MASTER
IN
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

The Unison Effect

Aligned Communication Leading Operational Excellence

AUTHOR

Julie Likhatcheva

DATE	SUPERVISOR	WORD COUNT
15.05.2020	Henrik Køhler Simonsen	25.418

The Unison Effect

Aligned Communication Leading Operational Excellence

by

Julie Likhatcheva

May 2020

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment

of the Master's Degree

in

International Business Communication

MCO

Master's Thesis	Contract number
CIBCO2000E	16780

It is the nature of improvement and optimization to create new levels on standard.

This is the meaning of growth in my eyes.

(Leader 8: Question 6)

Abstract

This thesis sets out to investigate the options for a company to reach superior performance. The study is based on qualitative data collection and already established theoretical frameworks, in order to analyze the roadmap to operational excellence in large organizations. Operational excellence is the common term used in organizations that are set on continuous improvement, learning and optimizations. What this study emphasizes is the leadership aspect of facilitating operational excellence, and what kind of communication is needed in order to encourage people in an organization to cross-collaborate with different departments in the organization in order to drive organizational alignment.

Consequently, this study uncovers the main leadership skills that based on the nine leaders interviewed, are the most important in order to facilitate operational excellence. Namely quality as a mindset, storytelling, commitment, and proper communication amongst others. In addition, this study succeeds in identifying how the underlying organizational or departmental beliefs, values, and assumptions drive the cultural patterns of change or resistance to it.

This thesis is based on an empirical analysis of how organizations reach superior performance with operational excellence. Based on the data, this study develops a framework that illustrates what organizations and leaders can do in order to create a unison effect in the way that they communicate and lead according to contingencies or new strategic initiatives. Subsequently, this thesis adds to existing literature on value, by suggesting that the unison effect creates awareness throughout the steps to operational excellence, and how to achieve superior performance in the organization.

Key words/tags: operational excellence, organizational alignment, leadership, performance management, communication, large organizations

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Henrik Køhler Simonsen, for challenging and encouraging me through this research process.

A huge thank you from the bottom of my heart to the love of my life, Daniel who has been the biggest support and inspiration in life and it the process of writing my thesis.

I would like to express my gratitude to my parents for always being there for me unconditionally and my little sister for her valuable creativity skills and support to the visual design of this thesis.

I extend my sincere gratitude to my parents in law for their support.

A special thank you to all the participants of the interviews. Your highly valuable insights and experiences have been the key of this thesis.

I am grateful to have you in my life.

J. Likhatcheva

Julie Likhatcheva

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Page | Title

List of Abbreviations

AM = Alignment Management

DMAIC = Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control

DMADV = Define, Measure, Analyze, Design, Verify

LPC = Least Preferred Co-worker

OE = Operational Excellence

PDCA = Plan, Do, Check, Adjust

PM = Project Management

PMO = Project Management Office

TQC = Total Quality Control

TQCM = Total Quality Control Management

1. Introduction

The ways companies do business is rapidly changing due to demand, competition, and innovation. The environmental changes are exponentially rapid, and the environmental challenges are costly if not grasped and managed well. Due to this, even a company's long-term strategy might not be valid in a few years, despite its ambition and relevancy at the time when initiated. Thus, constant change in the environment calls for constant change in the organization in order to maintain a superior performance. Consequently, superior performance is most vulnerable to change if it is not properly managed and led. Scholars have typically described organizational change as a cultural and communicative challenge (Lewis, 2011). Moreover, as portrait in literature, it is relatively easy to spot the 'cultural' top of an iceberg, however, it is usually more challenging to see the bottom of it (Schein, 2016).

Therefore, there is a reason why companies still hire consulting companies to support them in driving change in order to learn new ways of doing business, and not only to adjust but also to reach superior and excellent performance. Thus, companies acknowledge the importance of learning in accordance with environmental changes. However, as scholars also point out, learning does not necessarily come from external sources, it usually comes from within. In order to be a highly sought-after company that beats competition, the company must perform in a superior and excellent way (Oakland, 2014: Mitchell, 2015). Failing to achieve superior performance can be seen in well-known examples like; while Apple was learning in accordance with the environmental changes and exceeding its performance, Nokia was not (Shaughnessy, 2013).

Most companies in today's landscape are aware of what new strategic initiatives require in terms of recourses and communication. Nonetheless, the challenging aspect of communication in large companies comes down to breaking through the departmental separations and promote cross-collaboration in order to drive projects that are corporately aligned and in line with operational excellence (Schein, 2016: Trevor & Varcoe, 2017). Subsequently, the topic of this study has been to uncover the communication that aligns and leads operational excellence in order to achieve superior performance. Consequently, the discoveries made from the data collected allowed for an elaboration on this topic and generated findings in relation to the deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions in organizations (Schein, 2016).

The topic of this study is relevant for corporate communications as an interdisciplinary field of research and practice. Although the representation of leadership and superior organizational performance is extensively described and discussed in literature, the practical aspect of it is what drives this study. Namely because the result of this study is built on empirical evidence and practical experience by leaders with various seniorities from large companies. The focus of this study is to investigate how the organizational emphasis on quality and operational excellence could change the culture and improve the continuous learning and optimization. However, this study is not focusing on the complexity of cultural change, since it is a prerequisite that leaders are aware of it. Consequently, this study is attempting to explore the optimization process of creating superior performance in an organization and subsequently how communication aligns an organization to facilitate operational excellence.

In this study, I researched the leadership skills that are essential to operational excellence in order to investigate what is needed for the leader to be able to drive organizational alignment and achieve superior performance. Based on the collected data, the analysis and discussion, through a leadership lens, uncover how operational excellence can lead to superior performance with the support from a quality management framework and roadmap to operational excellence. Furthermore, based on this, this study develops its own framework.

The writing style of this study is considered intentionally to induce curiosity. The title catches the reader's eyes and interest. The reasoning behind this is that in my experience, people's attention is harder to catch nowadays. Especially due to the bombardment of buzzwords and articles promoting new ways to change or to communicate in the organization every single day. Nowadays, in general, leaders must prioritize their time even if the topics gain their interest. Consequently, mental filters and selection processes are the most prominent tools in their minds. Therefore, it is crucial to not only have a title that invokes interest, the study needs to induce genuine value for the leader, which I tried to do with this thesis.

1.1 Personal Motivation

Being raised by an opera singer has given me the opportunities to perform on stage either solo or in ensemble with my father. When I started to study business, I started to notice cross-disciplinary similarities between music theory and the philosophy of business. After studying both disciplines, it was evident that some concepts from music and my stage life could explain the behavioral science in business and vice versa. For instance, I have from my life as a musician learned how to speak confidently in front of people in a business context, and on the other hand from my work experience in business, I have learned how not to waste the audiences' time and only inspire them with my singing and choice of music.

After analyzing the data from the participants of this study, I realized that their approach to superior performance reminded me of a unison. Unison is a concept that I know from listening to countless operas and classical music. The unison is, metaphorically, a reflection of a whole orchestra of fifty people that sound like one, or when three people sing an aria, so it sounds like one voice. When writing the analysis and discussion chapter, I realized that people together can create such beautiful music and create an effect that makes tears fall down my cheeks just by cooperating and aligning with each other. So, it hit me: how can a company strive for this effect?

A CEO and a composer do not become successful overnight. The talent comes, in many cases, from a combination between an understanding of how each and every instrument – be it music or business – sounds and performs, and how to combine these in order to create unison. Therefore, it became my mission with this study to uncover all the steps toward the unison effect based on the collected data.

1.2 Research Statement

The main considerations to highlight the research statement of this study, have been to investigate existing literature and research to analyze data and then ask how a new way of leading towards operational excellence can be achieved. Thus, the following is this study's research statement:

How can leaders align communication in order to facilitate operational excellence?

The purpose of the research statement is to enable research within leadership, communication, and operational excellence to merge with the data analysis collected from various leaders in order to create a new framework and recommendations on how to achieve a unison effect in a company.

1.3 Outline

My thesis follows a classical structure that commences with defining concepts that usually are unfamiliar or ambiguous by nature. In addition, it will also create an initial understanding of what this study is specifically concentrated on. Then, the methodology and data collection of this study will be explained. The overall theoretical framework will provide the reader with a thorough evaluation of the chosen theory for this study. Eventually, the theory and data analysis will be the basis for the framework development. To tie it all together, the study will be implicated for the future and then concluded.

2. Concept Definitions

Concepts are important components of theories and it is almost impossible to imagine any theoretical framework without a concept embedded in it (Bryman et al. 2015). This study utilizes concepts that might be unfamiliar or even ambiguous to the reader. Thus, this chapter briefly describes the main concepts and frameworks for this study in order to create a more relatable frame of reference for the reading mind.

2.1 What Is Unison?

Have you ever heard a piece of music where one voice turned out to be two or more voices singing in the same note but sounded like one? That is, in essence, unison. In popular music, this is also called a doubling. In music theory 'unison' refers to a linear succession of musical tones that a listener perceives as a single entity (Hannon et al., 2004). As illustrated below in figure 2.1, unison is according to Harnsberger (1996), when something is doubled. In other words, to play or sing with another performer or play or sing the same part or same notes an octave above or below another performer (Harnsberger, 1996: p. 45).

Figure 2.1 Unison Illustrated

(Source: Essential Dictionary of Music Theory)

The term unison, similar to the well-known term harmony, is essentially the principle of creating alignment and consequently creating beautiful music that always satisfies the listeners. Harmony is commonly used in any context nowadays even in business. However, the term unison is rarely mentioned in business despite being a big part in music. To be in unison is equal to being aligned. Thus, even though the unison has its definition from music theory, its transferred meaning is mainly rooted in the theoretical aspects of continuous organizational improvement and operational excellence. Through the analysis in this study, I want to discover what drives and motivates people in the organization, and the way they lead and communicate in order to achieve this effect.

2.2 Excellence

In the twenty-first century business, it is very usual to see actively used organizational terms that end on 'excellence'. In general, 'excellence' has always been a well-known term for having a culture that exceeds their striving for excellence (Michell, 2015). However, the possibility of getting lost with all these similar terms, especially seen from the perspective of an employee at the hierarchical bottom, getting told that the company will now be run excellently, might be very high. Therefore, this section will describe process excellence, business excellence, and operational excellence as the on-going improvement processes in an organization and their inevitable interconnectedness.

As an imaginative example, two CEOs are talking about their continuous improvement efforts in their own respective companies. The first CEO is emphasizing the use of business excellence in his company, while the second one is facilitating operational excellence in his company. The first one says: "*In my company, we have been delivering solid and outstanding results for three years now, because we run the company with optimized processes and continuous learning, which encompasses the whole organization, including our strategy and our communication with all stakeholders, and most importantly the organization's results*".

The second one says: "*Sounds interesting and very similar to what we are doing, but my company has reached a revenue growth of 3% each year for five years now due to an internal culture change. And just like you, we have optimized our processes and we consistently promote continuous and sustainable improvement. Consequently, everyone understands how the systems and processes work in the organization and they get empowered every day to find solutions to occurring problems, sometimes even without the meddling of us in the upper-management*". The first CEO nods along and confirms that it sounds awfully like what is going on in his organization. They reveal that the terms they use are different, but in essence are the same thing – hence excellence.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the three terms as concentric circles intertwining each other. Process excellence is at the micro-level and concentrates its efforts solely on effective and efficient processes. While operational excellence mainly focuses on optimizing the balance between risk, reliability and cost. To be more precise, this process drives continuous and sustainable improvement (Michell, 2015). Thus, operational excellence distinguishes itself as a meso-level concept since it incorporates more aspects as opposed to its partner process excellence while being complimentary to business excellence. It is described in depth in section 5.15.

Figure 2.2: Excellence circle

(Source: an improved illustration of Banach, 2016)

Business excellence is positioned at the macro-level, because business excellence is engulfing both operational excellence and process excellence, therefore it should be the overall goal of any company. Business excellence is what any small, medium, and large company should strive for and have a vision of from day one. I mean, (Rhetorically asked) which company does not want to deliver at least good results in a pragmatic, consistently successful fashion and gain more market share and decrease competition? (Highgear, 2017).

What the model also illustrates is the fact that it is a perpetual process. The process aspect means that there might be an end-state when firstly initiated. However, this end-state will define a new path and so on and so forth. It is a commitment to continuous improvement when starting this process. Even while running the process, a company might already call itself excellent in the aspect they chose to optimize (Banach, 2016). However, for this study I will use the term and concept of operational excellence to point out the leadership aspect of it in terms of communication and continuous improvement. Similarly, leadership excellence is a concept that encompasses everything from a leader’s mindset, communication, and learning.

As the Charles Darwin quote states:

“It is not the most intellectual or the strongest of species that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able to adapt to and adjust best to the changing environment in which it finds itself.” (Darwin, 1859)

2.3 Management Levels and Decision Layers

The business world encounters many levels of management, and also layers of decision-making every day in different contexts. It is vital to understand what roles the leaders have in this process. Therefore, for the purpose of this study and the understanding of the terms in relation to management will be explained and three decision-making layers will be elaborated. In particular, literature on operational excellence emphasizes that the decision-making and problem-solving should be according to a bottom-up strategy, while traditional and bureaucratic theories emphasize the top-down approach of decision-making and problem-solving (Michell, 2015). The terms ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ are strategies on how problem-solving is handled within an organization. For instance, if the approach is top-down, the people in the organization require the top management to provide solutions for most problems. Whereas, a bottom-up approach empowers people to solve problems on the spot as they occur, and in alignment with corporate values.

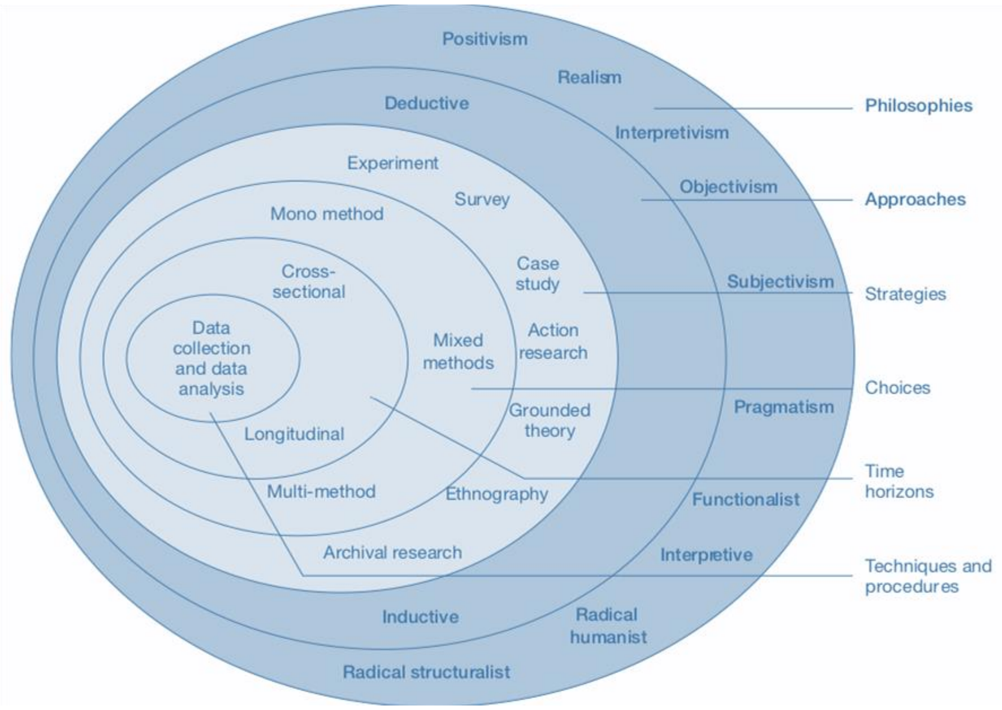
Theoretically, there are three layers of decision-making in a large organization. Namely the strategical, tactical, and operational (Sepstrup, 2006). In the *strategical layer*, top management in cooperation and acceptance of the board of directors, decide and formulate strategies and initiatives based on the company’s values and how they see the future for the company. The *tactical layer* involves the middle managers to facilitate plans and to execute on the overall strategy planned by higher management. Accordingly, the *operational layer* involves the actual execution and facilitation of the activities decided previously on and planned at the strategical and tactical levels. According to Simonsen (2009), it is the operational level that involves solving concrete and practical tasks (Simonsen, 2009: p.202).

3. Methodology

The use of theory throughout any research project raises an important question regarding its design. Therefore, the methodological account of the research philosophy for this study is described in this chapter, along with research considerations and assumptions, approaches to theory development, the strategic approach, the choices and most importantly, the data collection, the analysis and the validity of this research.

In order to achieve a structured methodology, there is an ample amount of reflections to address. For this reason, this chapter will be structured according to 'the research onion' framework developed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007). The purpose of this approach is to uncover all the layers of this onion, to eventually have a clear understanding of which philosophical and research considerations drive this study and its viewpoint.

Figure 3: The Research Onion



(Source: Marc Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill, 2007)

3.1 Research Assumptions and Considerations

According to Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2007), research assumptions can be separated into two clusters. Namely epistemology and ontology. Consequently, the considerations around these research assumptions, will be the philosophy throughout the analysis and discussion. Epistemologically, this study leans towards interpretivism. Meaning that "*it is necessary for the researcher to understand the differences between humans in our role as social actors"* (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007: p.106). In other words, this particular epistemology emphasizes that conducting research and extracting data among people rather than objects is key.

Figuratively speaking, Saunders et al. (2007) demonstrate interpretivism in the following way: The term 'social actors' accounts as a metaphor for actors in a theater. Thus, the scholars suggest that as humans we also play a part on the stage of human life (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007: p. 106). In addition to business research, interpretivism could, in this study, be used as a tool to analyze the responses from the participants' self-completed questionnaires and interviews. In essence, actors in a theater play a particular role that is personally interpreted by the actor or the director. Thus, Saunders et al. (2007) state that the actors act out their part in accordance with this interpretation (p. 107). Similarly, people in organizations interpret their own role based on their title, their experience, and their social norms. Accordingly, Bryman & Bell (2015) also state that we give meaning to roles that we socially play and act out of a personal frame of reference (p. 22).

The viewpoint of this study is as Saunders et al. (2007) state that the world of business and management is far too complex to only lend itself to theorizing by definite "laws" (p. 106). Accordingly, complexity is the most common factor in external and internal organizational structures. Usually, complexity is the condition of having many interrelated and interdependent entities, meaning that there is an array of people, systems, and processes that all need to be efficiently managed (Hoppermann, 2015). In addition, these entities can bear valuable insights to further optimization and improvement. If the research is undertaken to increase the stock of knowledge within a field, it can eventually bring rich insights into this complex world. However, these rich insights into this complex world are lost if such complexity is reduced entirely to a series of law-like generalizations (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007).

Nonetheless, this study is not about the complexity of business and management, but it is more to point out that complexity is the driver of many processes, systems, and organizational structures. In essence, they have induced the underlying curiosity of this study to not just generalize based on only data and existing theory, but also to challenge and to interpret the people behind the data.

Originally, the heritage of interpretivism comes from two intellectual traditions. Namely phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Thus, it refers to the way that humans make sense of the world around them and that they are in a continual process of interpreting the social world around them (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007: p. 107). Inevitably, in this view, people in organizations have the same need to interpret actions of others in all contexts which eventually leads to continuous adjustments of one's meaning and actions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007).

Ontologically, this study leans towards social constructionism. According to Saunders et al. (2007), this stance is of the subjectivist view (p. 108). Subjectivism is used to highlight that the social phenomena are created from the perception and consequent actions of social actors. Moreover, this view also emphasizes that actions and social interactions are in constant and continuous negotiation and revision. Consequently, what social actors are bound to do, is to seek to make sense of events and situations and draw meanings from them. In addition, their interpretations are likely to affect their actions and nature of their further social interactions with others (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007).

Social constructionism is compatible with the interpretivist stance as they both aim to understand the way people are making sense of reality. For instance, interpretivism essentially brings a different emphasis upon the empathic understanding of cultural context, similarly, social constructionism brings upon the mediation of language and social interaction (Bastalich, 2019).

3.2 Approach to Theory Development

Historically, two approaches to theory development have mainly been used (Saunders et al., 2007). Namely the deductive and inductive reasonings. As these two reasonings have different perspectives on research theory and its development, I will briefly explain both because they are used to some extend in this study. The deductive reasoning helps to identify theories and ideas using data. Inevitably the deductive approach develops a theoretical or conceptual framework which is subsequently tested using data (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Thus, it is the exploration of the necessary consequences of a rule (Hansen, 2008). Moreover, the deductive approach emphasizes the confirmation of an already existing and developed theory. Whereas the inductive reasoning concentrates on conducting without a theory-derived premise, and develops, for instance, a theory or framework based on the data-derived analysis. Thus, even though the purpose of the study is clearly defined with a research statement, the theories or conceptual framework is not predetermined (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007).

