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Relational Self-Confidence:

A Human Resources Executive Perspective on
Power Group Influences and the
De-centring of the Self

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Abstract

This thesis develops the concept of relational self-confidence. In psychological and managerial research, self-confidence, and other related concepts: self-efficacy; self-esteem; organisation-based self-esteem (Bandura, 1986; Rogers, 1961; Rosenberg 1965; Korman 1976; Pierce et al 1989) are examined from the perspective of their impact on organisations. The literature emphasises antecedents and consequences that can improve organisational operational parameters such as motivation levels, attrition, etc. (Hebert et al., 2014). Research shows that high self-confidence levels correlate with increased engagement, motivation, and inclination to stay in the organisation (Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Bowling 2010), yet only scant research on the reasons and underlying processes related to fluctuations in self-confidence has been conducted. The current research, by means of a reflexive collaborative autoethnography, offers a qualitative exploration into the complexity of self-confidence, and argues that, although personal history, cultural background and individual sensitivities influence self-confidence, it is essentially a dynamic *relational* phenomenon, that is negotiated among people at work. In each conversational gesture, every individual's self-confidence is influenced by the exchange, stemming from patterns of power relations (Elias, 2001), recognition gestures (Honneth, 1995) and people's personal identities and needs at a given moment (Marris, 1996). Since relational self-confidence is interrelated with existing power structures at work in complex ways, minorities may be more prone to reduced self-confidence. For example, in male dominated organisations, women are more likely than men to interpret relational power gestures personally, potentially contributing to decreases in their self-confidence at work (Kanter, 1987; Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009). Reflexive practices (Alvesson & Skolberg, 2018) can help build awareness of the intricacies of power relations between people in day-to-day work engagements. Through reflexivity, we may be able to de-center the self through a rigorous examination of our own thought collectives and ideas and by noticing the influence of intense power relations at work. Reflexivity may support increased self-confidence, greater emotional balance, and longevity in organisations in general, and in people belonging to minority groups in particular.

Key words: self-confidence; complex responsive processes of relating; recognition power relations; minorities; gender; reflexivity

1. Introduction

1.1 *Research Framework*

In April 2018, I embarked on the Doctor in Management (DMan) programme at the University of Hertfordshire, UK. This programme offers international practitioners the opportunity to obtain a practice-based doctorate in the field of management and complexity. Research on the DMan programme centers on a deepening inquiry into relational aspects of the researcher's experiences of their practice. Through a narrative inquiry in a series of projects about my day-to-day experiences of organisational life, basic assumptions about my and others' behaviour at work are uncovered, topics emerge, are examined, and evolve into research insights and arguments.

The theoretical lens applied in the programme is through the Complex Responsive Processes of Relating (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Mowles, 2015; Griffin, 2002) which brings together key ideas from philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, group analysis and complexity theory in order to make sense of the population-wide patterns of interaction between people, as well as local interactions in which we are all consciously and unconsciously constantly engaged. This perspective centres on the argument that individual identities arise through the web of relations with others and are therefore social through and through (Elias, 1970), and that the constraints of interdependence and therefore power relating, maintained through ideology, are unavoidable features of being with others in the world (Ibid).

This perspective is based upon significantly different assumptions about the nature of human experience as compared to traditional management theories that tend to focus on the individual (leader as 'hero') and typically on an abstract 'system' (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). Our approach to research on the DMan differs greatly from social sciences practices that try to emulate natural scientific research and is consonant with the minority critical tradition (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021). Part 2 of this thesis will offer an elaboration of the methodology taken up in the programme.

As can be expected in any academic study, my perspective on organisational theory shifted during the DMAN program. Applying the complex responsive lens, I started seeing some of the theoretical stances that I implicitly worked with in companies over the years and giving them new interpretations. I intentionally did not go back to polish or change the earlier projects and kept them as originally written, to enable an account to the development process that I went through during the research period. In the contributions to practice in part 6 of this thesis I offer an account for the development of my thinking throughout the program, and how this particular view of organizational life influenced me both in my research and at work.

1.2 Organisational Context

My research takes place during a few years in which I held the position of the Head of Human Resources in several global technology companies based in Israel. The particular social context of the technology industry in Israel is a high pace, relatively male dominated and quite confrontational, competitive industry. I constantly felt challenged as the (usually) only female executive on the team, needing to struggle for recognition and influence among my male peers.

