance with structure and direction.

These findings challenge simplified understandings of leadership behavior as either "good" or "bad." Instead, the empirical material suggests that leadership evaluations were highly relational and contextual, where the value of a leadership behavior depended on how it interacted with other dimensions. Leadership effectiveness was rarely connected to one isolated behavior alone. Students rather evaluated leaders more holistically by examining how multiple leadership dimensions were balanced and combined in practice. This supports broader critiques arguing that leadership effectiveness cannot fully be understood through isolated leadership styles or fixed behavioral categories alone (Michel et al., 2011; Verlage et al., 2012). The findings also support broader critiques of what Alvesson (2020) describes as "upbeat" leadership theory. Much leadership research tends to emphasize inspirational, motivational, and morally positive aspects of leadership while paying less attention to problematic or harmful leadership tendencies. The present findings partly support earlier leadership research, since students clearly valued behaviors connected to trust, development, communication, empowerment, and inspiration. The analysis also demonstrates that leadership evaluations were equally shaped by the avoidance of harmful leadership behaviors.

In many cases, students justified strong leadership not only through the presence of positive qualities, but also through the absence of behaviors perceived as damaging. Leaders were criticized when they created stress, uncertainty, exclusion, weak communication, excessive pressure, or lack of support. Effective leadership was

therefore not only understood as demonstrating desirable leadership behaviors, but also as avoiding behaviors that undermined trust, stability, and employee well-being. This supports arguments suggesting that leadership research should pay greater attention not only to positive leadership ideals, but also to how harmful leadership behaviors shape evaluations of leadership quality (Itzkovich et al., 2020). The findings therefore contribute to a more nuanced understanding of leadership evaluation, where leadership effectiveness partly depends on avoiding destructive or imbalanced leadership behaviors rather than only displaying positive ones.

Another important finding concerns the relative weighting of the leadership dimensions. Although many dimensions emerged in the empirical material, they were not equally emphasized by the students. Certain dimensions appeared significantly more central than others when students justified award-winning leadership. Relational, developmental, communicative, and inspirational dimensions dominated the evaluations. Students repeatedly emphasized trust-building, communication, empowerment, support, coaching, development, and meaning-making when describing effective leadership. Rather than relying on one single leadership style, students appeared to combine relational, communicative, developmental, and inspirational aspects simultaneously when evaluating leadership quality more holistically than FRLT implies. Effective leadership was therefore constructed not as a fixed leadership style, but as a broader combination of behaviors that together created trust, motivation, support, clarity, and development. This supports previous criticism questioning whether existing leadership frameworks fully capture the complexity of leadership evaluation in practice (Antonakis & House, 2002; Michel et al., 2011).

Not only are some dimensions weighed more heavily than others, but several of the dimensions receiving the strongest negative weighting are dimensions that lie outside FRLT. This is an interesting pattern that emerged when comparing the extensions of FRLT identified in section 4.3 with the dominant negative dimensions presented in Table 14. The subcodes pace & pressure, availability, and delegation were among the most frequently occurring negative justifications used by students when criticizing leaders or explaining why a nominee should not receive the award and the subcodes that were not found to be equivalent to a dimension within FRLT. This finding suggests that the limitations of FRLT are not only related to missing positive leadership behaviors, but also missing dimensions that seem important when people evaluate leadership negatively as these dimensions played an important role in distinguishing highly valued leaders from less valued leaders. This indicates that dimensions outside FRLT may be especially important for understanding how leadership failures, weaknesses, or limitations are identified and justified. This also, once again, supports previous critiques that the framework does not fully capture the broader range of leadership behaviors and evaluative criteria used in practice (Antonakis & House, 2002; Michel et al., 2011).

Another notable finding is the relatively limited role of transactional leadership in the evaluations. Compared to relational and developmental dimensions, transactional leadership behaviors appeared much less frequently in students' justifications. Behaviors connected to monitoring, corrective control, and management-by-exception were rarely emphasized as central explanations for leadership excellence. When transactional dimensions were discussed, they were interpreted as necessary but insufficient aspects of leadership. The weak emphasis on transactional leadership is

particularly interesting given that the evaluation context itself involved organizational leadership and managerial responsibility. Despite this, students consistently valued leadership behaviors connected to relational support, employee development, psychological safety, and communication more strongly than control-oriented or exchange-based leadership practices. Similar tendencies have also been identified in previous research about relational and identity-based leadership processes (Fransen et al., 2019).

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how leadership is interpreted, evaluated, and justified in a structured evaluative context by identifying recurring and dominant leadership dimensions in student assessments of leaders that were nominated to win an award. Through the analysis of 232 student reports written between 2017 and 2025, the study explored which leadership dimensions were most frequently associated with effective leadership, how these dimensions were used as positive and negative justifications, and to what extent they aligned with, or extended beyond the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT).