Besides these two more commonly used approaches to business research, a third approach to theory development has gained acknowledgement among researchers. Namely the abductive reasoning. This reasoning bridges the limitations of the inductive and deductive reasoning and proposes to overcome these limitations by seeking to explain a puzzle which the scholars Alvesson & Kärreman (2011) describe as 'a mystery'. These puzzles and mysteries arise when a researcher encounters an empirical phenomenon which existing theory cannot explain (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

According to various scholars, abduction does not start with explanations, but instead links things together to generate an order that fits the surprising facts in the beginning of theory-building. Consequently, this approach creates tentative explanations to make sense of observations for which there is no appropriate explanation or rule in the existing store of knowledge (Hansen, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2007). Thus, according to Saunders et al. (2007) abduction uses both inductive and deductive elements to explain the conclusion. In addition, this approach moves forward the plausible theory that can explain the fact. Subsequently, it becomes a process of moving back and forth from the observation, data, and empirical knowledge and the theory until a good enough explanation is achieved.

This study is based on the abductive approach because it seeks to identify the conditions that would make the phenomena researched less mysterious and puzzling (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). According to Ketokivi & Mantere (2010), abduction involves selecting the best explanation from competing explanations or interpretations of the data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Theoretically, this approach relates to the philosophy of continuous dialogue between the data and the researcher's preunderstandings, also called the hermeneutic circle (Bryman & Bell, 2015: p. 563). In other words, the knowledge develops and arises as the circle keeps repeating with newer gained knowledge. Therefore, the knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon expands.

3.3 Research Strategy

Strategically for this study, grounded theory has been the building block for creating a theoretical framework. Consequently, data collection was commenced without the formation of an initial theoretical framework, and the theory developed with this study from the data generated led to an amount of predictions which were tested in the analysis. Grounded theory is a discipline of theory-building that enables the combination of theory development approaches in order to predict and explain behavior where the emphasis is on developing and building a theory (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007).

Grounded theory is a research strategy that can build on theory through a combination of induction and deduction, and it is compatible with this study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). The reason for strategically using grounded theory is because of the continual reference to the data. Evidently, this study concentrates on the constant reference to the data to develop and test the theory (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Traditionally, grounded theory was often thought of being the best example of the inductive approach. However, as the theory was more frequently used in other epistemological and ontological contexts, the theory has become more encompassed and is acknowledged to be utilized with other theoretical development approaches.

Unlike positivistic approaches to grounded theory, Kathy Charmaz (2014) who is one of the world's leading theorists and exponents of grounded theory, espoused a constructivist perspective, "*in which reality is a function and outcome of interpretation and human interaction around a given phenomenon*" (Singh & Estefan, 2018). Meaning that the constructivist scholar promoted an interpretive approach to grounded theory, which in comparison to the traditional scholars like Glaser or Strauss, advocate the possibility of multiple and even competing perspectives of phenomena in a highly complex social world (Charmaz, 2014). Although this view is fundamental to grounded theory, the constructivist perspective of grounded theory further encourages the researcher to emphasize the collective process involving researchers and the participants, and also reviews of how participants of the collected data make sense of their own and the researcher's interpretations of the researched phenomena (Singh & Estefan, 2018). In other words, this process of viewing data from a socially constructed perspective will enable multiple interpretations of the studied phenomenon and outcome (Charmaz, 2014).

Inevitably, as social constructivism as an ontology views reality as a collective effort to revise and negotiate meaning (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007), Charmaz (2014) also views reality as a dynamic entity in which people construct their own meaning about reality and act on it within their own frame of reference. The scholarly approach to this, led Charmaz (2014) to praise previous personal and professional experiences of the researcher as well as researching within existing literature. In particular, the abductive reasoning as a theory development approach, is informed by the personal and professional knowledge and experience of the researcher (Singh & Estefan, 2018).

In regard to analyzing data according to grounded theory it provides, as Goulding (2002) stated, predictions and explanations for behavior where the emphasis is on developing and building theory. In this study, grounded theory will be used to explore the aspects of management and leadership that cause success or failure. According to Bryant & Charmaz (2019), the constructivist grounded theory is a process where the researcher as well as the data participants co-construct the theory development. For this reason, the abductive reasoning is the best tool for theory development in this case. Specifically, this reasoning explains, by engaging creative ideas, what was an unanswered or unexpected observation to begin with (Charmaz, 2014; Singh & Estefan, 2018).

In addition to the research strategy, the strategic choice for this study has been a multi-method qualitative study. Meaning that the qualitative data was both collected by self-completion questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Thus, no quantitative data was used for this study. The choice for this approach was based on the fact that it enables this study to scrutinize complex entities in a way that is holistic and retains meaning (Roller, 2015). Thus, by grasping the research objective from different methodological sides, it gives the opportunity for the researcher to immerse with the subject matter (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007).

3.4 Research and Interview Limitations

Firstly, it should be noted that the sample size accounted for nine leaders with various leadership experiences. Considering that the study would need more participants in order to generalize, thus, this study does not look at generalizations, but individual interpretations. In addition, it should also be noted that the leader profiles were not sampled randomly, which means that the inclusion of participants was based on their experience within operational excellence. Thus, the criteria for relevance were leadership experience, demonstrated knowledge of any kind of excellence, and the ability to reflect upon own actions and learning.

Secondly, the method for collecting the data was done with self-completion questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Undoubtedly, one could argue that the limitation of a questionnaire is the lack of elaboration. Nonetheless, they were easier to conduct and were left to self-administration by the participants, which also made the collection process more possible due to environmental constraints. It is clear that in comparison to the conducted interviews, the questionnaires were very fixed whereas the interviews led to a more elaborated semi-structured interview. Even though the questions were planned beforehand and sent out gradually, this study required additional data to elaborate on some of the details. Despite these limitations, the results obtained created an elaborate framework based on both data and existing literature.

3.5 Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data has been used in this study. However, primary data has been the foundation. Thus, this section will mainly focus on the primary data and samples collected that have been critical for carrying out a successful analysis and theory development. In regard to the data collection, once the managers were identified, I approached the ones I have not been directly working with, with questions about their experience with excellently operating in their respective organizations and their wish to participate in an interview or a questionnaire for this study. With their agreement, I gradually sent out structured self-completion questionnaires that could saturate the topics for this study or prepare questions for the semi-structured interviews.

The data collected are the most important elements in this study, and they enabled me to develop and build a framework based on the chosen theory. Inevitably, the theory of this study, being the secondary data, ensured that the primary data were supported by already established academic research. In addition, data from LinkedIn were used to analyze the participant's seniority. However, for anonymity reasons, this data source will not be disclosed. The primary data set for this study can be found in the appendix (see appendix 10). And the secondary data are listed in the bibliography.

3.5.1 Sampling

This study is solely based on qualitative research. As opposed to quantitative research that revolves around probability sampling, this study conducts a purposive sampling. In other words, the goal of this method was to strategically sample the participants of the interviews based on their relevance for the research statement in this study. The participants have been sampled deliberately to ensure differentiated occupations yet they remain relevant in their own unique way to the research statement (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The sampling has therefore not been a 'slave' to generalization because the participants were scrutinized and screened for experience prior to the interviews. In contrast to convenience sampling, which is categorized by Bryman & Bell (2015) as "*something available by chance to the researcher*" is not the case here, because I initially had the goal in mind of abductively designing the theory development (p. 442). Thereby, obtaining data that could explain the causal relationship between the concepts and variables and the fixed research statement by deriving and analyzing theory and data abductively (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

In addition, the purposive sampling was combined with theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is according to Bryman & Bell (2015), the process of data collection that is controlled by the researcher and the emerging theory for developing the necessary theory to prove a study's hypothesis (p. 441). Therefore, the interviews were conducted incrementally and in relation to one another. Essentially, it can be identified as an on-going process rather than a distinct and single stage (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In that effect, it is crucial to highlight that these sampling methods are a part of a bigger theory as mentioned in the research strategy section. Namely the grounded theory initially developed by Glaser and Strauss back in 1967 (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Even though this study primarily concentrates on the constructivist aspect of grounded theory according to Charmaz (2014), the initial scholars define theoretical sampling as a method to discover the categories and their properties. Eventually, the discovery will suggest the intertwined relations between the theoretical categories and lastly shape it into a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Evidently, the data were collected on an on-going basis, from theoretical sampling to theoretical saturation. Meaning, when successive interviews have both formed the basis for the creation of a category and confirmed its importance, there was no need to repeat the particular questions in relation to the category (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The advantage of this data collection methodology helped to eliminate unnecessary data and promoted a purposeful analysis. Thus, the relevancy of the questionnaires and interviews that I am going to describe below, creates efficiency for both the researcher and the participant. To that extend, the key has been to ensure sampling in such a way, so that I could test the emerging theoretical ideas (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.5.2 Interviews and questionnaires

In today's world, many companies are working operationally excellent. However, they are all following different frameworks, tools and organizational processes. Therefore, in regard to this study and the theory development, I sent out self-completion questionnaires to six leaders and interviewed three leaders from various industries and backgrounds that all have some form of experience with 'excellence' in common. As mentioned above, the inclusion of participants was based on empirical experience and the knowledge of their backgrounds as leaders in order to ensure that there was some variety in the resulting sample (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The self-completion questionnaires that were sent to six participants were structured, three participants were interviewed with semi-structured questions via phone or Skype. These data collection methods were chosen appropriate to the study in order to reach the maximum level of data without compromising on the exploratory research, but also not to pressure the participants with constrained time. Even though the questionnaires were intently based on open-ended questions, they were still structured, and I was not able to immediately elaborate on their responses on the phone or via. Skype. Thus, the questions were interpreted differently based on the participant's backgrounds and working position. Nonetheless, the semi-structured interviews gave room for elaboration on different interpretations.

The data collection was based on established groundwork of exploratory research, whereas this study used descriptive research to explore and explain, while providing additional information about the chosen topic for this field of research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Essentially, just like with the research strategy and the theory development approach of this study, the descriptive data collection purposely organizes and analyzes with the guidance from grounded theory, to examine and process the continual re-examination of data that determines the research findings (Harding & Whitehead, 2013).

3.5.3 Participants and their leadership backgrounds

As mentioned above, organizations and people were selected because of their relevance to the research statement (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In addition, it was important to this study that the participants have had experience with business excellence in any form, in order to ensure that there was some variety in the resulting sample (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, it was also important for this study to have different managerial positions and leadership seniority in order to ensure this variety in the resulting sample (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The reason for this was to establish different views on the phenomena in this study.

In order to acquaint the reader with the interview participants, brief descriptions of their current position and leadership backgrounds will be presented. Their names are kept anonymous and this study will refer to them as leaders "L1, L2, L3… etc." and the question number is referred with "Q1, Q2, Q3… etc." The questions and responses can be found in appendix 10.

L1 is a senior strategy consultant at Novo Nordisk, leading most projects within strategy deployment and network optimizations. Moreover, L1 has a natural flair for stakeholder management and ensuring to lead and support those in her team who need it.

L2 is a business analysist in Business Integration Partners. P2 has in fact been researching operational excellence. Specifically, within strategy deployment and the branch of it called Hoshin Kanri.

L3 is the managing director for Unilever driving the optimizations in the organization. When L3 initially started working at Unilever, he spotted an opportunity to make the business more excellent and seized it with successful results. In addition, L3 has also written a book based on his own development of strategic leadership and communication models.

L4 is a group operations controller at Hempel. Evidently, L4 is routinized in Six Sigma methodologies and has a solid and foundational experience with operational excellence.

L5 has a versatile background in various large companies. L5 has a very routinized background in operational excellence and agile methodologies. L5 just went through major changes in the company he works for, so he really wanted to share those with me.

L6 is an IT project manager at Novo Nordisk. L6 has a moderate managerial experience but those who know her, would say that she is a charismatic leader in anything that she does.

L7 is the contract manager in NNIT and has not only a PhD in Law but also has years of experience within leadership and communication.

L8 is a senior director at the Lego Group. L8 has been leading initiatives within strategy deployment with her excellent interpersonal and communications skills. When I met her first time at Copenhagen Business School, where she was invited to speak, I got so inspired because she was so charismatic.

L9 has worked within finance at Novo Nordisk but has experience and certificates within quality management and business analysis.

3.6 Data Processing

The processing of primary data was initially to categorize the leaders based on leadership experience extracted from their LinkedIn pages. Afterwards, I coded the gathered data from the questionnaires and interviews with NVivo in order to achieve four categories (strategic approach, leadership excellence, practice and methodology, and project management) and to link the categories to proper existing literature. To highlight the leadership behavior of the leaders who were asked to contribute with data to this study, I utilized Fiedler's (1964) Least-Preferred Co-Worker scale (LPC), that is described in the theory chapter, to range the specific leaders and prove that they are all in the high end of the scale. The scoring I made resulted in an average score of 7,8 out of 8.

3.6.1 Reliability and validity of the research

The reliability of this study is a matter for discussion. As reliability refers to whether the data collection techniques and analysis procedures could reproduce consistent findings if they were repeated on another occasion or if they were replicated by another researcher (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Inevitably, the strategies and approaches to data collection of this study have been based on people who might in the future have a different stance or more experience in the field. Thus, their data would not be replicable.

Nonetheless, the concepts presented in this study refer to the universally known drivers for successful organizations. Discovering similar findings to what this study has found would undoubtedly be possible. Inevitably, as mentioned before, the time, season, or situation of the participants can bring participant error to the study. All participants were aware that the data would be processed and published anonymously, thus, their responses reflect that, so there was no need to respond falsely.

However, since interviews usually are semi-structured and give the opportunity to explore and elaborate the responses, so that a common ground can be reached, the questionnaires were structured, therefore, the leaders were interpreting the questions from their own understanding and perception, which could have resulted in me interpreting falsely. However, in critical situations where I could not clearly interpret the response in the questionnaire, I contacted the participant for an elaboration.

I wanted to research the leader skills that were essential to operational excellence and really understand what was needed for the leader in order to drive organizational alignment and achieve superior performance. Thus, the results from the data measured the initial assumptions of this study. Inevitably, it linked both the existing literature with the data to generate an order that fitted the surprising fact in the beginning of the theory-building. Thus, the validity of this study is addressed by checking how well the results correspond to the established theories and other measures of the same concept (Middleton, 2020).

4. Theory

The theoretical frameworks of this chapter will firstly explain the fundamentals of leadership, secondly, the communication theories that support this study, and finally, operational excellence as a theory and an organizational method will be explained. In this chapter, I will present the main theories for this study that can both support and challenge the research statement and analysis with their perspectives.

4.1 Theories of Leadership, Communication, and Operational Excellence

This section will provide the reader with the main leadership and communication theory for this study. In addition, the operational excellence that will be used in the analysis and discussion for this study and will be described as a theory and method in this section as well. Scrutinizing the fundamentals of major theories like leadership, communication, and operational excellence will limit the extensive amount of research that has been conducted in this field and will concentrate on of what is relevant for this particular study. The fundamentals of the used theories will help in grounding and reviewing the focal scholarly points in leadership, communication, and operational excellence. This theory section will highlight the inevitable connection between leadership and communication.

4.1.1 Management versus leadership

The purpose of this theoretical account is to explain the difference between management and leadership. Specifically, this section is used to explain how management and leadership are distinguished and yet can be embodied by the same person. Therefore, the concept of leadership will be used as the main term for the theoretical chapter, the analysis, and discussion.

The distinction between the concept's leader and manager and their interconnectedness is subtle, yet theoretically rather different. A body of literature defines a manager as administrative, bureaucratic, and transactional, while leaders are more charismatic, friendly, and transformational (Kotter, 1997; Weber, 1968; Mintzberg, 1993; Bass, 1990). Metaphorically speaking, popular literature has distinctively identified the manager as a "bad" one and the "leader" as a good one, based on historical examples and highly acknowledged leaders in this century (Weber, 1968). However, studying leadership as a concept, it becomes clear that leaders can also be in the shade of a manipulator, a dictator, or metaphorically speaking a bully

(Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Inevitably, the question arises of what leadership then in reality is? Can a manager drive aligned communication?

According to literature, leadership is very difficult to define. Therefore, scholars like Alvesson and Spicer (2011), have contrasted this ambiguous concept with the broader and more commonly used concept 'management'. Noticeably, 'Management' is used as a concept in every company and university around the world. There is yet no university that offers courses in "business leadership" or "communication leadership". Consequently, companies are not looking for "associate leaders" or "project leaders". In today's society, it is still called "business management", "communication management", "associate managers", and "project managers". So, when does the concept of leadership come into the picture?

In order to understand the distinction that is an essential part of this study, it is important to highlight that everybody perceives differently. Thus, the real perception of this concept is based on different views. However, this social constructionist view can also be challenged by more traditional scholars. What is crucial to understand, is not the metaphorical use of leadership, but the leadership communication that supposedly supports the execution of projects in connection to operational excellence. For instance, Alvesson et al. (2011), state that strict monitoring of behavior or output does not seem to be leadership. Whereas, for them it involves a strong ingredient of management of meaning. Essentially, the term 'management' cannot be erased, just perceived differently based on the actions that a specific manager takes. It is about being a manager with acquired traits that make people perceive the manager, but with meaning. Thus, a leader (Alvesson et al., 2011: p. 12).

In theory, manager vs. leadership could also be referenced to be the difference between a more positivistic style of managing or a social constructivist leadership style. Accordingly, management is the systematic function, whereas leadership is the mindset. For instance, in universities we are taught the system and processes of management, but what we do in real life, gaining experience, getting inspired by a leader, or reading and practicing a particular leadership philosophy or mindset, is what makes a manager with meaning, a leader that continuously improve. Subsequently, this mindset is what a leader's subordinates are getting inspired from, which eventually creates a specific culture. In order to gain a full understanding of the distinction between the manager and a leader, the following section will draw from different perspectives.

Leadership has been studied in the field of business management and has been defined as the process whereby a person influences a group of people to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2015). According to the biggest and most acknowledged scholar within leadership and management studies, Henry Mintzberg, the meaning and role of a leader has been ever-changing. Within a few years, the role of a manager, who is in charge of establishing the organizational strategy that his or her followers must pursue, has enabled the manager to 'gain' his or her leadership by getting involved in practical tasks, achieving technical competencies and opening up for the opportunities to collaborate with subordinates (Mintzberg, et al., 2000)

In other words, not only does the manager with a leadership mindset establish a strategy, that they support and actively manage. As mentioned above, the difference between manager and leader lies not only in planning the organizational work, but also implementing and managing it. In addition, leaders and managers develop in different ways, whether they are more informative, relational, or decisional. However, they all have a common purpose. Namely to generate a process of change through an organization's overall goal (Kotter, 1997). Accordingly, managers plan processes, tasks, they monitor, and solve problems, where leaders create a vision, motivate and inspire. As a result, both roles play a vital role in an organization as they are both essential to the strategic management driving an organization. What is more, they can also be embodied by the same person.

An important element of leadership is to receive recognition from followers. Moreover, an organizational leader needs to be able see and understand the world how the employees are seeing and perceiving it (Schein, 2016). Inevitably, leadership is based on trust, dialogue, and the believe in that every employee can use their inner motivation and inspiration to solve problems and face challenges. Inevitably, the relation between the leader and his or her employee is important because the leader should be able to use their leadership tools to stimulate the employee's inner motivation and inspire to drive the organization to excellence (Narbona, 2016).

It is important to highlight that any skilled manager can drive proper communication. However, the communication itself has to spring out of a mindset that wants to transform people and see people as the most important asset in solving problems throughout the whole organization. Mainly because, in this study, the term leader and leadership are categorized in the sense of a mindset.

4.1.2 Contingency theory of leadership

The contingency theory was initially carried out as a study of leadership behavior via questionnaires during the 1950's at Ohio State University. The conclusion of the study was that good leaders had two specific behaviors. The first was *consideration*, where the leaders took interest in building confidence and rapport with their subordinates, and the second was *initiating structure*, where the leaders took over the management of the unit and handed out assignments and tasks to the subordinates. Later, the University of Michigan termed these two leadership behaviors as relation-oriented and task-oriented (Brooke, 2004).

Figure 4.1.2: Fiedler's LPC scale

Unfriendly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Friendly
Unpleasant	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Pleasant
Rejecting	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Accepting
Tense	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Relaxed
Cold	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Warm
Boring	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Interesting
Backbiting	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Loyal
Uncooperative	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Cooperative
Hostile	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Supportive
Guarded	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Open
Insincere	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Sincere
Unkind	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Kind
Inconsiderate	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Considerate
Untrustworthy	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Trustworthy
Gloomy	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Cheerful
Quarrelsome	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Harmonious

(Source: Fiedler, 1964)

In 1964, Fred Fiedler published an article on 'The Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness'. With this article, Fiedler initially proposed a model for leaders to lead during crisis by analyzing and evaluating the situation at hand and then acting accordingly. According to the scholar, contingency leadership theory argues that a leader's effectiveness is contingent and based on certain situations (Villanova, 2019). Thus, a leader should not be fixed in the way he or she leads, communicates, and faces challenges. Therefore, Fiedler developed a model called the Least-Preferred Co-Worker scale (LPC) (see figure 4.1.2) which enabled leaders to find what kind of leadership style and situation they thrive in (Fiedler, 1964). The model demonstrates that task-oriented leaders usually have a lower score in LPC scale which means that the leader should work with administrative tasks that does not involve constant relation-building management. Whereas, the higher the score in the LPC scale, the more people/relationship-oriented is the leader.