Over the years, the company I worked at was acquired by a Spanish competitor, introducing a unique situation in which I was assigned the role of the new Head of Human Resources in the merged company. After some time in that role and after considerable tension, self-doubt, and difficulty, I decided to leave that company, and started in a new technology company.

Thus, during the research period I was able to reflect on my relationships with the CEO and executive management members in several working configurations and situations, and this contributed greatly to my theoretical thinking, as well as to the evolution of my practice.

1.3 Research Question

My thesis explores the research question of what shapes the fluctuating nature of our self-confidence in our relationships with others at work. I reached the conclusion that although personal history, cultural background and individual sensitivities influence self-confidence, it is essentially a dynamic relational phenomenon, that is negotiated between people in conversations at work. In each relationship, everyone's self-confidence is influenced by the exchange, stemming from patterns of power relations (Elias, 2001), recognition gestures (Honneth, 1995) and people's identities and needs at a given moment (Marris, 1996).

My interest in the topic of self-confidence emerged as I started noticing my own self-confidence at work waning following an acquisition of the company in which I was the head of Human Resources. As I took over as Head of Human Resources of the newly merged company, I noticed that I was excluded from important group discussions of the established group and was unable to form the relevant relationships on the executive team in the new company, a situation that led me to gradually lose my self-confidence and feel ineffective, with reduced chances for success. Ultimately, I chose to leave that company and seek work in another organisation.

I was curious as to why in the previous configuration I was well connected, confident and impactful, whereas in the new configuration I felt so different, with reduced self-confidence, lowered motivation and finally choosing to leave the position.

Psychology and managerial research tend to treat self-confidence as an individual trait that is relatively stable and related to the individual. Multiple definitions of self-confidence abound in the literature (see for example Berger, 1992; Vealey, 1986; Compton & Postlewaite, 2004). Vealey (1986) considers self-confidence to be an individual's certainty about their abilities. Self-confidence is strongly related to Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory. Bandura defined self-efficacy as an individual's conviction in their ability to regulate motivation, thought process, and environment to achieve certain outcomes. Relatedly, self-esteem quickly came to have a prominent role in humanistic psychology when Carl Rogers (1961) identified it as a key to psychological growth. As seen in his need's hierarchy, Abraham Maslow (1964) reinforced the significance of self-esteem by linking it to authenticity and self-actualisation. The basic hypothesis guiding most of this work suggests that the way individuals react to life experiences varies as a function of their level of self-esteem, or the extent to which they perceive themselves as competent (Korman, 1976).

Building on Korman's (ibid) work on global self-esteem, Pierce & Gardner (2004) defined Organisation Based Self Esteem (OBSE) as "*the degree to which an individual believes herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organisational member*" (p. 593). They saw OBSE as a stable individual construct, like a personality trait.

Research has indicated that organisational members who believe they are important and competent have a lower turnover intention than those who believe they are not important or efficient (Pierce and Gardner, 2004). In addition, a meta-analysis combining data from 24 studies of OBSE found employees with high OBSE were strongly influenced to commit to their places of employment (Bowling et al., 2010). The researchers explain these findings by the fact that OBSE is expected to be positively related to both job satisfaction and organisational commitment. These two attitudes, in turn, are strongly associated with turnover intention (Tett & Meyer, 1993).

While the research findings suggest the correlation between reduced self-confidence and increased turnover, in general they do not explore the underlying reasons for this phenomenon.

The unique qualitative exploration of narratives in my research has led me to conclude that self-confidence, the feeling of being meaningful and valued at work, is a complex and fluctuating phenomenon that arises in the web of relationships between people rather than being a personal characteristic. I concluded that although self-confidence at work is influenced by the individual (societal, cultural,

and personal histories and experiences), there is a lot more going on in the relational context that influences our self-confidence than we are usually aware of. In addition, power and recognition are interrelated in complex ways and create patterns of influence that are used to discipline others into the status-quo and have the potential to constantly impact everyone's self-confidence. Paradoxically, awareness of these many influences at play and de-centring the self may allow for increased self-confidence.