The findings demonstrate that FRLT continues to capture many of the behaviors that people consistently value in leaders. Across the student evaluations, dimensions associated with transformational leadership, including vision and inspiration, motivation, communication, and employee development, were repeatedly linked to effective leadership and frequently used to justify why certain leaders were considered to be more deserving of the award than others. These findings were found to align with earlier research by Bass (1996a), Judge and Piccolo (2004), and Lowe et al., (1996), who found strong connections between transformational leadership and positive outcomes such as effectiveness, satisfaction and employee motivation. At the same time, the findings show that leadership evaluations involve a broader set of aspects than those represented within FRLT that students considered in the evaluations. Students consistently emphasized relational and developmental dimensions such as coaching, availability, delegation, psychological safety, and relational closeness. While some of these dimensions partially align with concepts within FRLT, they were often discussed in ways that extended beyond the traditional boundaries of the framework. Thus, these findings support previous critiques that suggest that FRLT does not fully capture the complete range of leadership behaviors and qualities that people associate with effective leadership and non-effective leadership. Rather than replacing FRLT, the results indicate that the framework captures many core leadership ideals but may benefit from being complemented by additional perspectives that more explicitly address coaching, empowerment, psychological safety, societal responsibility, and negative leadership behaviors.

Additionally, the study showed that leadership was evaluated through both positive and negative lenses as students did not only identify desirable leadership behaviors but also justified their choices by criticizing leaders that were perceived as controlling, unavailable, overly focused on performance, or lacking trust in their employees due to lack of delegation. This finding supports arguments made by researchers such as Itzkovich et al., (2020), who says that leadership research should pay more attention to destructive, ineffective, and negatively perceived leadership behaviors. This indicates that understanding what makes a leader stand out requires not only identifying valued leadership behaviors but also understanding which behaviors people actively reject.

The study contributes to leadership research by demonstrating the value of examining leadership through structured evaluative contexts. By analyzing how individuals justify why one leader is considered better than another, it becomes possible to identify not only which leadership dimensions are present, but also which dimensions are prioritized, weighted, and contrasted against each other. This provides a richer understanding of how leadership is socially constructed and assessed in practice.

Finally, several opportunities for future research emerge from this study. One interesting aspect would be to investigate whether leadership ideals differ across generations. Leadership theories like FRLT were developed during a period characterized by different organizational structures, work environments, and societal expectations than those that exist today. Future studies could therefore examine whether younger generations place bigger emphasis on dimensions such as psychological safety, coaching, well-being, inclusion, and work-life balance compared to previous generations. Comparative studies across age groups, cultures, industries, or time periods could provide interesting insights into how leadership expectations evolve and whether contemporary leadership ideals differ from those emphasized in earlier research. Future research could also explore the dimensions identified in this study using employee evaluations in organizational settings, which would allow researchers to investigate whether patterns observed in student assessments are similarly reflected in real-world leadership assessments.

6.1 Practical Implications

While this study contributes to the academic discussion surrounding Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), the findings also provide three implications for leadership practice. For practitioners, the most important insight is not whether a leader fits a specific theoretical framework, but rather which leadership behaviors consistently stand out when people evaluate and compare leaders.

A first implication is that effective leadership appears to be less about directing people and more about enabling them to succeed. Coaching, delegation, empowerment, and employee development were among the most frequently recurring dimensions in the evaluations. Organizations aiming to strengthen leadership capability should therefore not only develop managers' ability to make decisions and deliver results, but also their ability to create opportunities for learning, trust employees with responsibility, and actively support individual growth. *A second implication* concerns the importance of relationships. The findings indicate that employees value leaders who are available, supportive, and genuinely interested in people. Psychological safety, trust, active listening, and relational closeness were highlighted as positive leadership characteristics. This suggests that leadership effectiveness is not only determined by strategic competence or formal authority but also by the quality of everyday interactions between leaders and followers. This means that leadership development initiatives should place greater emphasis on interpersonal skills and relationship building rather than focusing exclusively on performance management within organizations. *A third implication* is that leaders are expected to balance multiple demands. Several dimensions identified in the study contained internal tensions. For example, delegation could be interpreted as empowerment when combined with support and follow-up, but as absence of leadership when support was non-existing. Strong involvement could be perceived as care and commitment, but also as micro-management if taken too far. These findings suggest that successful leadership is rarely about maximizing a specific behavior and instead it involves continuous balance, support, strategic direction and employee participation.

One of the most important practical takeaways is that outstanding leadership appears to be evaluated holistically. The most appreciated leaders were not necessarily those who excelled in a single dimension, but those who successfully combined vision, communication, trust, employee development, authenticity, and organizational

performance. For practitioners, this implies that leadership development should avoid a narrow focus on individual competencies and instead adopt a broader perspective that recognizes leadership as a combination of strategic, relational, developmental, and value-based practices.

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