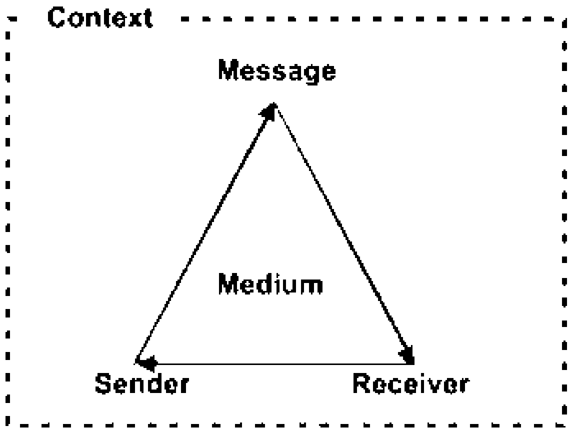
In theory, contingency is not concerned with how the leader can adapt to situations, rather it matches the leader's style with/in a compatible situation. In essence, the contingency theory is best used with Fiedler's scale to find out what a leader would want to work with which essentially discloses the leading style of the leader itself (Gupta, 2009; Oakleaf, 2016). A high score means that the leader is people/relationship-oriented. Whereas a low score means that the leader is more task oriented. However, even though relationships are a lower priority, these leaders are good at organizing groups to get tasks and projects done.

On the other hand, the relationship-oriented leaders usually rely on relationships with others to accomplish tasks. The theory is not necessarily concerned with adapting the leader to the situation itself, but rather to match the leader's style with a compatible leadership responsibility. Therefore, Gupta (2009) recommends, with support from the LPC scale, to find what style a leader possesses in order to make the best use of Fiedler's theory. Fiedler's theory and the LPC scale are crucial elements to this study as they play a role in gaining knowledge about what specific leadership skills are used in creating alignment in an organization. In addition, it supports the developed theory of this study to unfold and demonstrate the best way to achieve operational excellence.

4.1.3 Communication as a social construct

Communication has always been known for being the crucial component in any setting and context (Velasquez, 2010). Traditionally, communication is the transition of meaning from one person to another. Commonly, a model of this is depicted as a simple triangle consisting of a sender, a message, and a receiver in a specific context (see figure 4.1.3a) (Barret, 2006: p.386). However, this figure suggests a very simplistic and idealistic way of communicating, because in reality, as other scholars also have investigated, communication is mostly often affected by cultural barriers, misunderstandings, verbal misconceptions, different perceptions, or unclear communication.

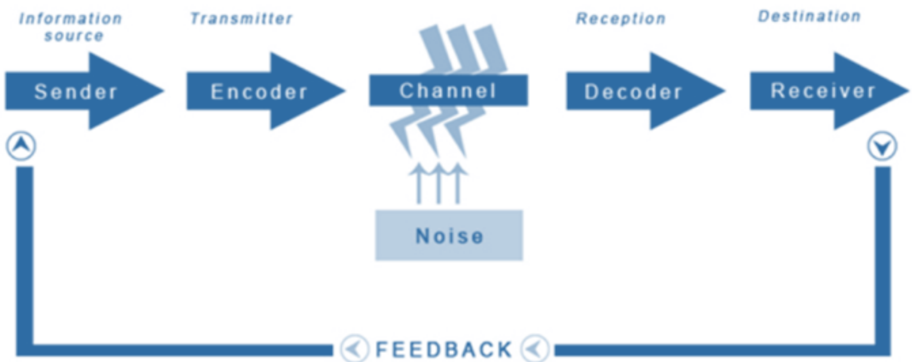
Figure 4.1.3.a: Triangle Model of Communication



(Source: Barret, 2006: p.386)

In other words, 'noise' as the most classical Shannon-Weaver communication model describes it (Al-Fedaghi, 2012).

Figure 4.1.3.b: Shannon-Weaver's Model of Communication



(Source: Al-Fedaghi, 2012)

Naturally, the reality presents communication contexts that are far more complex, interactive, and contingent. While the sender himself can influence a message, so can the receiver perceive the message in a different way. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the communication process can harm a professional relationship or collaboration (Barret, 2014).

An alternative approach for understanding communication could be by analyzing the cultural aspect. Specifically, how culture intertwines with communication and vice versa. For this reason, the main scholar of leadership and communication in this context has been Edgar Schein (2016). Schein researched how organizational culture can impact the communication in profound ways. According to him, people's communication in an organization was based on a specific cultural context, and in order to change the organizational communication or culture, a leader needs to understand the structure and levels of culture. This understanding is based on three levels of culture. Namely artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. Briefly, the artifacts are the visible and feelable structures, processes and observed behaviors in the organization. Consequently, these are difficult to decipher but easy to observe.

Accordingly, we have the espoused beliefs and values which are the ideals, goals, values, aspirations, ideologies, and rationalizations. These beliefs and values may or may not be congruent with behavior and other artifacts. Then, there are the basic underlying assumptions which are the unconscious, often taken-for-granted beliefs and values that determine behavior, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings (Schein, 2016). With a social construction model of communication like Schein's three levels of culture, it is more manageable to grasp the culture behind the communication. By gaining this approach to communication, it enables a better understanding of the complexities of human interaction (Schein, 2016)). Mainly because, aligned communication is a combination of different levels of communication.

According to Schein (2016), the artefacts in an organization refer to both the tangible and the intangible aspects of culture. Artefacts can be displayed in an organization and in the observation of behavior. For instance, when people get hired in a new organization or department, or team, everyone will have their own individual culture, and it is almost relatively easy to see after a few weeks. However, the deciphering is According to Schein (2016), more difficult because organizational or team culture for instance, have very large roots or extremely fixed routines, as "*observed behavior is also an artifact as are the organizational processes by which such behavior is made routine*" (p. 24).

The espoused beliefs according to Schein (2016), are specifically about that "*all group learning ultimately reflects someone's original beliefs and values*" (p. 25). In other words, leaders who can influence the people to adopt certain new approaches to problems, can also shape new beliefs and values. The leaders mentioned here, are both the top management and the middle managers, who all need to influence each other to thinking in ways of solving problems individually in order to optimize the whole organizational performance. However, the issues and resistance to change occur when there is no shared knowledge as a group about the new initiatives. Inevitably, if there is no knowledge or a specific frame of reference that is culturally similar to the group, then the people would have a hard time to take a common action in reference to whatever they are supposed to do. According to Schein (2016), whatever is proposed, will only be perceived as what the leader wants, until a joint action has been taken, and the outcome of it observed, and the result positive (p. 25).

The basic underlying assumptions is the last cultural level in Schein's framework. According to the scholar, the repetition of the same problem-solving methods leads to taking them for granted. Inevitably, Schein argues that reality is created this way (Schein, 2016: p. 27). In particular, when "*culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things to mean, how to react, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations*" (Schein, 2016: p. 28). In other words, the change of culture always leads to discomfort because when integrated assumptions that have created, as Schein describes it a "mental map" or "a thought world" (Schein, 2016: p. 28), get changed or leaders have a desire for changing them, people cannot understand a different "thought world". Consequently, if not addressed to begin with, it might lead to resistance and misinterpretations.

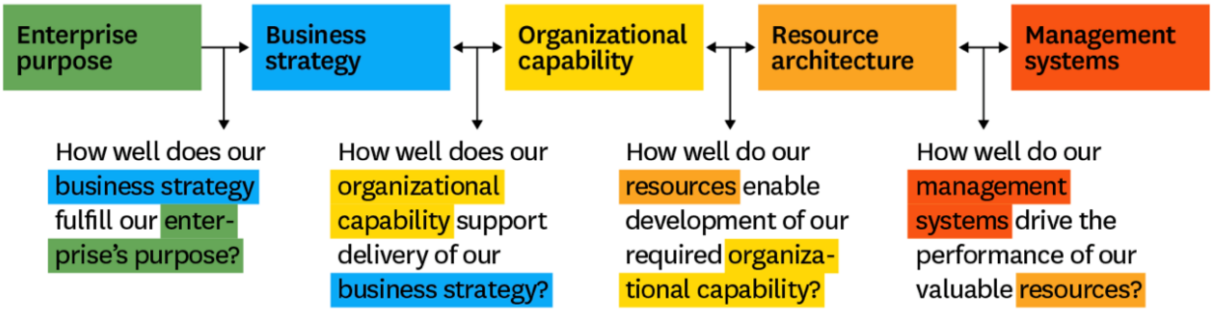
Also, in theoretical alignment with this study, are van Riel's (1995) *common starting points*. In addition to the cultural aspect provided by Schein (2016), van Riel (1995) argues that central values are the basis for undertaking any kinds of communication envisages by an organization (p. 12). Common starting points ensure to create priorities of communication projects. In addition to these, the operational guidelines dictate the procedures that must be followed in the projects. Essentially, when it comes to changing something in the strategic communication or strategy in general, van Riel (1995) describes that operational guidelines are the specifications for the implementation of communication projects include sequencing, routines, and group problem-solving. For instance, the sequencing entails the process of ensuring coordination of dialogue and evaluation. Routines are processes, as Schein (2016) also mentions that needs to be aligned with the organization's overall objectives and strategic initiatives. The group problem-solving entails the communicative aspects of integration (van Riel, 1995).

Inevitably, communication in this study is based on the way culture shapes it, and the most central issue for leaders in this context, is to understand the deeper levels in order to not just challenge people into seeing the benefits of what they are doing, but actually letting them feel it themselves by helping people to assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways of performing (Fullan, 2002).

4.1.4 Alignment management

The body of research on specifically 'Alignment Management' is limited. Nonetheless, the concept of alignment is a common notion in business strategy (Philips & Phillips, 2012). Strategically, businesses, companies, or enterprises are naturally driving alignment just by resourcefully managing the value chain. A value chain is filled with various projects that are managed by specialists who execute on projects according to the company's purpose and desires (Trevor & Varcoe, 2017). Ideally, communication should be the tool for alignment that every person is engaging with and doing. Moreover, various frameworks actively promote 'alignment work' in organizations, meaning that most organizations suffer when there is no alignment in the organizational communication or projects between upper-management, middle-management, and everyone below and in between (Khadem & Khadem, 2017).

Figure 4.1.4: The Interdependent Components That Make Up a Strategically Aligned Enterprise



(Source: Trevor & Varcoe, 2017)

According to Trevor and Varcoe at Harvard Business Review (2017), alignment is very much the key ingredient to fulfilling a company purpose and enduring what the company does best in an effective and profitable manner. Thus, alignment management encompasses the concept of operational excellence and the essence of it. Operational excellence is indeed a process that facilitates alignment management in its purest form. Because without alignment in a company, specifically throughout the whole value chain, top to middle management, and the rest of the organization, the company will not be able to identify itself as operationally excellent. As described above, operational excellence is used specifically for continuous improvement, replying to contingencies, and most importantly, growth (Oakland, 2014). When every process is out of alignment, the overall company purpose and the objectives are lost, and the company will not be able to battle disruptions in the industries, contingencies in the environment, or even competitors in the landscape.

Ultimately, the Cambridge Business Dictionary (2011) defines alignment as '*the manufacturing processes, whether designed for cost efficiency, speed, or quality are alignment with company objectives*.' The term business alignment is also used in regard to ensure that a new project programs, or processes are connected directly to business impact measures usually expressed in terms such as output, quality, cost, or time (Philips & Phillips, 2012). It is very important for alignment to be firstly defined by top management. They must communicate this desire to the middle management who then not only conveys this message by making specific objectives and strategies relative to the respective department, unit, or team. But most importantly, the leader should also lead by example and always have the objective of alignment in mind (Trevor & Varcoe, 2017).

The importance of business alignment lies in the fact that when a project is properly aligned to the business, to the purpose, and to the objectives, the organization will notice a huge impact on the value of the business. However, when projects and communication are not aligned, the results can be very disappointing, and sometimes even disastrous (Philips & Philips, 2012).

For projects that are aligned to the core of a company's purpose, seen from a financial perspective, can be measured financially. For instance, once a year middle management presents the business improvement projects that they want in their department or team to work on during the next fiscal year. Consequently, if a project gets funding, it means that top management approves the project to be aligned with the overall company purpose and the investment can now support the lead of an improvement project in line with operational excellence and the company's higher purpose. Thus, the lack of business alignment between a project and corporate objectives will often result in lack of investment. Thus, alignment management is the glue that holds an organization together. It is a natural and very intuitive practice that commences with communication (Lattuch & Dankert, 2018).

4.1.5 Operational excellence as a theory and method

As mentioned in the concept definition chapter, operational excellence is not a definitive term, as business excellence and process excellence are interconnected to the overall process of continuous improvement. In the concept definition chapter, operational excellence was presented as a method for achieving continuous improvement and alignment in an organization. However, in order to explain exactly what specifically operational excellence does for a company, the theory of it should be studied, which this section will do.

"Operational excellence is the single, master, unifying improvement program for the enterprise. It is the enterprise-wide improvement program for production and business system effectiveness and increased value" (Mitchell, 2015: p. 26).

Every organization defines their own operational excellent processes, routines, and frameworks. Operational excellence is wide and flexible enough to be stretched and adapted to how the company wants it or needs it. Using operational excellence as a theory, it is crucial to understand that it is bigger than a single definition. Essentially, the definition does not simply lie in a theoretical sentence, because operational excellence is something that is communicated, discussed, measured, lived, and breathed (Baxter, 2015). Thus, operational excellence is a mindset that needs to be anchored with proper communication and the right leadership skills. Nonetheless, this theory section will concentrate on examining the term and its components in order to present the fundamentals of operational excellence.

The term 'operational' refers to the activities and functions of a business, whereas, 'excellence' refers to the brilliance or superiority (Baxter, 2015). The functions in an organization can be superior to others and measured with the following key elements. Namely strategy, metrics, culture, systems, methodology, project management, and tools. The importance of understanding and operating with these components in mind will subsequently lead to an operational excellent organization. The components and elements of operational excellence, and the people involved in the specific processes, need to learn how they work optimally together and achieve overall and consistent alignment. The key elements according to Baxter

(2015) are described below as the factors in an operational excellence roadmap for achieving superior performance and brilliance.

Strategy is the most important element in creating a vision and subsequently the values that drive an organization. The *metrics* are the frameworks for continuous improvement, for instance, the balanced scorecard. *Culture* is framed in individual's understanding of the strategy and the way they are authorized and accountable for achieving strategic vision through continuous improvement of processes, products, or services. With *systems*, it means that the organization implements holistic, integrated quality management system and processes. The *methodologies* might be different for any organization, but for operational excellence there are the following: The Design for Lean Six Sigma, Lean Six Sigma, A3 Thinking, or Theory of constraints. These methodologies will be described below. *Project management* is also something that is different from one company to another, and each company has their own project management (PM) frameworks or "institutes". The *tools* are the solution delivery for processes, products, and services. Moreover, they are the means of problem solving and continuous improvement. The tools are mostly individual based because they are usually acquired by individuals from their educational background or PM experience.

The organizational anchoring is a big part of the initial phases of operational excellence and by supporting the process fully it automatically creates a culture of continuous improvement. Essentially, that is the main objective of project management run in an operational excellent organization. Meaning that all projects should be mindfully run in accordance with excellence. Thus, utilizing frameworks that support and promote initiatives within operational excellence. Eventually, *"employing these critical elements, along with a foundation of well-communicated and understood purpose, vision, mission, and set of values – it creates operational excellence"* (Baxter, 2015: p. 6).

According to Mitchell (2015), the frameworks that are mostly used with operational excellence and drive a culture of continuous improvement are, as mentioned above, described next. *Lean Six Sigma* is a tool concentrated on teaching a team-focused managerial approach that seeks to improve performance by eliminating waste, defects, and deviations. The combination of Six Sigma tools and lean enterprise philosophy, this tool supports the elimination of physical resources, time, effort, and talent while assuring quality in production and organizational processes (Kenton, 2018).

Within Lean Six Sigma, there are two processes that ensure a lean decision-making and monitoring. Namely DMAIC and DMADV. They are acronyms for: define, measure, analyze, improve, control and: define measure, analyze, design, verify. Both are processes of continuous improvement and are both structured methods to reduce deviations and solve problems. Moreover, they collect and analyze data to make informed decisions that create value for the entire organization (Purdue, 2019). Similarly, the process of A3 Thinking supports the organizational problem-solving efforts by enabling people in the organization to capture issues through commonly understood templates (Ehrenfeld, 2016).

In other words, choosing a an A3 thinking template permits people to see problems through the same lens. So, instead of having hundreds of different views, A3 is designed to support scientific and logical thinking. In addition, the acronym that runs this scientific thinking is PDCA: plan, do, check, adjust. Simply put, planning is the crucial part that can justify the action of doing and executing on an idea. Essentially, checking If it works should be a natural step in any improvement process as it can prevent major failures. Then, the adjusting part ensures that the learnings of executing are learned and incorporated into a new plan. And this PDCA cycle should be present in any project (Dennis, 2006).

The Theory of Constraints implies "*a broadly applicable approach to managing any business operations within an organization*" (Wilkinson, 2013). First introduced by Eliyahu Goldratt in the 80's, this theory is a method for critically identifying the most crucial and limiting factors, both internally and externally in an organization that are standing in the way of achieving the goals set by top or middle managers. Goldratt implores businesses to eliminate these factors by systematically improving them until they become powerless (Goldratt , 1990). In addition, this theory can be used with either process-improving cycle like for instance, PDCA. Nonetheless, Goldratt identified these constraints as bottlenecks, and in order for them to be cleared, he introduced the five focusing steps. The steps involves, naturally, to identify them, exploit them, subordinate everything to them, elevate them, and then prevent inertia from becoming the constraint itself (Goldratt , 1990).
Eventually, to achieve operational excellence, organizations need to have processes that are effective, and they have to be efficient in delivering value. Processes need to be well designed, capable and consistent, where people who performed the work are capable and have the means of knowing what's important, what to do, when to take action, and what actions to take. Thus,

they have the necessary process authority, responsibility, and accountability as mentioned before. In addition, organizations need to have the tools and techniques for design improvement and control as listed above (Michell, 2015).

Consulting firms that support companies in the transformation towards operational excellence, usually promote the ‘faster, better, cheaper’-approach. Meaning that an operational excellent company will always be faster in the sense of innovation and disruption. Better, in the sense of beating competitors. Cheaper, in the sense of cutting cost in terms of procurement and production. Thus, when consultancy firms get hired to transform an organization by implementing operational excellence, they often forget that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution. Every organization needs to not only replace their way of working, they need to enhance it and support people in anchoring the improvement processes in the respective cultures.

Utilizing frameworks that support and promote operational excellence in an organization calls for operational excellence as a method. In general, operational excellence as a method is the consistent mindset that employees in an organization need to possess or at least create in the initial phases (Tallyfy, 2020). Methodologically, it is the continuous improvement of business processes. For instance, while most initiatives within improvement and quality are targeting specific processes, production, or equipment systems, operational excellence encompasses a wider footprint: people, performance, maintenance, equipment, systems, and most importantly, culture (Mitchell, 2015).

Evidently, operational excellence is a process as it is not a result of continuous business improvement, it is the process of sustainable improvement and optimization in itself. Therefore, it is the method to reach a corporate culture of consistent and continuous agility and power to overcome any challenge or competitor that may arise. In fact, the operational excellence researcher Michell (2015) describes it as “*Think of Operational Excellence as the roof under which all functional improvement programs live, are coordinated, and thrive*” (p.19).

According to Mitchell (2015), an organization cannot achieve operational excellence without the four following elements: Enterprise alignment of strategies, prioritizations, policies, and decisions. These elements have to be anchored across different functions and up and down all levels of the organization to consistently drive the right behaviors and results. These four elements are essential to achieve operational excellence: to be better, faster, and cheaper. As an organization, you want to get to the point where everyone in the organization is willing and is able to do well.

As described in this section, operational excellence is far more than just a buzzword. Operational excellence serves the purpose of continuously improving not only organizational processes, but also people's mindsets. The templates and acronyms that support in developing a resilient organization are crucial to the project managers that need to know to use them (Michell, 2015).

4.2 Control Theory of Performance Management Systems

Performance management is a crucial aspect for measuring performance for an entire organization. Similarly, it also monitors that organizational goals are met in an effective manner and measures the activities of individual employees (Lebas, 1995). This management system plays a vital role in aligning and optimizing individual as well as overall organizational performance. According to a doctorate scholar within performance management it is "a continuous process of identifying, measuring and developing performance in organizations. It is achieved by linking each individual's performance and objectives to the organization's overall mission and goals" (Aguinis, 2011).