Having an outsider or minority status, such as being new to an established group or being a female on a male dominated executive team, potentially predisposes these groups to reduced self-confidence in the workplace. By closely examining gender as an example of a minority status, I concluded that gender habitus and gender expectations from men and women encourage women to be submissive, smile, and generally be "nice" (Sullivan, 2000). Research indicated that women tend to have reduced self-confidence in male dominated environments (Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009). Awareness of this underlying social power structure may help women interpret exclusion and misrecognition as a social phenomenon rather than personal feedback and that way enable increased confidence in relations at work. In a broader sense, my research found that being in a minority group at work may make individuals more disposed to reduced self-confidence as they interpret the social power structure that is not inherently in their favour, as personally negative feedback. In projects 3 and 4 in this work I explore, define and explain in more depth the concepts of recognition, misrecognition and the relation to self-confidence.

Finally, while researching self-confidence, I found that de-centring of the self from relational situations at work through reflexivity (which is rigorously enabled by the DMan research programme structure) and through nourishing a sense of belonging to other communities of practice may contribute to increased self-confidence, improved relationships at work and an overall sense of emotional balance. De-centring means taking a more detached approach at work, making less self-attribution in intense emotional situations, and developing a view that deeply accepts our total dependence on one another for accomplishing shared goals, e.g., making oneself more group minded.

Primarily, my research is relevant for Human Resources professionals, consultants, and managers working with executive leadership teams on organisational design, development and leadership who want to reflect upon their experience from an alternative perspective that emphasises the complexity of human relations as a driving factor in organisational life and as a driver of organisational strategy and development. My research is also relevant for a much wider audience – both individuals and teams - who want to explore what occurs in organisations from a relational perspective and for people who want to explore how their professional

confidence and identity in organisational settings are influenced by their relationships with others.

1.4 Structure of this Work

In the following chapters, I will detail the methodological approach of my research (part 2).

In part 3, I have included the four projects that I developed during the course of my studies in full, depicting the development of my thinking along the years, followed by Part 4 - a summary of these four projects and my key insights and learnings in each one, as well as an insight into the evolvment of my thinking. Part 5 is an account of my main arguments, followed by a summary of my contributions to knowledge and practice, limitations, and further research avenues (part 6).

2. Methodology

The DMan is a practice-based qualitative research programme, typically spanning three to four years, during which through a narrative based exploration (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001) of work situations, researchers seek to make sense of what we and others are saying and doing in our practice, taking our experiences at work seriously (Stacey & Griffin, 2005; Mowles, 2011). We take up literature in an emergent manner, literature that is based on the theoretical framework of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating (Stacey, 2011; Stacey & Mowles, 2016) that emphasises the relational nature of humans.

The research process is conducted in the context of a highly collaborative research community that constantly supports and challenges each other in our research. In this way, we absorb fresh and different perspectives on our practice, bringing us into an iterative reflexive process (Alvesson & Skolberg, 2018) that generates insights to advance our practice and develop innovative theoretical ideas.

In the next few sections in this methodology chapter, I will elaborate on the key methodological anchors on the programme to ensure the reader has a fair understanding of how my key arguments have been developed.

2.1 Practice Based Research

The programme draws on the perspective of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Mowles, 2015; Griffin, 2002) which brings together

key ideas from philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, group analysis and complexity theory in order to make sense of the local relationships in which we are all consciously and unconsciously engaged in all of the time, as well as the population-wide patterns of interaction that we form. This perspective centres on the argument that individual identities arise in the web of relationships with others and are therefore social through and through (Elias, 1970; 1994, 2001; Dewey, 1938; Brinkman, 2013), and that the constraints of interdependence and therefore power relating (Elias, 2001), maintained through ideology are unavoidable features of being with others in the world (Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

Unlike the positivistic scientific method that aims to find proven “truths” (Stacey & Griffin, 2005), this research method corresponds with the pragmatist philosophy tradition, stipulating that there is no objective reality to be studied or understood on its own, but rather that our own experience, as expressed by our habits and activities, is the focus (Brinkmann, 2017). Thus, this approach acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than shying away from these matters or assuming they distort perception and therefore can be ignored. Instead, these aspects are included and examined.

The Complex Responsive Processes theoretical lens is also situated in critical thinking traditions (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018) that promote a reflective assessment and critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge existing power structures. Thus, the programme enables critical analysis of one's own practice, while paying attention to our thinking patterns and underlying theoretical assumptions which are often not talked about or recognised but are typically taken for granted in organisational life (Stacey, 2010).