This continuous process is a clear indicator of improvement. Improvement and optimization processes are the results of a mindful identification of measurable performance indicators. When an individual's performance is linked to an organization's overall mission and goals, it creates alignment throughout the whole organization, as mentioned above (Trevor & Varcoe, 2017). Thus, the measurement of work performance is one of the most important constituents of modern leadership and business management (Walia & Chetty, 2020). By doing so, scholars have pinpointed that it enables a business to properly evaluate the worker's efficiency level. Moreover, it gives guidelines in form of data to support the determination of how to best improve and where to optimize the overall productivity of the workplace (Koopmans, 2014).

A self-assessment tool by Public Health Foundation was republished in 2012 in order to highlight the high value of performance management systems (Public Health Foundation, 2012). Even though this model and self-assessment tool is mainly developed to support public health practices, it perfectly also serves any business practice that strives to achieve excellent performance management systems. The model below shows the four components that work as indicators of an organization's performance management capacity. In this model, *performance standards* establish an organizational or system performance standards, targets, and goals to improve work practices.

Figure 4.2: Performance Management Systems

(Source: Public Health Foundation, 2003)

The *performance measurements* develop, apply, and use performance measures to assess achievements of such standards. *Reporting of progress* ensures the documentation and reporting of process in meeting standards and targets and sharing of such standards. Inevitably, *quality improvement processes* established a program or process to manage change and achieve quality improvement in organizational policies, programs, or infrastructures based on performance standards, measurements, and reports (Public Health Foundation, 2003). Accordingly, the four components address the following.

The *performance standards* are the guidelines that are used to assess an organization's performance. In a business context it means the appropriate regulatory standards should be incorporated. Moreover, by benchmarking against similar organizations, it gives the company analyzing it an advantage that can reach superior performance in comparison to competitors. The *performance indicators*, according to the Public Health Foundation (2012), summarize the focus of performance goals and measures. Thus, the performance indications are often gathered for communication purposes, and precede the development of specific measure.

Inevitably, the *performance measures*, quantitatively measure the capacities, processes or outcomes relevant to the assessment of a performance indicator. Essentially, according to this model, *the performance management system* is the continuous use of all the above practices to achieve alignment and improve satisfaction among people in an organization. In other words, performance management systems are often a part of the overall strategy of an organization. For instance, there are according to Walia & Chetty (2020), "*many notable strategies and approaches of performance management systems in order to simplify the process".* According to the scholars, choosing a strategy for performance management systems in an organization, can help the process to become more efficient. Such an approach can for instance be control theory.

Mainly, combining control theory with performance management systems, enables operational excellence to unfold because according to scholars like Mitchell (2015), operational excellence is often driven by control. Strategically, it means that control theory is a scientific approach that helps in sustaining the management system by defining forms of control between the organization and the system within (Walia & Chetty, 2020). Accordingly, as researched by the scholars Barrows and Neely (2012), control theory dictates that actions of all system should be aligned and in sync with the overall goals and objectives of the organization (Walia & Chetty, 2020).

Similarly, Mitchell (2015) states that mainly due to increased opportunities for competition to emerge, the idea of a static business environment has drastically changed. Michell (2015) argues that change in the internal business processes and systems, and the competitive external environment must be accommodated in near real time, which control theory supports. The scholar also argues that operational excellence is a crucial example of that the concept of profitability must be extended from a 'monthly report' to a real-time requirement at the operating level, so that operations and their respective owners can continually adjust and solve problems in the instant of their occurrence to maximize the business and its mission's value (Michell, 2015).

Control theory of management performance is challenging the leadership and communication in the sense that control is usually perceived negatively and often used as a micro-management tool. However, the aspect of control theory is defined by Mitchell (2015), as being able to control, for instance, performance that has to be measured in a time frame relative to its variability. In other words, "*When the business variables associated with profitability of the operation did not change over monthly durations, profitability could be effectively managed with the information provided in monthly business reporting systems*" (Mitchell, 2015: p. 102). Meaning, that performance should be evaluated based on available data that can provide insights to where they could optimize in order to gain more profitability and achieve a superior performance within every aspect in the company.

However, in order to implement a performance management according to control theory, it is crucial to mention that operational excellence is advocating for real-time control rather than monthly control. Meaning, that effective operational excellence programs and systems must be, according to Mitchell (2015) "totally integrated through operational excellence to have the desired positive impact on business value" (p. 102). Namely because operational excellence is structured to work here and now in a real-time. For instance, people in an operationally excellent organization solve problems instantly and always provide real-time results (Baxter, 2015).

4.3 Oakland's Framework for Quality Management

In today's competitive landscapes, quality is one of the most important means for gaining competitive advantage. An advantage like reputation is very much a valuable asset, and it is only built by the interconnectedness between quality, reliability, delivery, and price (Oakland & Marosszeky, 2006). On the other hand, reputations for bad quality can last for years and damage a company's image in the long run. Thus, the management of quality control is crucial in any company. Inevitably, a process like business excellence can support this control.

Total quality control (TQC) is the key to meeting customer requirements over time and even exceeding their expectations. By creating reliability of a product or service and consistently meeting these requirements, a company will achieve a reputation of excellence and gain customer loyalty (Oakland & Marosszeky, 2006). In line with TQC, operational excellence is a process of ongoing improvement in an organization. Operational excellence focuses on the customer's needs, keeping the employees empowered, and continually improving the current activities in the workplace

(Hanna, 2019). In other words, it is the level of quality work in a company that determines the operational excellence.

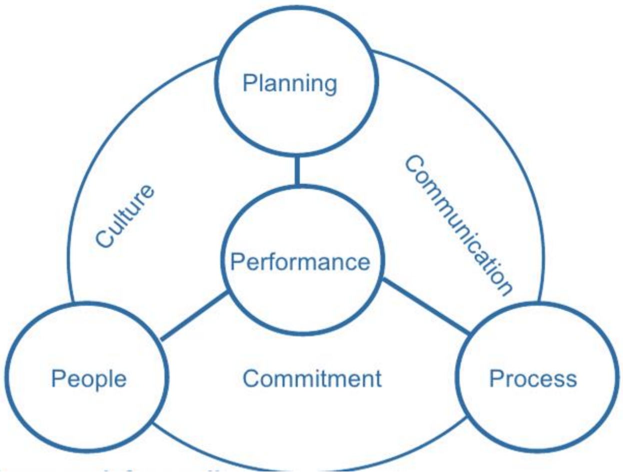
Total quality management (TQCM) is a philosophy that involves everyone in the organization in a continual effort to improve quality and achieve Customer satisfaction. This philosophy concentrates on continuous improvement and quality (Uduk, 2015). As the source of continuous improvement and quality are the essence of operational excellence, TQCM is an excellent theoretical framework to support that.

According to Oakland (2011), being a quality-driven company brings certain advantages to the organization. For instance, excellence as the highest benefit from a quality-minded organization. John Oakland's notorious framework for quality management has theoretically been the base for many excellent-driven companies (Oakland, 2014). Therefore, this study also sees the importance of its contribution to business excellence. The framework, as illustrated in the figure, is based on extensive research and according to Oakland (2014), "*it provides a simple framework for excellent performance, covering all the angles and aspects of an organization and its operations."* The framework concentrates around the four P's and the three C's. Namely planning, performance, people, and process. As well as culture, commitment, and communication. The latter are the points of measure because the only way that this model is complete, is when the three C's are integrated as the outcomes of the four P's (Oakland, 2014).

Essentially, the three C's are the indicators of whether or not the organization is successfully moving forward and are the bricks for building a company that is quality driven. For instance, *planning* is the improvement and deployment of strategies and policies, setting up suitable resources and partnerships. *Processes* is the understanding and management of quality systems and trying to redesign in order to achieve continuous improvement. *People* is the management and development of people, where teamwork, culture change, communication, and learning are the key elements. The C's cover the *culture*, which is the insurance of creating a supportive culture to the strategic decisions, *communication* is the proper communication is used for the culture, and the *commitment* of not only the leader to lead the company, but also the individual employee's commitment to excellence (Oakland, 2014).

According to the framework, performance is the key factor for achieving quality management. Specifically, it means to establish a performance measuring framework for the organization by carrying out self-assessments, review, audits, and benchmarking (Oakland, 2014). Inevitably, the company will achieve superior performance and excellence. Subsequently, the rest of the three P's and three C's support in achieving the best performance.

Figure 4.3a: Framework for Quality Management



(Source: Oakland, 2014)

In other words, Oakland (2014) states that *"performance is achieved, using a business excellence approach, and by planning the involvement of people in the improvement of processes*" (p. 27). Thus, this scholar's framework emphasizes that the processes of continuous improvement and the people planning and running them are the key factors to mediate and close the gap between the four P's and the three C's.

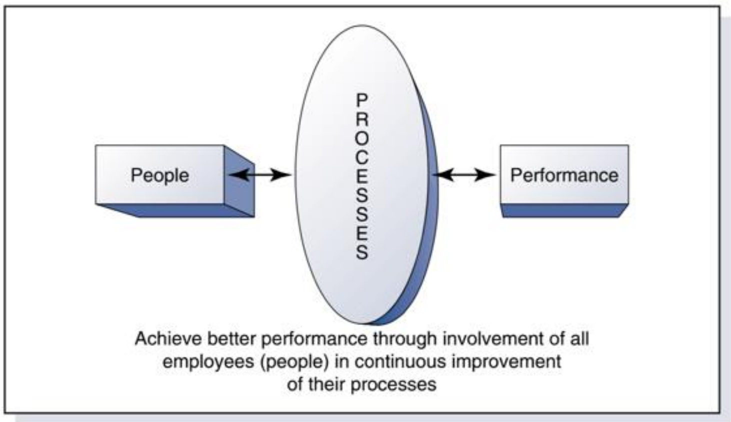
That is to say that in order to ensure the achievement of a successful completion of the implementation, it is crucial for the organization to cultivate effective leadership and commitment (Oakland, 2014). In order for a leader to commit to processes like operational excellence, he or she needs to understand what quality essentially is, how it can create a competitive advantage, and how to communicate it to the people in the organization.

As mentioned above in the concept definition chapter, quality in general terms, covers everything from the processes to the leadership around quality. The organizational commitment to quality assurance, reliability, delivery, and price, creates a reputation that attracts customers, and thrives in a competitive position in the market or industry (Oakland & Marosszeky, 2006). The leadership aspect of Oakland's framework promotes commitment. According to the scholar, quality stems first and foremost from the commitment and policies from top management. Mainly because total quality management starts with the demonstration of commitment from the top.

Most importantly, the middle management then has the key role of conveying and communicating the message of the strategic directions and policies (Oakland, 2011)

Effective leadership is crucial to fulfilling the key role of communication. According to Oakland & Marosszeky (2006), effective leadership starts with the top management's vision that is blueprinted into a strategy for implementation. Inevitably, "*the effectiveness of an organization depends on the extent to which people perform their roles and move towards the common goals and objectives*" (p. 48). In other words, the end-result and potential success depends on the engagement from individuals to be responsible for handling projects according to organizational frameworks and solve problems that are in line with excellence. Thus, total quality management is about the overall collective effort of individuals in the organization to be accountable and responsible for his or her own performance. Simply put, the model for improved performance, thus process management, "*is achieved through involvement of all employees (people) in continuous improvement of their processes"* (Oakland, 2004: p. 26).

Figure 4.3b: The Simple Model for Improved Performance



(Source: Oakland, 2014)

To that effect, the driver for achieving excellence in leadership is by anchoring total quality management in an organization. By using the construct of Oakland's TQM model, the four P's and three C's, the success of implementing operational excellence will be much higher (Oakland, 2014). Oakland's framework will be an important aspect in the analysis and discussion chapter, where the four P's and three C's will be the guiding stars in understanding the overall performance of the initiatives of operational excellence.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The findings from the collected data will be analyzed according to Baxter's (2015) framework of operational excellence. In addition, the elements from Oakland's quality management framework (2014) will be implemented. This analysis and discussion chapter will commence with an overview and discussion of the processed data.

Firstly, for this study it was important to understand the leadership-level of the participants. The reason for this is that all leaders have their own perception of leadership through a longer or shorter managerial experience and it is crucial to highlight these details in order to understand the underlying meaning of their answers to the questions. For this reason, a table has been created to understand the leadership levels of the participants (see figure below).

Figure 5: Table of the Leaders

Table of the leaders

	Type of interview	Fiedler's LPC scale score	Years of leadership experience according to their LinkedIn page
Leader 1	Questionnaire	8	16 years
Leader 2	Questionnaire	7,7	2 years
Leader 3	Interview	7,9	27 years
Leader 4	Questionnaire	7,8	13 years
Leader 5	Interview	7,9	11 years
Leader 6	Questionnaire	8	7 years
Leader 7	Questionnaire	7,8	15 years
Leader 8	Interview	7,7	18 years
Leader 9	Questionnaire	7,7	16 years

(Source: Author's own creation)

The table contains the overview of the leader's managerial seniority and leadership experience. Initially, this was an important factor to investigate because interview and questionnaire responses are usually a reflection of seniority (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Meaning that usually empirical knowledge and years of experience are a way of having constructed a reality and a particular frame of reference. However, as the analysis showed, it is all about mindset and the ability to facilitate good communication in any situation, no matter the seniority.

Secondly, leadership analysis was about scaling the participants according to Fiedler's LCP scale. The result of this indicates that the level of leadership is very high. According to Fiedler's contingency theory, when the score is high, the probability of communication abilities is naturally also high (Fie67). The reason for this is that, for instance, friendliness, cooperativeness, interest in people, openness, cheerfulness, and kindness all are a part of both verbal and non-verbal communication. The ability to have those traits and to be perceived as having these traits from co-workers, indicates a high level of interpersonal leadership.

As mentioned above, the Fiedler's LPC scale score is usually not an indicator for how good a leader a person is, it matches the leader's style with a compatible leadership responsibility. For this reason, it is safe to say that all the leaders that participated in the interviews or questionnaires are matched to their responsibility as a leader in an organization and are able to lead change accordingly. However, the most interesting observation is that the score that a leader has received is not dependent on the years of their leadership experience. For instance, Leader 2 only has real leadership experience that does not even exceed two years, but his responses and personality traits score is high on the LPC scale. Similarly, Leader 6 has a leadership seniority of seven years, which is far less than for instance Leader 8, but Leader 6 still scores higher than Leader 8.

The higher the score according to the Fiedler's scale, the more people/relationship-oriented the leader is. As can be seen in the table above, the average score is 7,8 and the leadership seniority is 13 years. This can be an indicator of that leadership seniority has something to say when it in regard to more people/relationship-oriented rather than task-oriented. However, in my experience, managers are educated to be more task-oriented and 'academical', which can inhibit the leadership-trait in most cases. So, leadership traits such as the people/relationship-orientation, are usually acquired throughout an extensive amount of experience and empirical practice in a company. However, in some cases, as seen in the table above, even less experienced individuals score high on the LPC scale.

Thus, the scoring on the scale is not dependent on the years of experience, but rather the personality and mindset. In this case, the scoring comes from how I perceived the leaders to be during the interviews or their approach to the self-completion questionnaires, when I have not been working directly with them. Nonetheless, their responses demonstrated the exact traits that Fiedler (1964) in his theory describes as people/relationship-oriented.

According to the responses, all the nine leaders usually rely on relationships with others in order to accomplish tasks. In addition, they do not like to micro-manage their people and advocate for freedom with responsibility (Fie67). Fiedler's theory is best used to match a leader's style with a compatible leadership responsibility, which also reflects perfectly in the responses they made. The question arises from the research purpose of this study: are these leaders able to create alignment and achieve operational excellence?

With the research statement in mind, let us now move from the leadership analysis to analyzing how they actually lead people. Initially, this study chose to analyze according to four major categories taken from Baxter's (2015) roadmap to operational excellence. According to the researcher, this roadmap that was described in the theory chapter, leads an organization to operational excellence. An organization cannot achieve operational excellence without the four following elements. Namely enterprise alignment of strategies, prioritizations and commitments, policies, and decisions. These have to be across different functions, and up and down all levels of the organization to consistently drive the right behaviors and results. As an organization, you want to get to the point where everyone in the organization is willing and is able to do well (Baxter, 2015).

Eventually, what I noticed in the data was that quality management is a prerequisite and actually a natural part of operational excellence. Therefore, within those four major categories, I detected the elements from Oakland's quality management framework in the responses of the leaders. Consequently, the first category according to Baxter (2015), is the strategic approach, which contains the elements of Oakland's planning and process. The second category is leadership excellence, which contains the elements of culture and people. The third category is the practice and methodology for continuous improvement, which according to Oakland's framework could lean more towards commitment from the leader and the people in the organization. The fourth category is the project management that mostly contains the element of communication. Eventually, the awareness and implementation of the four categories within operational excellence and the elements of Oakland's framework, creates superior performance in the organization, which is the main goal of operational excellence. Namely to exceed competitor's performance and become an organization of continuous learning and improvement.

5.1 Strategic Approach to Operational Excellence

According to Oakland's quality management framework, the strategic approach to operational excellence could be described with the planning and process elements to managing quality and achieving superior performance. As planning is the foundation for improvement and deployment of strategies, policies, and processes, Oakland's framework is about the understanding and the management of quality systems in order to redesign so that the company can achieve continuous improvement. This section will focus on the analysis of how the leaders that were interviewed manage to lead the planning and processes of achieving continuous improvement in their organizations.

5.1.1 From idea to action

Usually top management has a lot of ideas on ways to improve and optimize business, which is natural because it is their main job to do so (Lukins, 2019). However, not all ideas become a reality, because it is a filtering process that goes from idea to action, which is a part of a company's ambition to innovate, improve, and optimize. Common starting points could support in being the central values to creating clear priorities in a new strategic initiative (van Riel, 1995).

An example could be Leader 3's empirical experience. Initially, when he was hired as a General Manager, he noticed that improvements could be made in the way that the company was doing business, delegating tasks, and collaborating, but first he made sure to understand the company's overall direction, so he gained a clear idea of where the business was going, and that obviously required an extensive amount of information and knowledge-sharing and a lot of time to process the gained information. Eventually, after a few months, he could acquaint his colleagues in top management to his ideas on how to improve the business model and optimize operations (L3:Q1a).

It was done this way because top management are required to create strategic direction if not on a yearly basis, then at least every third year. In addition, every company usually has a five or even ten-year strategic plan and a roadmap to achieving the goals in order to increase continuous profitability (Michell, 2015). This is an important element in creating commitment amongst middle managers to convey the strategy to their employees. A successful strategy communication is what determines the eventual policies in regard to quality of operational processes (Baxter, 2015). Moreover, the importance of sharing such strategies are a part of creating alignment, as it is important for employees that their managers “*share information about the strategy of the company*” (L7:Q2).

As the table above shows, Leader 3 had ideas from former experience, but the point here is that thorough planning is required in order to start an optimization or improvement process (van Riel, 1995). Even continuous improvement and learning initiatives should be planned prior to implementation. In addition, as Mitchell (2015) mentions that the roadmap to operational excellence lies in the constructing phase of the ‘map’. The steps towards operational excellence are rather universal (p. 14). However, they have to be specified and adapted to the particular company in order to be effective.

Moreover, Mitchell (2015) also implores to really come down to the answer of what is important to the business/mission. Inevitably, “*This should be spelled out in the business/mission strategy and objectives. It forms the basis for all that will follow while developing the Operational Excellence program*” (p. 14). Without this kind of thorough planning, analysis, and determination, it will be hard for everyone on every level and any layer to even follow a roadmap. Let alone make decisions, solve problems, and learn how to improve (Michell, 2015).

Most importantly in order to achieve quality, Leader 5 says that “*the feedback on the responses to top management’s strategies is a part of ensuring quality execution*” (L5:Q1). What Leader 5 means is that when top management let the middle management know what strategic goals the company as a whole are going to achieve within a frame of years, the middle management then creates a strategic response that is relevant for their specific area or team. Inevitably, yearly strategic directions from top management ensure that all management levels are clear on their message to their employees and how they should lead accordingly.

Thus, continuous feedback and learning is where quality stems first and foremost from (Oakland, 2014). Just as total quality management starts with the demonstration of commitment from the top, it is crucial for top management to keep the dialogue with middle management. It is what creates commitment to not only quality but also continuous quality and improvement through feedback and learning (Mitchell, 2015).

5.1.2 Quality as a mindset

In essence, the strategic approach to operational excellence determines whether or not the company or the top management have a focus on quality. In order to be successful in promoting business effectiveness and efficiency, Oakland (2014) argues that the quality mindset must truly be organization wide. More importantly, it must start at the top management level as a strategic initiative and all directors and managers, whether they are at the top or in the middle, need to demonstrate that they are serious about quality (p. 33).

As mentioned in the previous theory sections, theorists like Mitchell (2015) states that:

"operational excellence is the single, master, unifying improvement program for the enterprise. It is the enterprise-wide improvement program for production and business system effectiveness and increased value" (p. 26).

In addition, the quality of the products or services of the company will either improve or stay competitively the same. In either case, the implementation of a quality mindset and anchoring an optimization process such as operational excellence, will definitely benefit the company on many levels as quality is the key to meeting customer requirements over time and even exceeding their expectations. By creating reliability of a product or service and consistently meeting these requirements, a company will achieve a reputation of excellence and gain continuous customer loyalty (Oakland & Marosszeky, 2006). Similarly, Leader 4 mentions that:

"*Whenever we strive towards operational excellence, one of the key focuses is that whatever we want to improve or implement must fit to and support our future needs*" (L4:Q3)

While Leader 3 emphasizes that a lot of clarification and planning is needed in order to implement improvement processes that will stay for many years in the company (L3:Q1a). Thus, operational excellence implemented today will be a seed for future value. Therefore, much effort and attention should be brought to strategically fitting and supporting the future of operational excellence in the organization and making sure to create a good foundation. However, the implementation of operational excellence, will in many cases enable the company to optimize certain processes and evidently cut cost on operations (Mitchell, 2015).

For instance, let us go with the assumption that 'when excellence is implemented into the daily tasks and agenda of the whole company, it stays there'. By looking at the financial results of the biggest and most successful Danish companies like Novo Nordisk and Lego, it is evident that their growth is exponential for the following reasons: Firstly, they focus on innovation and long-term investments where quality is one of their core competencies that they never compromise on. Secondly, they have a customer-focused business. Meaning that both companies particularly satisfy the customer's needs by providing them with a highly customer-valued product and subsequently customer service. Thirdly, they both nurture a corporate culture that emphasizes values, and specifically Novo Nordisk highlights the Novo Nordisk way as the way leaders in the company are required to lead. (Lego, 2019; Novo Nordisk, 2019)

When I asked Leader 8 about the assumption, she said:

"*I don't believe that the investment in operational excellence will ever be a waste. It takes time and a lot of sweat from everyone on any level, but essentially, when anchored in a company culture - it stays there for sure. It is the nature of improvement and optimization to create new levels of standards. This is the meaning of growth in my eyes*" (L8:Q6).

Inevitably, to begin a process that drives continuous improvement automatically and naturally, the collective mindset of quality should reflect any decisions, projects, and optimization efforts going forth (Møller, 2018). Accordingly, Leader 5 states that:

"*In order to achieve operational excellence, people in the organization need to be operationally excellent every day, everyone should be engaged, enabled, and empowered to achieve operational excellence and the desired results for competitive advantage*" (L5:Q12).

In addition, Oakland & Marosszeky (2006) emphasize that TQC is only something that is achieved when meeting customer requirements over time and even exceeding their expectations is the standard way of doing business. Moreover, by creating reliability of a product or service and consistently meeting these requirements, a company will achieve a reputation of excellence and gain customer loyalty (Oakland & Marosszeky, 2006). Thus, by setting the focus on customer needs, the company will understand what the customers want and then adapt accordingly (Hawthorne, 2020). In line with quality management that is focused internally, it is also crucial to maintain a good reputation externally, which continuous learning and strict quality management facilitates (Oakland, 2003).

5.1.3 Barriers to success

As much as the lack of feedback can be a barrier to success, the true barriers often lie hidden in the subconscious mind. Without lingering too much on psychological aspects, barriers to success are usually the unidentified and sometimes subconscious stopping-blocks to having a culture that follows a mindset of continuous improvement and quality (Oakland, 2014). Primarily, the more common a behavior is, the deeper are the roots. (Schein, 2016).

As this study is mainly addressing the possibility for continuous learning in spite of failure within culture change, it is important to know that most failures stem primarily from employee resistance and unsupportive management behavior (Rick, 2016). Thus, the barriers for success lie primarily there. However, as this study is working with already established leaders that are aware of this, this section will not dive into change management systems and programs but will address the learnings and outcomes that come from organizational change and the adaption of it.

It is very naive to claim that all organizational change is easily implemented and always successfully anchored in the culture. According to Oakland (2014), changing a culture in an organization is always about incorporating a sustainable ethos of continuous improvement, where responsive business planning will come only as the result of carefully planned and managed processes (p.67). From Leader 8's experience it was evident that resistance to change and being afraid of something new is very normal (L8:Q2). However, by expecting resistance to change, and essentially planning for it from the start of the change management program, will allow the leaders to effectively manage objections (Rick, 2016).

For this reason, the section with the control theory of performance management systems stated that quality improvement processes established a program or process to manage change and achieve quality improvement in organizational policies, programs, or infrastructures based on performance standards, measurements, and reports. The main key here is to have a focus that essentially controls the performance management (L9:Q1). But not to forget, a company generates an extensive amount of data that support the focus on specific issues that should be optimized.

As stated by Mitchell (2015), "op*erational excellence is directed to seeking safe sustainable value*" (p. 14). Therefore, top management should lead continuous improvement by seeking for gaps or opportunities in data like Leader 9 states: "*before being able to do the right corrections to the processes, data are needed*" (L9:Q3). By doing so, key processes that create value for the company will be the result, and the company will reach a state of resilience and superiority (Michell, 2015).

"*Being able to understand how each area and culture approaches strategies, can help anticipate their execution with a higher rate for success*" (L6:Q1).

According to Oakland (2014), the strategic and operational planning process is the most crucial to identify because it addresses the strategic issues that are against the vital needs of the future of the company. In addition, the scholar mentions that providing awareness of impending changes in the business environment and the strategic initiatives taken accordingly, will enable a rapid and appropriate adaptation. As mentioned above, the strategic plans require a lot of recourses in terms of time and effort. However, they are inevitably the continuous process by which any organization describes its destination, and how they assess and address barriers standing in the way of reaching that destination.

Consequently, the strategic planning efforts will create approaches for dealing with those barriers moving forward (Oakland, 2014). Inevitably, the leadership approach to change also plays a huge role by showing integrity and in walking the talk, modeling the desired behavior, and letting the people in the organization see the desired values in action. Accordingly, the importance of the joint force of effort coming from both the top management and the middle managers, eventually leads the rest of the people towards success with the approaches discussed in the next section.

5.2 Leadership Excellence

According to Oakland's quality management framework, the aspect of leadership excellence is found in the way that a leader drives the organizational culture and leads the people. As mentioned above, the people element of the framework is the management and development of people, where teamwork, culture change, communication, and learning are the key elements. In addition, the cultural aspect of the framework emphasizes the insurance of creating a supportive culture to the strategic decisions (Oakland, 2014).

5.2.1 Do you have the cultural key?

The most crucial aspect of alignment and communication that can lead operational excellence and continuous improvement are the people themselves. Following social constructionism, people create the culture they have and the routines they live by. As mentioned in the former analysis of the strategic approach, it became clear, based on data and literature that strategically leading a culture to understand why something is important is crucial. For instance, Leader 9 states that "*culture is key in order to be able to make improvements*" (L9:Q1). Thus, a manager can lead continuous improvement in an organization by anchoring a certain culture of learning. For instance, this could be any learning frameworks that companies have and require employees to work by, like various Lean or Sig Sigma frameworks dependent on the specific company. Similarly, Leader 6 argues that "*culture plays an important role in how we learn and apply things in practice*" (L6:Q1), which is also how scholars like Edgar Schein (2016) sees it:

"*If learning is shared, all the group forces of identity formation and cohesion come into play in stabilizing that learning because it comes to define for the group who we are and what is our purpose or reason to be*" (Schein, 2016:p.21).

For a leader to have a key to cracking the culture code, is something that Leader 5 has demonstrated in his organization that he has. For instance, he wanted people to behave and think in a certain way, so he molded the culture by making them mold it themselves. Just like with children, he wanted to clean their slate of what they knew and felt about failure, and wanted them instead to learn from mistakes and gain more experience in challenging the task that he gave them, so that they could solve problems bottom up and not bottom down (L5:Q6). The interesting part about this approach is that Leader 5 "*facilitated the space for them to learn and always encourage them to be proud of failure because then they could learn*" (L5:Q7).

Inevitably, the importance of an approach like this, is that by embracing the deeply roots of the culture, and then instead of forcing a culture change onto them, Leader 5 did not judge nor get angry with them when they made mistakes. Which is also something that Leader 2 states is important: "*building a culture where mistakes are rewarded and not punished as long as they provide good learnings*" (L2:Q2). Essentially, Leader 5's employees stopped suppressing their failures and instead started to learn from them without being judged or afraid of solving problems on their own, knowing that they could not fail, just learn.

Thus, the key to creating this culture of continuous learning is according to scholars, the balance of project ownership, feeling of importance, and capacity to fail and learn from it (Oakland, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Schein, 2016). Leader 5's approach is really reflected in his LPC scale scoring of 7,9. Even the leaders with a seniority higher than his, he is capable of creating such a change that even theoretical scholars would applaud.

Metaphorically, having the key to specific doors, obviously opens them. However, attaining a specific key can be done not only with experience, but also with adjusting communication artefacts, beliefs and values, assumptions and commitment. Because every culture is different, and the leader has to be very specific on what needs to be adjusted and how. More importantly, the leader has to anticipate the reaction from people. According to Schein (2016), this is a part of the espoused beliefs and values.

The difficulty of changing something has its roots in the fact that the new beliefs and values will be not be implemented in the group if there is no shared knowledge of them. Because common actions and routines are the reference points to whatever they as a group are supposed to do, and according to Schein (2016), "*whatever is proposed will only be perceived as what the leader wants*" (p. 25). This perception stays as long as the group has a joint action, together observe the outcome of that action. Until then, the proposition of the leader will be invalid because there is not a shared basis for determining whether it can actually work in the organization (Schein, 2016). However, if the leader convinces the group to act on new beliefs, and the solution works, gradually the perception of the new belief becomes a reality. Ultimately, this transforms into a shared assumption, if the actions based on it continue to be successful (Schein, 2016: p. 26).

5.2.2 Telling stories

Telling stories has always played a big role within leadership and communication (Schawbel, 2012). Thus, it is important to note that people usually do not see the purpose of a new strategy set by top management, because as mentioned before, human beings prefer stability. Nonetheless, this barrier could be avoided with stories that encourage better communication and optimization opportunities. For instance, having a storyline in a power point slide or sharing powerful stories captures people's attention. Therefore, Leader 1 also explains that, in her experience, there is an old saying that you need to say things seven times before people actually remember it, as being true. Therefore, she has been touring with almost the same presentation and slides for three years and people still find it interesting (L1:Q1).

Inevitably, this is something that most leaders do because they usually have that one mission of conveying one important message at a time. For instance, like Leader 5 says:

"*Sometimes I am forced to look at what is important in certain situations in order to prioritize what messages I need to convey to people. As a leader, I always have to look at what is important and relevant and then it is my mission to push forward that message to my employees*" (L5:Q4).

In addition, Leader 9 mentions that the key to succeeding in creating alignment has "*been the presentation of data in various fora"* (L9:Q5) which usually is done with a storyline. What Leader 8 mentions, is that by starting to tell stories, they started to engage people more in new initiatives and they became more and more empowered to change (L8:Q2). Storytelling is, according to the research executive and author of 'Lead with a story', Paul Smith (2012) a tool that appeals to all types of learners because stories are contagious, easy to remember, and they get the message across without arrogantly telling the listener what to think or do (Smith, 2012: p.12). The point is that:

"*You can't just order people to "be more creative" or to "get motivated" or to "start loving your job." The human brain doesn't work that way. But you can lead them there with a good story. You can't even successfully order people to "follow the rules" because nobody reads the rulebook. But people will read a good story about a guy who broke the rules and got fired, or a woman who followed the rules and got a raise. And that would be more effective than reading the rulebook anyway*" (Schawbel, 2012).

It is evident that people need to make sense of changes, and compelling stories and cases can help in doing so (Rick, 2016). According to Smith (2012), a leader should be a designated storyteller and be able to engage people at all levels to work in the best possible manner that inevitably generates success not only for the company as a whole, but also for individual people (p. 3).

5.2.3 The emperor's new clothes

According to Leader 2, his biggest learnings in working with operational excellence, was that "*sometimes people, especially those in the front lines (operations, production sites), do not have* *the big picture of what they are doing, but rather follow what their leaders tell them to do*" (L2:Q1). By remembering H.C. Andersen's tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes", it is a very clear example of that people easily can follow a leader and be afraid of giving constructive criticism, just because he is the leader. However, Leader 5 says that he prefers people in his department to think for themselves and ask questions that can help everyone to evolve and learn. To Leader 5, it is "*mainly all about the right communication and walking the talk as a leader*" (L5:Q6). In addition, according to him:

"*Many managers just make you do things and execute on projects that have no purpose is wrong and people should not just blindly follow managers and leaders without questioning and challenging the view and direction. Not to be completely stubborn and resistant to change but I also don't expect my employees to be blind followers. I want them to learn from mistakes and gain more experience in challenging the task that I give them, so that they can solve problems bottom up and not bottom down"* (L5:Q6).

According to Oakland (2004), the collective effort that Leader 5 is describing, is what drives the culture of continuous improvement. In his model, from the theory chapter, he portrays processes as being dependent on people and performance, the scholar argues that continuous learning improves performance and is only achieved through involvement of all people in the organization (Oakland, 2014: p. 66).

Crucial to mention is the departmental effort that each team needs to strive for in relation to cross-disciplinary collaboration. The thing is that departments and teams might have a company goal in common but then have nothing else in common. So, a leader's ability to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration is called effectiveness of leadership because spotting synergies between departments can generate a culture of alignment and thus "*avoid duplication of work amongst different teams*" (L2:Q2,Q4). The manager will always ensure that their department or team fulfill their duties and specific tasks, whereas the leader responds to the lack of knowledge in a field that is not inherently a part of the leader's team or department. Hence, by emphasizing and promoting the collaboration throughout the whole organization, it creates a culture of continuous improvement and learning.

Moreover, teams that work perfectly together across departments are, according to the theory of operational excellence, aligned (Baxter, 2015). In fact, departments that insist on working apart from each other "under the same roof" are defined by silos. And evidently, silos are less efficient and usually end up redoing a lot of work (Gleeson, 2017). Therefore, if the silos are not broken, they can hinder operational efficiency. Hence, a leader's ability to facilitate continuous learning and encourage people to cross-departmental collaboration, can help in achieving operational excellence and eventually, superior performance (McGowan, 2019).

It is evident that the importance of support means an ocean for Leader 1, who has carried out projects in relation to network optimizations in her company: "*I could not have done it without colleague's support, sparring, and generating ideas*" (L1:Q2). According to scholars like Barret (2014), supportive leadership is very important in the sense of informing about the possibilities of collaboration around in the organization and conveying to team members what is going on in the rest of the company instead of walking around wearing blinkers. Leader 6 also describes it as:

"*Being able to understand how each area and culture approaches strategies, can help anticipate with a higher rate for success*" (L6:Q1).

In addition, the leader in an organization will gain more trust from people by acknowledging their own limits. Hence, why striving for organizational continuous learning can be an excellent asset in achieving superior performance. Inevitably, as operational excellence is not an end-destination, but a process, it enables continuous improvement, alignment, and learning as elements of optimization (Michell, 2015).

This section was about culture and people and how leadership can influence and motivate the embeddings of cultural changes and eliminating the separation between functions and departments in order to make better decisions in line with continuous improvement and learning. For a leader to know the depts of the cultural roots in her or his team or department, can create new levels of learning and performance. In addition, it was pointed out that telling stories and walking the talk could improve the inspirational aspect of leadership and communication.

5.3 Practice and Methodology for Continuous Improvement

According to Oakland's framework, the practice and methodology for continuous improvement could be the subsequent result of a leader's commitment to creating a practice for continuous improvement in the organization. According to Oakland (2014), the commitment should not only be held by the leader, but also by the individual employee's commitment to excellence. However, most importantly is the commitment of top management to lead the company according to frameworks within operational excellence.

5.3.1 Commitment to growth

Learning is the most crucial aspect of continuous improvement. In order to learn, top management needs to provide everyone in the company with frameworks and feedback accordingly. Constructive feedback-abilities is according to Williamson (1986), the most important asset that all managers need to have in order to drive continuous improvement to leverage the company's collective effort. As Leader 6 states it:

"*continuous improvement is a responsibility of all, but to make sure it remains a part of the culture it needs to be driven by management*" (L6: p.: Q.1).

Culture is the key word here, which was also described as an important asset that a leader should understand. Besides, anchoring a culture of continuous improvement poses some challenges because it involves change, and change requires empowerment from the leaders that have implemented it.

According to Leader 6:

"*The key for continuous improvement, is by creating an environment where employees feel they have the freedom to use their skills and competence to make decisions for not only routine, but strategic wise*" (L6:Q2).

Not only does this aspect encourage better performance, it also continually improves the current activities that determine operational excellence (Hanna, 2019). According to Oakland (2014):

"*For effective leadership it is necessary for management to get very close to employees. They must develop effective communications – up, down and across the organization – and take action on what is communicated*"(p. 42).

Inevitably, this is part of both empowerment and commitment. The latter because a leader cannot communicate clearly without the commitment of doing it in a certain strategic way that is compatible with the vision, mission, and values of the company.

Nonetheless, TQCM is an organization's cultural philosophy that involves everyone in the organization in a continual effort to improve quality and inevitably achieve customer satisfaction (Uduk, 2015). Thus, it is the leader's responsibility to bring this culture to life. Mainly because, if the leader is not committed to this change, the people will never be so, too (L2:Q1). However, historically, that is exactly why the term manager has been replaced with the term leader. Afterall, it is the leader who leads people, departments, and organizations towards a common vision (Narbona, 2016). Managers are administratively oriented and will continue to be so. However, the leadership mindset is an acquirement that is done by a commitment to lead superior results for the company by engaging with and developing people in the organization (Barret, Leadership Communication, 2014). Just as Leader 8 states in the interview:

"*Firstly, this mindset has given us the opportunity to grow without compromising on the quality. When you have quality in mind you grow automatically"* (L8:Q3).

In addition, Leader 8 also adds another advantage of having a quality-driven company: "*keeping the customers interested and engaged with you as a company*" (L8:Q3). These advantages are the drivers of the overall growth of the company, and the commitment to this is invaluable.

Accordingly, people are usually willing to pay more for quality. As an example, just look at the willingness for a woman to purchase an expensive designer handbag. The only thing that differentiates the designer handbag from a knock off or a cheaper unbranded one, is the company and brand equity behind that bag. Inevitably, if this company started to compromise on quality, sooner or later customers would turn their backs on that company. However, if a company continuously has a quality mindset and learns from failures and gains from successes, the company will survive for many more for a long time. According to Oakland's model, the performance of all the remaining P's and C's is what drives and nurtures the quality of the company's production (Oakland, 2011).

5.3.2 Like running a marathon

When a person decides to run a marathon, they commit themselves to go through with it and nothing can stop them after a true commitment. On the other hand, you might say that when registering for a marathon, the participant must pay a sum of money to have a spot in the run and receive a runner's number and so commit to the marathon itself. Psychologically, this payment makes sure that the commitment is real, while the participant finds the number extremely motivational.

Similarly, a company also spends an extensive amount of recourses on optimization efforts in the organization (Baxter, 2015). However, only practice and countless runs will enable the runner to achieve a superior performance in the marathon. Similarly, it can be argued that a company has to do a lot of plans, doings, evaluations, and adjusting in order to achieve a certain superior performance that enables operational excellence (Dennis, 2006: Mitchell, 2015: p. 66)

According to Leader 8:
"*It is a learning process that takes years. However, we had amazing leaders that were able to commit and to drive these changes with people that helped with their engagement. The key was actually to know what we were working towards. What our true north was, and everyone was welcome to solve problems, fail or succeed but most importantly to learn along the way" (L8:Q5).*

As Leader 8 mentions here in the quote, the organization has to have a "true north", which means a common goal that can, if reached, enrich the company. This is a motivational factor, just as the marathons runner's number is a motivational factor for the runner to keep practicing and getting up in the morning to run and become better each day. Oakland (2014) states that middle management has a particularly important role to play both in grasping the new initiatives induced by top management, but also in ensuring engagement from the people they are responsible for (p. 16). Mainly middle management has the obligation to ensure that their own commitment is properly communicated with integrity, because "*only then will TQM spread effectively throughout the organization*" (Oakland, 2014: p. 33). Thus, the argument that it is first and foremost management that needs to be committed is valid. Accordingly, Leader 2 also confirms this argument with the following response:

"*Changing an organization way of working requires serious commitment from its leaders. People do not commit if they think their leaders aren't on board with a change project*" (L2:Q1).

For this reason, it is also important to reward the people for their commitment to change and bring behavioral goals to attention (Rick, 2016; Oakland, 2014). The journey from commitment to a specific goal and to accomplishing it, is naturally hard because we are usually dealing with various challenges such as resistance mechanisms or misunderstandings. Similarly, the runner will also encounter a lot of challenges along the way till the very end of the marathon finishing line. However, the accomplishment of reaching the goal wipes away all the sweat and only makes the runner, as well as the people in the organization wiser and stronger based on learning and overcoming challenges.

This section was about commitment. Specifically, about how a leader is obligated to commit in order to engage the rest of the people in an organization. Particularly, because people need to commit to the cultural change and learn what goals are important at that moment. However, in order to continuously improve, the leader should ensure an environment that allows failure and promotes learning (Rick, 2016).

5.4 Project Management

The last element of Oakland's framework that is left is communication. Even though communication is part of any practice, specifically, proper communication in project management is crucial. Therefore, last category will investigate how the leaders are able to communicate properly and create alignment throughout projects.

5.4.1 The ancient story of communication

According to Schein (2016):

"*The Egyptians and the Mayans both built highly visible pyramids, but the meaning of pyramids in each culture was different – tombs in one, temples as well as tombs in the other. In other words, observers can describe what they see and feel but cannot reconstruct from that alone what those things mean in the given group*" (p. 24).

As history tells us, human beings have always been able to communicate since ancient times. However, in those times they could communicate through writing by using various materials e.g. metal, stone, wood, pottery, and wax (Carsley, 2017). As the evolution of communication obviously has changed, this ancient story just illustrates the most important aspects of a leader who has to deliver a specific message and must have the culture in mind.

Usually, larger cross-departmental projects are dependent on the project manager's abilities to work prominently with stakeholders, with data, and essentially, be able to communicate properly. A project manager is usually the one executing on projects proposed by the middle management and encounters full responsibility of it. The most important aspect of project management is that all projects should be executed based on the essential project management tools within operational excellence. They are essentially just the analysis aids that any project manager leading operational excellence needs to utilize in order to achieve the common goal (Baxter, 2015). As Oakland states:

"*Project managers in predominantly design organizations have a critical role as they often have responsibility for selecting the manufacturers, subcontractors and suppliers and have the challenge of creating a cohesive quality focused team on the project. They have to explain the quality strategy to all those involved and ensure that all parts of the team are committed to the shared values and goals*" (p. 33).

In truth, every project manager has been exposed to various tools and frameworks in the course of their career. However, they only keep a minimal few that work perfectly for specifically them and utilize only those. However, it is important to use certain tools that align with the strategy of the organization. If, for instance, operational excellence was the main strategy in achieving superior performance, all the tools and theories in the theory chapter should be considered implemented.

For instance, when cross-departmental collaboration is suggested by middle management, it should be the most natural thing for a project manager to create the possible connections in order to gather information for the specific project. Inevitably, the project manager should also scout for such opportunities in any case, because extracting knowledge from stakeholders allows for better alignment. Leader 1 believes that:

"*For very big projects we have to try out a lot of things – communication-wise, data-wise etc. and the input and hard work the teams have provided, has been very important for the success of the projects*" (L1:Q2).

In addition, Leader 1 also mentions that getting 'fresh eyes' on a project, helps in expanding the horizon and solution of the project (L1:Q2). Accordingly, the PDCA cycle of running projects creates continuous improvement because the project manager is aware of the process in any stage of it. Thus, when solutions or strategies for the solutions have been presented, they can be checked and adjusted accordingly. After this, the project manager should plan for the adjustments, and act on it accordingly. When the project has been running for a while, the checking and adjusting should again be evaluated automatically (Mitchell, 2015: p. 66).

It is arguable, that such processes are very resourceful (L3:Q2). However, as Leader 8 says: "*when has the investment in operational excellence ever been a waste?*"(L8:Q6). In other words, the time and recourses spent in continuous learning from checking and adjusting the planning and the actions done from the planning. Leader 6 also mentions that:

"*The best communication comes from proposing a solution and then people can either accept it or not (with arguments for their choices). Based on those arguments, you can then start a dialogue*" (L6:Q4).

According to Van Riel (2012):

"*Alignment and stakeholder support are the most powerful tools any company can have in its operational arsenal, providing leverage that opens markets, sells products, and allows a business to thrive*" (p. 4).

From the data, it is evident that all the leaders are aware of the tools they use in order to create continuous learning and achieving operational excellence. Inevitably, by using project management tools in relation to operational excellence, it creates a scientific way of thinking that enables high-level learning and inevitably superior performance.

5.4.2 Creating alignment

The most important part of both internal and external communication is "*building and maintaining alignment around core strategic issues*" (Van Riel, 2012). According to his research within reputation intelligence, he developed a way to minimize the difficulty for organizations to build and maintain alignment, as it requires a high degree of trust among a large variety of stakeholders (Van Riel, 2012: p. 6). The core strategic issues usually revolve around the optimizations that are planned to be implemented.

However, according to leader 4, optimization is only reachable when alignment is in place. Additionally, the leader states that "*alignment doesn't come easily, and the importance is often understated*" (L4:Q1), which is what the scholars Trevor & Varcoe (2017) explain in their article in the theory chapter. According to the scholars, alignment management, as mentioned in the theory chapter, is a value chain is filled with various projects that are managed by specialists who execute on projects according to the company's purpose and desires (Trevor & Varcoe, 2017). Leader 3 also sees alignment being in the planning-stage of an optimization process (L3:Q2).

For the most part, the type of communication that is needed to create alignment is hard to identify because it depends on the context and organization. Nonetheless, Leader 6 describes it very well:

"*I believe face to face is best if you need to create alignment for trivial issues or strategies. In general, the best communication comes from proposing a solution and then people can either accept or not (with arguments for their choices). Based on those arguments, you can then start a dialogue. I believe depending on the topic or target group, either written or oral communication is valid for alignment. As long as you state each other's roles & responsibilities and also the desired outcome/purpose of the discussion*" (L6:Q4).

Inevitably, the learnings from knowledge sharing enables leaders to bring forth aligned communication. For instance, Leader 9 says that "*publishing of data has been crucial in the journey of creating alignment*" (L9:Q5). Similarly, Leader 2 states that communication plays a key role in creating alignment. In his opinion "*an effective communication is one that involves as many people as possible (and relevant) in the organization, at all levels*" (L2:Q4).

By systematically analyzing these responses, it became clear that the leaders expect knowledge sharing and feedback, a dialogue, a clear purpose, and delegated roles and responsibilities in order to create alignment. Because in order to create alignment, it is crucial to involve other people into projects and align them with knowledge sharing to avoid duplicated work and bottlenecks (Goldratt , 1990). Also, it is important to understand that even if people are not necessarily working directly together, everyone in an organization are working indirectly together. If there is one company – there is one purpose.

6. Framework Development

This framework development chapter will propose a framework that could potentially improve the awareness of a leader's ability to communicate in alignment with stakeholders and other departments in order to achieve operational excellence. Based on the analysis of the data and literature presented in this study, my framework is a further interpretation of Oakland's quality management framework and an extension of the literature and theories described in this study. Furthermore, this developed framework will support the analysis and discussion in answering the research statement of this thesis "how leaders can align communication in order to facilitate operational excellence".

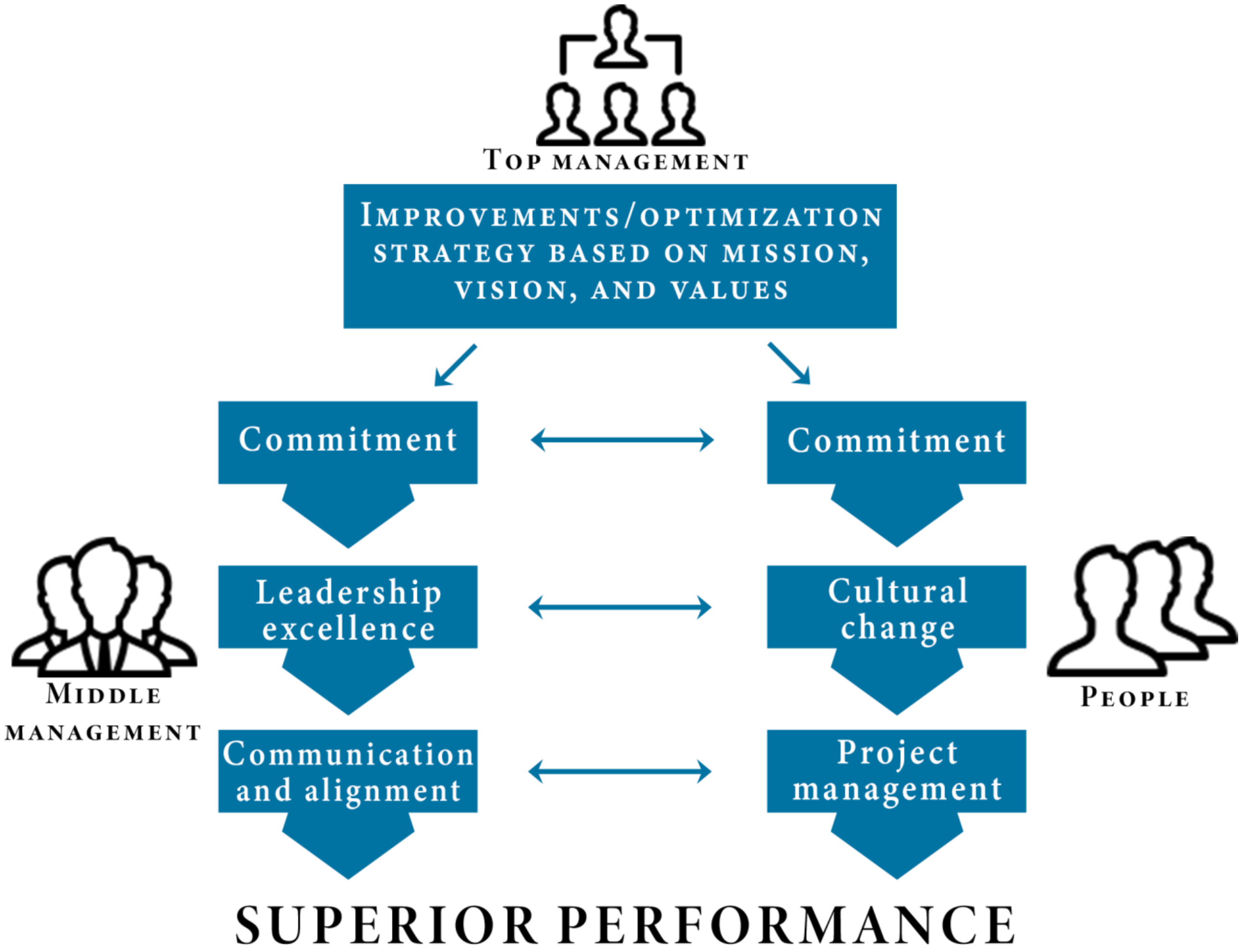
Other leaders can learn from this framework and become aware of the underlying communicational or cultural barriers that hinder an organization to fully commit and achieve superior performance.

6.1 The Unison Effect

As described in the concept definition chapter, a unison effect is when notes are played at the same time while creating a beautifully harmonic sound. The illustration in that chapter was the inspiration for developing the framework in this chapter. Moreover, the *Performance Management System* (see section 4.2) framework was also used to develop the steps in this framework.

As mentioned above, according to operational excellence, the bottom-up approach of problem-solving is preferable for continuous learning and improvement. Thus, the learners can might as well be middle and even top management. Therefore, both the management and the people in the organization are the joint force of both guiding each other by sharing knowledge, and inevitably driving the company into superior and excellent performance (Baxter, 2015).

Figure 6.1: The Unison Effect



(Source: Author's own creation)

What this figure illustrates is the unison effect in organizations. The end-goal in this visualization of the unison effect is superior performance. As mentioned above, superior performance is the implicit result in revenue growth, satisfied people, and a good reputation. An in order to achieve it, few measures need to be in compliance with operational excellence.

The process to achieve superior performance, begins with top management and the board of directors inducing the improvements and optimization strategy based on the corporate vision, mission, and values. This strategy is presented to the middle management who needs to commit to it. Only if the leaders from middle management are committed to it, they then can begin to influence the people to commit to it as well. This process of going back and forth till both parties are committed can take some time, but eventually, when both are committed, the leader would then have to demonstrate excellent leadership based on cultural understanding, engagement, and inspiration.

This kind of leadership can support the cultural change that is needed in order for people to work with the stream of change rather than against it (Foundation, 2003). This is also a process of feedback, learning, and adjusting. When the second steps of cultural change are fully anchored, the leader would have to practice proper communication and alignment by advocating for cross-disciplinary work. All the people that manage or lead projects need to have the strategy and optimization goal in mind in order to, after some time being anchored, will achieve the goal of superior performance. In order to start the process, performance standards, goals, and targets should be identified. In addition, the top management will need to communicate expectations in order for the middle managers to become committed (Foundation, 2003).

6.1.1 Commitment as a common denominator

As uncovered in the analysis and discussion, the commitment to the organizational strategy, no matter what it implies, is the first step in the framework. Thus, commitment is an important milestone for both the leaders and the people in an organization. As also mentioned in the analysis by Leader 2:

"*Changing an organization way of working requires serious commitment from its leaders. People do not commit if they think their leaders aren't on board with a change project*" (L2:Q1).

Therefore, without commitment, the superior performance will not be achieved for the following two reasons: Firstly, the commitment provides the glue (Oakland, 2014: p. 30) to the unison effect from successfully implementing the initiatives, to successfully operating with superior performance. Secondly, the desire to change comes from within, thus, commitment ensures own personal responsibility for continuous learning and organizational improvement.

In accordance to the performance management system framework, the performance measurement should be used in order to commit to the performance standards. Here, it is important for the leader leading people to refine indicators and define measures that can develop data systems and collect data on performance (Foundation, 2003). Based on the analysis, the unison effect emphasizes the mental and physical commitment to change as the foundation of superior performance and it is the common denominator in reaching any goal together as an organization.

However, most essentially, as the analysis uncovered, was that the leader needs to lead the way, walk the talk, ooze integrity, and show confidence that this change is only for the better. Subsequently, by behaving like this, the leader demonstrates that top management have taken the best decision for the company, which automatically works as a source of inspiration e.g. "if the leader like it, then I must give it a chance". If, for instance, someone from middle management started to criticize the CEO's decisions or strategic initiatives, the middle manager would not be categorized as a leader leading the people towards the decision, but rather driving them away from it. When that is said, every human being is entitled to its own opinion, however, a leader needs to be diplomatic enough to balance the required commitment to top management, and peoples dis-satisfaction. As mentioned in the analysis, humans prefer stability and are naturally a little resistant to any change. However, by embracing this fact and at the same time feel confident in the decisions made, a leader will already be ahead of the 'game'.

The most important factor in achieving a collective commitment, is the continuously revision and negotiation of what to commit to, which is a factor that is dependent on the respective company and agreeing thereon. For instance, if the people in a company just don't see a particular work-routine change, the management and the people they are responsible for have to with constructive communication revise and adjust the proposal into something tangibly understandable for the people. Essentially, they are the drivers of the operational layer. Inevitably, the operational layer is the engine of the company, and without its commitment and engagement, the whole company will experience low performance and constant failures (Michell, 2015).

6.1.2 Leadership excellence drives cultural change

The analysis discovered some ways in which leaders changed people and cultures in the organization. Changing a culture is not easy, and this study has not concentrated on how to specifically change it, because dependency and contingency would have to be considered as well in the analysis. However, what this study concentrated on was the leadership aspect of changing a culture and motivate people through the right communication and advocation to make people drive optimization-conscious projects.

What the unison effect proposes in relation to leadership excellence is mainly, as the analysis discovered, to have a thorough cultural understanding, have the ability to tell stories in order to engage people, and essentially to show integrity when leading people into new beliefs and values in order to achieve superior performance. It is an important step for superior performance to report the progress. A leader will have to have people analyzing data and the feedback of this data should be continuous. Most importantly, is it to develop a regular reporting cycle (Foundation, 2003).

In order to drive cultural change, the leader has to continuously evaluate the situation and their own leadership excellence. Consequently, a leader will have to contingently, to go back and forth in the revision and reconstructing of a new culture with the people.
The reconstructing of a culture requires to change the cultural beliefs and assumptions in regard to certain realities that drive the culture. As an example, if an organizational department drives corporate marketing, that department might interpret the finance department of the same large company to "lack innovative capacity", it comes from the general experience based on the assumption that numbers and, for instance, formal clothing means bureaucracy and standardization (Schein, 2016: p. 25).

Driving change is sometimes not something that can be planned, because cultural change is usually extremely complex (Fullan, 2002). However, by driving communication based on, for instance, the common starting points, potentially allows the organization to cultivate a more agile organizational body (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008). Thus, in order to maintain the flexibility to change and to try different things or directions, the organization or the leader has to be sufficiently complied with the central values of the organization. Namely because, the common starting points are values which the organization return again and again to when orchestrating communication (Christensen et. Al, 2008: p. 185).

As Schein also argues that if the beliefs and values that provide meaning and comfort to the group are not congruent with the beliefs and values that correlate with effective performance, it will be observed that the espoused values that reflect the desired behavior are will not be reflected in the observed behavior (Schein, 2016: p. 27). As an example, it could be when a company's ideology says that it has high quality standards for its products, but its actual record may contradict what it says (Schein, 2016). As discussed earlier, integrity should be the most important trait in leadership excellence.

In analyzing the espoused beliefs and values, the leader must discriminate carefully among those that are congruent with the underlying assumptions that guide performance, those that according to Schein (2016), are a part of the ideology or philosophy of the organization, and those that are rationalizations or only aspirations for the future (p. 27). In other words, as mentioned right above, these espoused beliefs and values might be contradictory. This is because the espoused beliefs and values often leave large areas of behavior unexplained that makes the grasping of it difficult (Schein, 2016: p. 27). Moreover, in order to change it, the unison effect wants the leader to understand it first, and this process, is also a back-and-forth process between the leader and the people.

In regard to understanding change and navigating it, Fullan (2002), argues that redefining resistance of cultural change is useful (p. 18). Meaning that an excellent and successful leader can find important points in resistant people (Foundation, 2003). Which is exactly what the unison effect framework also emphasizes, the constant negotiation until a common ground is identified is what defines leadership excellence in relation to cultural change.

6.1.3 Alignment in relation to project management

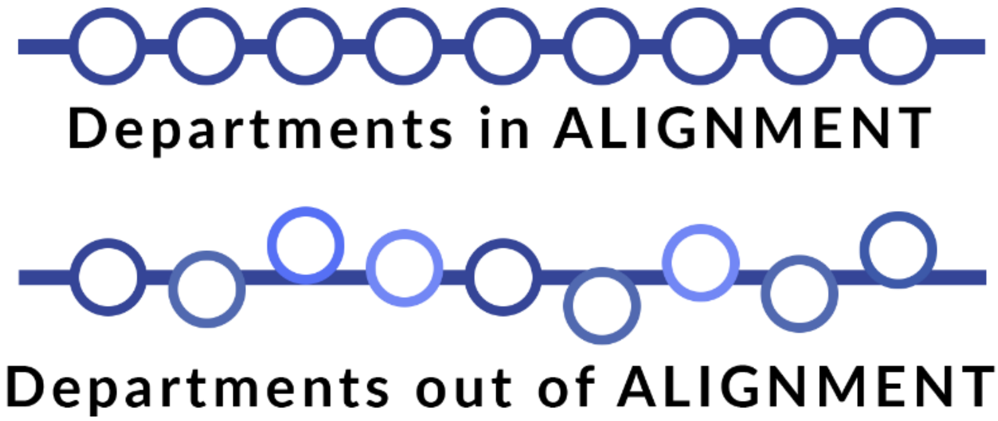
As uncovered in the analysis of the data, the leaders found it of extreme importance to collaborate. However, the collaboration comes from the leader's ability to discover opportunities in the work environment and the ability to know how to motivate people to cross-collaborate. Inevitably, cross-collaborations is an essential part of alignment because it consistently facilitates the problem-solving on a higher level due to intense knowledge sharing. Leading projects that ensure extracting information from other work fields than one's own, promotes a healthy organizational environment that encourages people to seek for answers and ask for support to projects.

Essentially, by collaborating, the leader can gain a full picture of what other leaders are working on and, thus, when they need some more expertise or other eyes on the current project, they know who to contact (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). In essence, this is the unison of project management – to ensure to establish both a useful network across the organization, but also to make sure to align with other departments around the organization. Thus, unison is the effect that happens when we are aligned on expectations, leadership approach, and communication. Without this organizational effect, the journey towards operational excellence and superior performance gets abrupt. Inevitably, it is important to have a quality improvement process that enables to use data for decisions to improve, for instance, programs and outcomes, so the performance management system creates a learning organization (Foundation, 2003).

Alignment in an organization becomes essential when departments are used to being separated by profession and work area. In this case, Mitchell (2015) also states that this separation becomes the primary barrier to success and gaining full benefits from the implementation of value-driven operational excellence (p. 101). In other words, the operational efficiency has to be implemented at all levels in the organization, which means that the communication between every strategic, tactical, and operational layer should be sufficient enough that problem-solving can happen as it occurs.

Inevitably, the leader should, according to the unison effect, be efficient enough to encourage cross-departmental collaboration despite of multi-cultural differences. When an organization is aligned, all departments operate in unison, see figure 6.1.3.

Figure 6.1.3: Department in Alignment



(Source: Author's own creation)

This figure simply illustrates that when every department, process, or manager is aligned with one another, everything is smoother and the foundation stronger that the company operates from. Thus, the company can overcome any challenge, both internally and externally.

As shown in the example above, with the marketing department assuming that finance departments lack innovative capacity, a solution to this would be, to collaborate with that department and create organizational alignment for the purpose of overall superior performance. However, if that has been tried before, and the assumption about the finance department stems from a collaboration experience in the past, the leader could, to begin with, achieve an understanding of the opposite culture in order to also understand their own. As mentioned in the theory and analysis chapters, the observation of artifacts could help in achieving the cultural understanding. However, this method takes some time because in order to be able to conclude anything, reflections on the observations should be analyzed. Furthermore, if the understanding should come faster, a dialogue between the leader and a group member could unveil the espoused values, norms, and rules that according to Schein (2016), provide the day-to-day operating principles by which members of the group guide their behavior (p. 25).

6.5 The Unison Effect Limitations and Recommendations

According to the unison effect, the process of awareness from initial implementations, to commitment, to change, to alignment eventually brings superior performance to the organization. However, in order for the process to be fruitfully implemented, every step of the way should be in accordance to the mission, vision, and values of the company and its strategy. Thus, leaders need to ensure to advocate for them and live by them.

The common denominator of all new initiatives is that it can take months, even years to have implemented something completely and ideally. However, the importance is what is learned along the way. Some processes might not run as smoothly in some organizations, and it is evident from the data that the participants work in organizations that are relatively well driven in relation to operational excellence and superior performance. Thus, whether the unison effect could be implemented as a framework in other organizations than the ones studied is not clear. The limitation of this framework is that it is not addressing issues such as high-level change management because it involves further research.

Also, the strive for quality means that recourses should be allocated accordingly, so if external constraints occur e.g. supplier files for bankruptcy, the company will might have to rethink their position in regard to quality, if qualified alternatives are not readily at hand. Furthermore, a company might not be in a financial position or lacking key-personnel, so it is severely limited in its ability to conduct large implementations towards operational excellence as change is often costly, and companies might not always be in a position to splurge, even if the change is necessary. This could lead to a stagnation onwards to operational excellence.

To do it right, operational excellence should be consciously implemented into to the organization, with the right mindset, right attitude, and right expectations. There is a lot of theoretical and methodological work that needs to be in place before the initial steps of implementing and anchoring the program. For this reason, most companies committed to this change, must bring in costly external expertise to support the process of implementation. Inevitably, this aspect might repel companies with lack of recourses to implement such programs. However, what the unison effect could support such company with, is to provide a framework and guiding line for achieving superior performance. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, complete commitment is the key, and then everything can be possible (Michell, 2015). Thus, the leaders should be the role models in everything that they do.

The constant change in the environment, means that larger companies cannot necessarily take risks to change something as it occurs as a trend or a high demand from the public for corporate social responsibility. The analysis and benchmarking will have to be prioritized before the company can initiate change. Thus, the company might miss the front-runner advantage, but will mitigate the risk that comes from being first. A company might simply not have the capital planned for a strategic move to incorporate corporate social responsibility at any given time.

In sum, the unison effect is not necessarily a framework that presents new knowledge, just a new perspective on organizational performance and how it is achieved, what understandings and considerations need to be taken into account. Nonetheless, the unison effect is a good way of creating awareness and giving leaders some new eyes on the process. For instance, if a leader is stuck in the process of change, the unison effect could be a good visualization of what to do or to see what step the leader has overseen in the process towards superior performance.

7. Future Implications

The main goal of this study was to explore how the organizational emphasis on quality and operational excellence could change the culture and improve the continuous learning and optimization. Consequently, this study will attempt to explore the optimization process of creating superior performance in an organization and subsequently how communication aligns an organization to facilitate operational excellence.

In order to gain a holistic picture of this research, it would be recommended to look at aspects such as cultural change, operational excellence, it is recommended that further investigations of leadership and communication in connection to business excellence is conducted and how it relates to operational and process excellence.

It could also be an interesting case to look at more companies with a quality mindset, operational excellence initiatives, and superior performance in order to gain a fuller empirical understanding of the phenomena in this study. Investigations of change management in regard to the unison effect and how this framework works in practice, perhaps do some quantitative or qualitative analysis to investigate the aspects that the data from this study did not cover.

This model is based on larger organizations; thus, it cannot be concluded if it could be useful in small or medium sized enterprises. So, on the basis of this study, it is recommended that further investigations of the use of operational excellence in small or medium sized companies.

8. Conclusion

Much insight can be gained when asking leaders in managerial roles to open up about their leadership experience in certain fields and categories. As the analysis demonstrated, this study has supported in gathering valuable insights from nine leaders in order to develop a new framework. Throughout this thesis, operational excellence and quality management have been the main elements in demonstrating that through a well-planned strategy, wholehearted commitment, leadership excellence, and aligned project management, superior performance can be achieved.

The analysis and discussion of the collected data revolved around major points in regard to Oakland's quality management framework. The analysis and discussion illustrated that organizational performance is dependent on the factors that enable total quality management. All elements like planning, processes, people, culture, commitment, and communication are all parts in the puzzle of leveraging a company's outputs to a superior level. The analysis discovered that it was mainly about the right communication and walking the talk as a leader. Inevitably, the discussion uncovered that the roadmap to operational excellence, as Baxter (2015) describes it, contained the elements that commits leaders to quality and eventually enables superior organizational performance.

Along with the data from the leaders, the developed framework was based on the theoretical framework of performance management systems (Public Health Foundation, 2012), which elaborated how the strive for quality, continuous learning, and improvement can lead to superior performance on an organizational level. A performance that every company, inevitably, is seeking.

The methodological stance that I was taking in contributing to a field of research was by constantly referring to both the empirical data and the established theory in order to create this framework. The framework illustrated the unison effect, which incorporated both the empirical data and the established theory.

The unison effect as a developed framework has contributed to the awareness and understanding of the importance of commitment, cultural change, leadership excellence, and aligned communication in order to achieve superior performance. When the elements in the framework are aligned and continuously adjusted, it was argued that only then every single person in the organization understands the unison effect of “playing the same notes”. In other words, by being in ‘unison’ to one another and by having processes in ‘unison’ with the organizational goal, it brings alignment to the organization. The unison effect is a framework that encourages the organization’s leaders to become aware of this phenomenon and lead accordingly.

In addition, based on the data, this study emphasized that the alignment throughout an organization is crucial for facilitating operational excellence with cross-collaboration and communication. The unison effect gathered all the empirical experience from the data with existing theories and developed a framework for aligning communication that subsequently can lead operational excellence by facilitating continuous learning. Indeed, this thesis has provided leaders with a recipe for how to reach superior performance while being fully aware of the process and eventually control the organizational performance.

9. Bibliography

Aguinis, H. (2011). *Performance Management.* (https://www.ebsglobal.net/EBS/media/EBS/PDFs/Performance-Management-Course-Taster.pdf, Ed.) Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University, Scotland: Edinburgh Business School.

Al-Fedaghi, S. (2012). A conceptual foundation for the Shannon-Weaver model of communication . *International Journal of Soft Computing*, pp. 7(1): 12 – 19.

Alvesson, M., & Karreman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research and theory development: Mystery as method.* SAGE Publications.

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2011). Routhledge.

Banach, T. (2016, June 09). *LinkedIn.* Retrieved from On Process Excellence vs. Operational Excellence vs. Business Excellence: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/process-excellence-vs-operational-business-tracy-banach/

Barret, D. J. (2006). *Strong Communication Skills a must for today's leaders.* Handbook of Business Strategy, Emerald.

Barret, D. J. (2014). *Leadership Communication* (Vol. Fourth Edition). New York, NY 10121: McGraw-Hill Education.

Barrows, E., & Neely, A. (2012). *Managing Performance in Turbulent Times: Analytics and Insight .* New Jersery: John Wiley & Son Inc.

Bass, B. M. (1990). From Transactional to Tranformational Leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Orgabizational Dynamics, 18*(3), pp. 19-31.

Bastalich, W. (2019, May 31). *Interpretivism, social constructionism and phenomenology*. (UniSaEDGE) Retrieved from University of south Australia: https://lo.unisa.edu.au/mod/page/view.php?id=489362

Baxter, R. (2015). *Operational Excellence Handbook.* Naples, Florida: Value Generation Partners.

Brooke, S. L. (2004). The Relationship of Consideration and Structure Leadership Styles to Employee Job Satisfaction in Nonprofit Child Care Organizations. *Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies // Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection*.

Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (2019). *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory.* SAGE Publications Ltd 1 Oliver's Yard 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP.

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). *Business Research Methods.*

Cambridge University Press Dictionary. (2011). *Cambridge Business English Dictionary* (Vol. 10). Cambridge University Press.

Carsley, S. (2017, March 23). *How did ancient people communicate?* Retrieved from Kiwi Report: https://www.kiwireport.com/ancient-people-communicate/

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (Vol. (2nd ed.)). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Charteris-Black, J. (2007). *The Communication of Leadership - The design of leadership style.* 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, Madison Ave, NY: Routhledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Christensen, L., Morsing, M., & Cheney, G. (2008). *Corporate Communications: Convention, Complexity and Critique.* Sage Publications Ltd.

Cox III, J., & Schleier, J. (2010). *Theory of Constraints Handbook.* USA: McGraw-Hill.

Coyle, D. (2018). *The Culture Code - The secrets of highly successful groups.* New York : Bantam Books.

Darwin, C. (1859). *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.* Oxford University: J. Murray.
Dennis, P. (2006). *Getting the Right Things Done - A leader's guide to planning and execution.* (lean.org, Ed.) Boston, MA, USA: Lean Enterprise Institute.
Ehrenfeld, T. (2016, August 09). *A3 Thinking Roundup*. Retrieved from Lean Enterprise Institute: https://www.lean.org/leanpost/Posting.cfm?LeanPostId=602
Fairhurst, G. T. (n.d.). A Communication Alternative to Leadership Psychology. *University of Cincinnati*.
Farwell, J. P. (2012). *Persuasion and Power. The Art of Strategic Communication.* Washington, DC: Geargetown University Press.
Fiedler, F. (1964). A Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Volume 1*, pp. Pages 149-190.
Foundation, P. H. (2003). From Silos to Systems: Using Performance Management to Improve the Public's Health. *Public Health Foundation*.
Fullan, M. (2002, May). The Change. *Educational Leadership*.
Gigliotti, R. A., & Brent, R. D. (2016). Leadership as Social Influence: An Expanded View of Leadership Communication Theory and Practice. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies, 23*(4), pp. 467-479.
Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory; Strategies for Qualitative Research.* Chicago: Aldine.
Gleeson, B. (2017, June 20). *Why Silos Kill The Ability To Communicate A Unified Vision, And 5 Ways To Eliminate Them*. Retrieved from Forbes: https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2017/06/20/why-silos-kill-the-ability-to-communicate-a-unified-vision-and-5-ways-to-eliminate-them/#13483dd029a4
Goldratt , E. M. (1990). *What is this thing called Theory of Constraints and how should it be implemented?* North River Press.
Goulding, C. (2002). *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide for Management, Business and Market Researchers.* London: Sage.
Gupta, A. (2009, April 25). *Contingent Leadership*. Retrieved from Practical Management - Designing a better workplace: http://www.practical-management.com/Leadership-Development/Contingent-Leadership.html
Hamrefors, S. (2010). Communicative Leadership. *Journal of Communication Management, 14*(2), pp. 141-152.
Hanna, L. (2019, February 12). *KaiNexus Blog - Everything Continuous Improvement*. Retrieved March 2020, from https://blog.kainexus.com/improvement-disciplines/operational-excellence/what-it-takes-to-achieve-operational-excellence
Hannon, E. E., Snyder, J. S., Eerola, T., & et al. (2004). The role of melodic and temporal cues in perceiving musical meter. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 30* (5).
Hansen, H. (2008). *Abduction.* (D. a. In Barry, Ed.) The Sage Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization.
Harding, T. S., & Whitehead, D. (2013, January). Analysing data in qualitative research. *Nursing & Midwifery Research: Methods and Appraisal for Evidence-Based Practice, Edition: 4th*(Chapter: Analysing data in qualitative research), pp. pp.141-160.
Harnsberger, L. C. (1996). *Essential Dictionary of Music Theory.*
Hawthorne, M. (2020, May). *Customer Focus & Anticipating Customer Needs*. Retrieved from Chron: https://smallbusiness.chron.com/customer-focus-anticipating-customer-needs-25891.html

Highgear. (2017, April 17). *Highgear Blog*. Retrieved from highgear.com: https://www.highgear.com/blog/process-excellence-operational-excellence-and-business-excellence/
Hoppermann, J. (2015, April 15). *The Definition of Complexity Is A Complex Matter*. Retrieved from Forrester: https://go.forrester.com/blogs/10-04-15-the_definition_of_complexity_is_a_complex_matter/
Kenton, W. (2018, February 05). *Lean Six Sigma*. Retrieved from Investopedia: https://www.investopedia.com/terms/l/lean-six-sigma.asp
Ketokivi, M., & Mantere, S. (2010). Two Strategies for Inductive Reasoning in Organizational Research. *35*(2), pp. 315-333.
Khadem, R., & Khadem, L. (2017, June 19). *9 SIGNS YOUR ORGANIZATION IS MISALIGNED*. Retrieved from SHRM Executive Network - HR PEOPLE + STRATEGY BLOG: https://blog.hrps.org/blogpost/9-Signs-Your-Organization-Is-Misaligned
Koopmans, L. e. (2014). Identifying and selecting indicators', Work. In L. Koopmans, *Measuring Individual Work Performance* (Vols. Chapter 3, pp. 229–238., pp. CHAPTER 3, pp. 229–238.). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT.
Kotter, J. P. (1997). Leading change: A conversation with John P. Kotter. *Strategy & Leadership, 25*(1), pp. 18-23.
Lattuch, F., & Dankert, P. (2018, July). The glue that holds an organization together: building organizational vision with top management teams. *Development and Learning in Organizations*.
Lebas, M. (1995). Performance measurement and performance management. *International Journal of Production Economics*, pp. 41(1-3), pp.23–55.
Lego. (2019). *The LEGO Group Annual Report 2019.* https://www.lego.com/cdn/cs/aboutus/assets/blt55a9aaa4253b2fa5/Annual_Report_2019_ENG.pdf.pdf.
Lewis, L. (2011). *Organizational Change Creating Change Through Strategic Communication.* Wiley: Wiley-Blackwell.
Lukins, S. (2019, August 23). *Top 9 Skills You Need for a Career in Management*. Retrieved from Top Universities: https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/careers-advice/top-9-skills-you-need-career-management
Møller, C. V. (2018). *Organizational learning perspective on continuous improvement and innovation in product realization.* Technical University of Denmark.
McGowan, J. (2019, October 19). *How to create a culture of continuous learning*. Retrieved from Trainingzone: https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/lead/culture/how-to-create-a-culture-of-continuous-learning
Michell, J. S. (2015). *Operational Exellence.* Hoboken NJ.
Middleton, F. (2020, May 1). *Reliability vs validity: what's the difference?* Retrieved from Scribbr: https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/reliability-vs-validity/
Mintzberg, H. (1993). *Structure in Fives.* Englewoods Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
Mintzberg, H., McCarthy, D., & Constantinos, M. (2000). View from the Top: Henry Mintzberg on Strategy and Management [and Commentary]. *The Academy of Management Executive, 14*(3), pp. 31-42 Retrieved April 24, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/4165656.
Narbona, J. (2016, May 26). Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis. *InformaUK Limited, trading as Taylor & FrancisGroup.*
Nordisk, N. (2019). *Novo Nordisk Annual Report 2019.* https://www.novonordisk.com/content/dam/Denmark/HQ/investors/irmaterial/annual_report/2020/Novo-Nordisk-Annual-Report-2019.pdf.
Northouse, P. G. (2015). *Leadership: Theory and Practice.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Oakland, J. (2011, May 27). Leadership and policy deployment: The backbone of TQM. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence, 22*(5), pp. 517-534.
Oakland, J. S. (2003). *TQM: Text with Cases.* New York, NY 10017, USA: First published Butterworth-Heinemann. .
Oakland, J. S. (2014). *Total quality management and operational excellence: Text with cases.* 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN: Routledge .
Oakland, J. S., & Marosszeky, M. (2006). *Total Quality in the Construction Supply Chain.* (Elsevier, Ed.) Oxford, Burlington MA OX2 8DP: Butterworth-Heinemann; 1 edition.
Oakleaf, L. (2016). *ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION IN RECREATION, SPORT AND LEISURE MANAGEMENT.* USA: Linda Oakleaf. Retrieved from Organization and Administration in Recreation, Sport and Leisure Management. OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE SITES. Linda Oakleaf: https://oer.missouriwestern.edu/rsm424/chapter/contingency-theory-of-leadership/
Phillips, J., & Phillips, P. (2012). *10 steps to successful business alignment.* Alexandria: American Society for Training & Development.
Public Health Foundation. (2012, May). *PHF.org.* Retrieved from Self-assessment tool for performance management systems: http://www.phf.org/resourcestools/Documents/Performance_Management_Self_Assessment_Tool_May_2012.pdf
Purdue. (2019, August 19). *DMAIC Vs. DMADV*. Retrieved from Purdue University, Lean Six Sigma Online: https://www.purdue.edu/leansixsigmaonline/blog/dmaic-vs-dmadv/
Rick, T. (2016, September 7). *BARRIERS TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE*. Retrieved from Meliorate: https://www.torbenrick.eu/blog/change-management/barriers-to-organizational-change/
Roller, M. R. (2015, May 30). *WORKING WITH MULTIPLE METHODS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: 7 UNIQUE RESEARCHER SKILLS*. Retrieved from Research Design Review: https://researchdesignreview.com/2015/05/30/working-with-multiple-methods-in-qualitative-research/
Saunders, M. N., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods For Business Students* (Vol. Eighth edition). Pearson Education Limited.
Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2007). *Research Methods for Business Students* (Vol. Fourth Edition). Edinburgh Gate, Harlow Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited.
Schawbel, D. (2012, August 13). *How to Use Storytelling as a Leadership Tool*. Retrieved May 2020, from Forbes: https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2012/08/13/how-to-use-storytelling-as-a-leadership-tool/
Schein, E. H. (2016). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Vol. 5 Edition). New York, United States: John Wiley & Sons Inc. Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series.
Sepstrup, P. (2006). Tilrettelæggelse af information- kommunikations- og kampagneplanlægning. *3. edition*.
Shaughnessy, H. (2013, March 08). *Apple's Rise and Nokia's Fall Highlight Platform Strategy Essentials*. Retrieved from Forbes: https://www.forbes.com/sites/haydnshaughnessy/2013/03/08/apples-rise-and-nokias-fall-highlight-platform-strategy-essentials/#2d057b9a6e9a
Simmering, M. J. (2020). *Management Levels*. Retrieved from Reference for Business: https://www.referenceforbusiness.com/management/Log-Mar/Management-Levels.html
Simonsen, H. (2009). Communication policy, corporate language policy and corporate information portal - A Holy Trinity in corporate communications? *Journal of Communication Management, Vol. 13* (No. 3,), pp. pp. 200-217.
Singh, S., & Estefan, A. (2018, October 04). Selecting a Grounded Theory Approach for Nursing Research. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*.

Slack, N., & Betts, A. (2009). *Instructor's Manual Operations and Process Management : Principles and Practice for Strategic Impact Second E dition.* (P. E. Limited, Ed.) *: Pearson.
Smith, P. (2012). *Lead with a Story - A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives That Captivate, Convince, and Inspire.* United states of America: American Management Association.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory.* Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.
Tallyfy. (2020). *What is Operational Excellence [10 Core Principles]*. Retrieved from Tallyfy: https://tallyfy.com/guides/operational-excellence/
Trevor, J., & Varcoe, B. (2017). How Aligned Is Your Organization? *Harvard Business Review*.
Turning Point. (2003, http://www.phf.org/resourcestools/Documents/silossystems.pdf). From Silos to Systems: Using Performance Management to Improve the Public's Health. *Public Health Foundation*.
Uduk, P. (2015, March 02). *Total Quality Management as a Business Philosophy*. Retrieved March 2020, from PEX Process Excellence Network: https://www.processexcellencenetwork.com/business-transformation/articles/total-quality-management-as-a-business-philosophy
Van Riel, C. B. (2012). *The Alignment Factor: Leveraging the Power of Total Stakeholder Support.* London:: Routledge.
van Riel, C. B. (1995). *Principles of Corporate Communication.* London: Prentice-Hall.
Velasquez, D. L. (2010). *Library Management 101: A Practical Guide.* American Library Association: Language Arts & Disciplines.
Villanova, U. (2019, November 5). *Leadership and The Contingency Theory.* Retrieved from Villanova University: https://www.villanovau.com/resources/leadership/leadership-and-contingency-theory/
Walia, A., & Chetty, P. (2020, April 13). *Why is it important to measure employee work performance?* Retrieved from Project Guru: https://www.projectguru.in/why-is-it-important-to-measure-employee-work-performance/
Weber, M. (1968). *On Charisma and Institution Building.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Wilkinson, J. (2013, July 24). *Theory of Constraints*. Retrieved from The Strategic CFO: https://strategiccfo.com/theory-of-constraints/
Williamson, J. N. (1986). *The Leader Manager.* United States of America: John Wiley & Sons.

10. Appendices

10.1 Questionnaires and Interview

10.1.1 Questionnaire, Leader 1, Senior Strategy Consultant at Novo Nordisk

Q1. How are you responsible for leading operational excellent processes - what are you specifically doing?

As part of project managing a strategy execution project, I have been leading a value stratum mapping exercise focusing on improving operational excellence in our processes for moving production between production sites. I this I have planned and facilitated Value stream mapping workshops and followingly followed up and supported the implementation of the new best practices.

Q2. How high is the importance of support you get from colleagues and is it easy or hard to drive operational excellence together – why/why not?

For me personally – very high! I could not have done it without colleagues to support, spar, idea generate and carry out a lot of work related to the project. I think that for very big projects we have had to try out a lot of things – communication-wise, data-wise etc. and the input and hard work the teams have provided, has been very important for the success of the projects. As a (project) leader I think it is important to constantly get fresh eyes into the project because it is easy to go blind when you have been part of something for too long.

Q3. What do you think is important for a leader in order to align communication within operational excellence?

My experience is that the old saying of 'you need to say things 7 (cant remember if it is 7 or 10or something else) times before people remember that it is very true. I have toured with almost the same presentation and slides for 3 years and people still find it interesting. Another thing is to make the massage very simple and make sure to align with top management on the simple message.

10.1.2 Questionnaire, Leader 2, Analysist at Business Integration Partners

Q1: What did you learn from researching operational excellence in terms of Hoshin Kanri (strategy deployment)?

When researching on Hoshin Kanri I learnt the following:

Sometimes people, especially those in the front lines (operations, production sites), do not have the big picture of what they are doing, but rather follow what their leaders tell them to do;

Coordinating operations across several different countries is no joke, and it's not just about physical distance. Differences in culture make all the difference in the way people approach problem solving at all levels:

Changing an organization way of working requires serious commitment from its leaders. People do not commit if they think their leaders aren't on board with a change project.

Q2: How can a manager lead continuous improvement in an organization?
(What are the most important characteristics)

In my opinion, managers can effectively lead continuous improvement by:

- Following the guidelines of continuous improvement frameworks (i.e. Kata),
- Building a culture where mistakes are rewarded and not punished in their teams (as long as they provide good learnings)
- Encouraging team members to think out of the box
- Encourage and reward cross-function collaboration to spot synergies that would otherwise not arise

Q3: What specific project management tools are you using?
(Within your area of work)

My job does involve PM and PMO activities. The tool that I use the most are agile-based frameworks, which allow for faster and continuous advancing goal setting and achievement.

Q4: What kind of communication do you think can create alignment? (According to you)

Communication does play a key role in creating alignment. In my opinion, an effective communication is one that involves as many people as possible (and relevant) in the organization, at all levels. In fact, when researching Hoshin Karni, I learned that one of the major benefits that people were experiencing from an early adoption of the framework was that there was much more alignment since each organizational actor knew what other departments/teams were working on, and towards which goal. This generated alignment and avoided duplication of work amongst different teams.

10.1.3 Interview with Leader 3, Managing Director at Unilever

Q1: How much do you think freedom means in relation to control at the workplace or in a team?

It is different and depends on the specific role that you have or what industry you are working in. My experience is primary from consumer goods, so I think that that determines my leadership style very much. Even within the same industry, I think there must be a wide palette of how much a person might think that freedom or control contributes to the workplace or team. Personally, my leadership style revolves around freedom rather than control. But I think it requires a lot of other things in order for it to function. I think you would have to be very clear on the predefined frame and goals. So, you would have to spend a lot of time beforehand and check-in on the tasks. Moreover, you need some milestones along the way. But what I believe in the most, is the delegation and making everyone clear about the goal setting. I think they can contribute much more in freedom rather than if they were micromanaged.

Q1.a: So you would say that it is extremely necessary to plan before starting a new project?

Yes, but I would say that the absolutely first thing you need it clarification. For instance, I have been in Unilever for 2 years now – when I was hires I did not act on it right away because I needed to understand the direction and have a clear idea of where the business is going and I needed a lot of information. So, it is some sort of a process. Unilever was a very controlled business as I felt it, so when I was hired, I did not come in with my own philosophy and expected everyone to change the direction, I was very cautions and tried to understand everything. And when you make a change of direction, then I think you have to be extremely crystal clear on the goal setting and milestones towards success and then give them the freedom to change. So, it is not black and white, there is a lot of work in planning and understanding.

Q2: How important is alignment between colleagues, teams, and departments in an organization? Do you have an example?

For instance, as said before, my example with Unilever. Before I sought alignment, I had to understand the business and expose all of the opportunities. Then when ideas start to appear, then there is a need for all the top management team to chip into it so we can craft something out of it. And we spend a lot of time, and sometimes I even feel that we wasted some time to secure that the alignment always would be there. Because alignment can also be that I have my own idea of how things should be, but it is also about deflecting and challenging some of them to obtain the optimal alignment. So, yes alignment is about planning, but I also feel like alignment is an intermediate thing that requires a lot of resources. When it is already there, then you don't need as many resources for it. However, you need to know what you want and spend a lot of time on aligning, describing, and creating a narrative around it. Also, to define the frame of it, how it should function and the process behind it. And only then you can unfold a new idea and give people the freedom to act on it.

Q3: How would you characterize the operational excellence you have at Unilever?

I have not really worked with operational excellence, however, I know and work with business excellence, where you define the model for the whole organization and how it functions.

We have some processes in Unilever that are operational excellent that are a little frozen. I think it comes from the fact that there has been work extensively on how the business should run optimally with meetings and processes etc. And I also think that Unilever got caught in the model that wasn't very centrally managed. For instance, many companies like Procter&Gambler and Colgate are centrally management, whereas Unilever is more delegating. Which means that when something is predefined, you kind of let go of the control and let the locals manage in the most optimal way. It was very clear that people were very lost in this model. They have never really taken this model into their hearts.

10.1.4 Questionnaire, Leader 4, Group Operations Controller at Hempel

L4, Group Operations Controller at Hempel

Q1: How important is alignment, according to you, across all levels of management and between every stakeholder? Do you have any examples?

Alignment both in goals, information level and sharing is key to success in any improvement or project within business. Alignment doesn't come easily, and the importance is often understated. An example from my own world is in covid-19 sourcing and supply challenges where personal bonus kpi's were working against the overall best for the company and as a consequence we had to firstly address total alignment in goals and bonus kpi's before being able to optimize our sourcing and business results

Q2: Can you tell a brief story on how you managed a project that was a part of an operational excellent process? What was the outcome? What did you eventually learn?

The project target was to identify and implement planning excellence (or Operational Excellence) in one of our production lines. Through various analysis in the production environment where I participated in several shifts combined with data analysis and theoretical best practices - I came up with a planning method whereby we were able to segregate our products and planning into 3 cycles/methods: cyclic planning, ROP planning and MTO. At that point in time (15 years ago) this was considered Excellence level and meant that our production output increased by 18% with same manning and Operational expenses. Even today the method is used and ensures continuous improvements in throughput

Q3: What strategic approaches do you have when it comes to operational excellence?

Whenever we strive towards Operational Excellence one of the key focuses is that whatever we want to improve or implement must fit to and support our future needs - and therefore we are very conscious about making sure it has a strategic fit and support. An example could be a new technology we are testing and working on perfecting - this is a strong improvement and step towards excellence in our operations, but when we are linking it to our future strategy it supports much more than operational excellence. It will also support commercial growth, service improvements and agility towards our customers

Q4: What set of project management tools are you using daily? Can you explain why exactly those?

the best set of project management tools that I use on daily basis - both in business but also privately - are the tools I learned during my LeanSigma BlackBelt education. The DMAIC approach/structure combined with my continuous improvement mindset, seeing all problems or complaints and improvement opportunities are the strongest toolset. They have brought me to where I am today - without having a high degree education - and the strength og this toolset is that it always focuses equally on preparation, analysis/understanding, implementation and follow-up... ensuring the implemented solutions are long-lasting and sustainable.

Q5: Do you think that control inhibits leadership? If yes, how so? If no, how so?

Leadership at excellence level in my view is demonstrated by an 80/20 rule where 80% is trust and coaching - and where the 20% is control and instructions. Saying that - it is my opinion that control can definitely inhibit leadership.....it is a fine balance - where control must never take over.

10.1.5 Interview with Leader 5, Director in Strategy at 3Shape

Q1: How do you ensure continuous improvement and learning?

As a director, it is still crucial to me to receive feedback from my managers. Therefore, it is also important for top management to receive the feedback on the responses to top management's strategies because it is a part of ensuring quality execution. The response is somewhat made by all the different teams in specific departments. For instance, we have 3 teams in my department, and they all chip in with their own specific knowledge. This knowledge sharing is crucial for growth and continuous improvement.

This is why we decided to implement operational excellence in our specific department. As we started to do it and sharing our experience, more and more departments started to do something similar - but with their own specific department flavor.

Q2: can you elaborate more on that?

Yes, well for instance, a bio-chemistry team is not running the same processes as an engineering team, an innovation team, or a sales and operations team. They are all interconnected in the company but run their own individual processes and they know best on how to optimize the processes they are running so they can cut cost, reduce deviations, and optimize their work output.

Q3: these different teams you mentioned, how can they ensure alignment and going for the same corporate goal?

That is a good question, because yes, teams and departments usually work in silos and they don't talk to each other that often. Their goals and visions might even be out of alignment at times even though they work under the same roof so to speak and have the same CEO and are supposed to have that one corporate goal in mind, they don't. Without alignment, people usually forget for what they are working for and that reflects, not in quality but in the communication around it.

Q4: what can happen in this situation?

Well, it is definitely not an operational excellent company, I must say, if every department is out of alignment and don't talk. Companies have worked like this for years, so it is not dangerous. However, it can inhibit coming out of any crisis. And also, if we look at how many companies are resilient to crisis and are working operationally excellent, they might beat you in competition, so my recommendation would be to invest a lot of money in communications and alignment and eventually practice operational excellence with continuous improvement and learning.

Q5: Can you tell me little about how to achieve a good work output?

Without getting too technical into it and keeping it brief, a work output can always be measured with performance management tools that ensure to collect and analyze data on all performances in a company. Whether it is sales data or stock data. Performance managers ensure to present this data to optimize certain aspects that are in a "red" area. And achieving a good output depends eventually on the input of people in a company. Roughly said that if the people are happy and satisfied, the company will be so too.

Q6: How do you know what and how to communicate appropriately?

Sometimes I am forced to look at what is important in certain situations in order to prioritize what messages I need to convey to people. As a leader, I always have to look at what is important and relevant and then it is my mission to push forward that message to my employees

Q7: How did you start with implementing an operational excellent strategy?

The idea came from above and at first, we discussed it, but I was committed, and I set an example for my people.

Eventually, it was all about communication - but not just communication, but the right communication. For instance, we thoroughly planned with a consultant how we could implement and anchor operational excellence in the company with the people.

Q8: what exactly did you do?

We made off-sites and made meetings all about operational excellence and the frameworks we wanted to promote. Mainly it was all about the right communication and walking the talk as a leader. You know many managers just make you do things and execute on projects that have no purpose is wrong and people should not just blindly follow managers and leaders without questioning and challenging the view and direction. Not too be completely stubborn and resistant to change but I also don't expect my employees to be blind followers. I want them to learn from mistakes and gain more experience in challenging the task that I give them, so that they can solve problems bottom up and not bottom down. Time after time, when I was aware of these patterns and how I wanted something to be, I molded the culture in this way.

Q9: Can you share the specific steps?

Yes, the thing is… human beings will always learn like they learned when they were babies and children. So the key is to make them commit mistakes and own failure for then to learn from it and grow from the learning. My job was to facilitate the space for them to learn and always encourage them to be proud of failure because then they could learn. In essence, human being s also need to embody mistakes in order to not make the same mistake again, they need with their own mind and body understand what they did wrong and what they could do in the future. It sounds simple, but when you have had a culture that always strived for success and suppressed failure, it was hard to make them unlearn that failure actually was the only way to learn. Of course, only if they were mindful about it and was actually analyzing it instead of suppressing it. And being a leader that encouraged to talk about failure and learnings without judging, people naturally started to become more intelligent.

Q10: what do you see as a success factor of implementing and anchoring opex?

Essentially, the way that everyone is responsible for achieving this excellence. It is a success when everyone solves problems according to operational excellence and feel confident that they are a part of operating excellently.

Q11: How is quality linked to operational excellence?

First of all, quality is according to me the outcome of operational excellence and operational excellence is the outcome quality thinking and doing. However, most importantly is it to build some metrics that drive action in the organization and also improve the data transparency and automatize a lot of the processes. Moreover, is it important to evaluate risks as well which is a quality feature that operational excellence also is a part of.

Q12: How would you describe the quality mindset that your company possesses?

To have a quality mindset is all about thinking ahead and base decisions on data. In order to achieve operational excellence, people in the organization need to be operationally excellent every day, everyone should be engaged, enabled, and empowered to achieve operational excellence and the desired results for competitive advantage

10.1.6 Questionnaire, Leader 6, Leading IT Project Manager at Novo Nordisk

Q1: What is your role to strategically approach to operational excellence? (By operational excellence, I mean the continuous improvement and learning)

As an IT Project manager, my role is to assess that every task or activity in a project is addressed as part of a learning curve. Successful or not, we document the results, the process and share that it is shared so that we create knowledge and continuous improvement. I also see the aspect of balancing both standardization and innovation very important when working in a business support unit that coordinates different tasks across a very diversified and international area. Culture plays an important role in how we learn and apply things in practice. Being able to understand how each area and culture approaches strategies can help anticipate their execution with a higher rate for success.

Q2: How can a manager lead continuous improvement in an organization? (What are the most important characteristics)

Continuous improvement is a responsibility of all, but to make sure it remains a part of the culture it needs to be driven by management. In this case, I see empowerment as an important characteristic for a leader. By creating an environment where employees feel they have the freedom to use their skills and competence to make decisions for not only routine, but strategic wise is key for continuous improvement. Another characteristic is self-involvement/ownership. As a leader you can motivate more when you are doing what you want people to do. You are the leader that lives by example. Taking ownership of the principles you want to see in others. This means being open for change, improvement and for breaking the “this is how we do things around here” taboo. To be able to recognize the need to throw something away when it no longer works, even if that thing was implemented by you in the first place. This leads to another important characteristic - willingness to learn. As a leader you can drive continuous improvement when you accept the fact that you don’t have all the answers and that you also need to learn.

Q3: What specific project management tools are you using? (Within your area of work)

I am not sure I understood this question. If you meant like platform/system - then we normally use Clarity for portfolio reporting. For project management with the PEM Model (waterfall methodology) there aren’t any standards. People use Excel sheets for their Ghantt charts, or resource allocation. At the moment, in my area I know some are using Norris which was developed in house. For agile projects, we often use Kanban and Scrum. And for big projects, people are using Azure DevOps.

If you meant elements of project management, I use mainly stakeholder management and organizational change as most of my tasks are to coordinate global tasks across different organizations.

Q4: What kind of communication do you think can create alignment? (According to you)
This is hard to identify because it depends. I believe face to face is best if you need to create alignment for trivial issues or strategies. In general, the best communication comes from proposing a solution and then people can either accept or not (with arguments for their choices). Based on those arguments, you can then start a dialogue. I believe depending on the topic or target group, either written or oral communication is valid for alignment. As long as you state each other's roles & responsibilities and also the desired outcome/purpose of the discussion.

10.1.7 Questionnaire, Leader 7, Contract Manager at NNIT

Q1: How are you experiencing operational excellence at your workplace? If you don't - why not according to you?

my answer to this question is totally dependent on the specifics of the work I am doing. Basically, I see operational excellence as a consistent execution of the strategy of the company, where the processes, procedures as well as responsibilities are crystal clear, relied on. the costs are thereby minimized, the focus is on the development, as the delivery part is obvious and well understood. Disputes with the customer and vendors arising from the unclear roles and responsibilities or scope are not common. The risks are mitigated through the well-functioning risk and issue process.

Q2: What is an excellent leader to you?

There are different levels of success for a leader. Honest communication. Sharing of information about the strategy of the company, that I need to know. Support in challenge deals and tasks. Trust in the employees' professional qualifications according to their level of seniority. Support in the professional development taking into account the individual employees' needs and preferences. in the organization acting as a captain leading the ship. remembering, that flexibility works both ways and focusing on the healthy and content workforce.

Q3: What set of project management tools are you using daily?

I am not using project management tools, as I am not a pm, however, I am training every day the PMs in using the risk management process, documentation and change management. Deliverables and obligations tracker are also an essential tool for any pm on a large and complex project.

Q4: Do feel like you have the place to improve continuously as a leader at your workplace? If yes, what is been done right by your manager? If not, what would you have done in her/his shoes?

I can say, that I am leader on my set of tasks, where I need to take leadership in complex situation, often disputes or contract negotiations. for that purpose, I need to have continuous development of certain leadership skills and my leader gives me such opportunity.

10.1.8 Interview with Leader 8, Senior Director at Lego

Q1: How do you ensure quality?

We have a huge focus on customers and their needs and want. Along with top management, middle management have implemented strategies to ensure continuous customer focus. We found out that most failures in the company launches have been due to lack of customer focus. This was twenty years ago, so now we have definitely moved and learned to investigate what a customer focus does for the company. For us it makes a lot of sense.

Q2: how did you start doing that?

We started by telling stories and engage people with generating ideas that could be executed on eventually. People are by nature afraid of change - most of them hehe in my experience at least. Me, I myself am also very resistant. However, by implementing well known tools by a researcher that I don't remember the name of, I overcame those barriers and know I try to show people in the organization, by my own experience, that it is not that bad at all.

Q3: what has a quality-driven mindset given your organization?

Firstly, this mindset has given us the opportunity to grow without compromising on the quality. When you have quality in mind you grow automatically. Isn't that amazing? In my experience, when a company did not grow or was not quality driven, they failed with innovation, sales, and marketing. They lost customers daily. People want quality stuff - usually for a competitive price. However, when a company has a certain brand equity it is far easier to have sales at a higher rate than others but still maintain a moderate quality level. Nonetheless, if quality keeps being moderate, customers sooner or later leave and stop buying the product.

Therefore, a quality driven mindset has the benefit of keeping the customers interested and engaged with you as a company.

Q4: I read an article about you going operationally excellent with Hoshin Kanri?

Yes, a few years ago we decided on going further with Lean and create even extraordinarily results, which we have ever since. What exactly do you want to know?

Q5: How did you manage to anchor it?

Ah yes, it is a learning process that takes years. However, we had amazing leaders that were able to commit and to drive these changes with people that helped with their engagement. The key was actually to know what we were working towards. What our true north was, and everyone was welcome to solve problems, fail or succeed but most importantly to learn along the way.

Q6: So, what do you think of the following assumption: 'when excellence is implemented into the daily tasks and agenda of the whole company, it stays there'. Can you confirm it empirically?

Yes, of course! I don't believe that the investment in operational excellence will ever be a waste. It takes time and a lot of sweat from everyone on any level, but essentially, when anchored in a company culture - it stays there for sure. It is the nature of improvement and optimization to create new levels of standards. This is the meaning of growth in my eyes.

10.1.9 Questionnaire, Leader 9, Finance Manager at Novo Nordisk

Q1: How can numbers/financial data enable operational excellence?

In general, we our Operational excellence is primarily driven by cLean, however the numbers and financial data is part of the drivers of having the right focus. The financial data puts a weight to the inefficiencies in processes (could be scrap, output on machines or manning productivity (how many FTEs vs output)

Q2: What is your strategic approach to operational excellence?

For operational excellence we focus on the following:

Scrap and waste (focus on scrap percentages per process) Data is prepared centrally and data is used in line of business (LoB) on a production batch level.

Productivity Machine: Focusing on OEE data (Overall equipment efficiency) – improve data quality. Ensure it being used in both in LoB and at management level.

Productivity Man: Number of FTEs per shift, and the ratio of direct vs. indirect manning

For all the priority is to get data, gather insights and ensure actions for each area.

And as mentioned then the operational excellence in LoB is then handled by Lean.

Q3: How can a manager lead continuous improvement in an organization?

Two things to ensure continues improvements.

cLean: the culture is key in order to be able to make the improvements

Data: before being able to do the right correction to the processes data is needed. Hence our focus on OEE data and scrap data.

Q4: What specific project management tools are you using?

KATA is used in LoB. Where it is all about experimenting to reaching very ambitious goals.

In order to create data – a series of sprints have been made. And working with the minimum viable product to create value as fast as possible has been key. So despite the data is not 100% done, we publish the data and have LoB to work with it.

Q5: What kind of communication do you think can create alignment?

For us the publishing of data has been crustal in the journey of achieving operational excellence followed up by presenting data in various fora has been the key to success. Furthermore, it comes with an ambition/targets and discussions should lead to actual initiatives.