For instance, while writing my first project, I became more critical of my total belief in organisational development models that I previously took for granted as entry tickets to practicing my profession as a Human Resources expert. A good example is the “cohesive team” (Lencioni, 2012) model I was repeatedly using in my practice, even though disputes amongst team members were clearly prevalent and consistent. By critically exploring my underlying assumptions while using such models (e.g., the need for control in a complex environment, the inclination to simplify and linearise organisational work due to the dominance of the scientific method, the focus on future visions rather than the present moment, to mention a few) I was gradually able to make new meaning of what it was that I was actually doing at work, influencing both my research and my practice.

In such a manner, practice-based research has the potential to reciprocally and simultaneously influence both practice and research. By paying attention to our work experience while conducting research, we have an opportunity to recognise

patterned behaviour and thus, over time influence our practice at work. Critical analysis of our work assumptions contributes to new ideas about how modern organisations function, which in turn enables new theoretical ideas to develop.

It will be noted that any academic theoretical lens may influence our thinking patterns in transformative ways, and thus the complex responsive processes theoretical perspective is an additional lens through which potentially to view the world.

2.2 Theoretical Frame: Complex Responsive Processes of Relating

From the perspective prevalent in current orthodox literature, organisational strategy is the realisation of the choices of powerful individuals such as a CEO or executive team who manipulate a “system” (see for example ‘Strategic Choice Theory’: Child 1997; Child et Al., 2003 or ‘Upper Echelons Theory’: Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Wang et. Al, 2016). The systems approach attempts to control results in a volatile and changing world by applying scientific, cybernetic principles to human behaviour, treating people as cognitive, rational beings, placing the manager or consultant as an outsider to this system who manipulates it, and measures results in an ongoing improvement feedback loop (Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

The theoretical stance of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating critiques systems theory and stipulates that organisational strategy, continuity and change emerge in many, many local relations as patterns between people that cannot be predicted or controlled by any one individual or group. Although more power resides with certain groups and individuals such as the CEO, outcomes emerge in the interplay of everyone’s plans and intentions (Stacey, 2010). This view of organisations is fundamentally different from “systems thinking”, as it places the emphasis on human relations; on the web of relations between people as well as on what is happening here and now - the conversation of gestures between people – alongside the plans, strategies and tools employed in organisations. From this vantage point, it is through ordinary, everyday processes of relating that people in organisations cope with the complexity and uncertainty of organisational life. As they do so, they constantly construct their own identities, and the unknown future together (ibid).

A fundamental assumption is that people are dependent upon each other and limited in their ability to independently choose what happens to them. This assumption of interdependence is also described as a general social pattern in Elias’s work *The Society of Individuals* (Elias, 2001). According to Elias, humans are formed

intersubjectively and thus patterned changes in society emerge from the relations of interdependent and interacting human beings. As such, local (individual) and societal (population-wide) patterns form and are being formed by all of us who are engaging together in the world. This view enables us as researchers to make generalisations from specific scenarios, since our experience is shared rather than isolated.

An unavoidable feature of being with others in a world of constraints of interdependence is power relating, maintained through ideological debates about topics at hand (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). As a result, power relating is sustained by a negotiation over each person's ideology, history and experience. At any given time, we both compete and collaborate with our peers and will influence and be influenced in a way that will mutually change our identities and perspectives or sustain existing beliefs. In this way we create for each other the conditions in which everyone must find enough sense of power and freedom to make life seem manageable (Marris, 1996; Burkitt, 2008).

For me personally, having come from a highly individualised upbringing and background, being in touch with the relatedness and interdependency that I had with my peers at work was transformational in the sense that my entire experience at work gradually shifted during my research period. Understanding how profoundly we all needed each other to succeed helped me release my self-absorption with my own responsibility and accountability for results, a stance that left me at times isolated and frustrated. I was gradually able to develop more empathy towards my peers, improving my ability to relate and collaborate with them, a process that materially improved my day-to-day experience at work.

I will show in my arguments chapter that just as we are interdependent upon each other for achieving our shared goals at work, self-confidence is also a social phenomenon that arises through our relationships with others, and as such is dynamic, depends on the specific groups we are in relation with at any given time, and can be thought of as a relational process that resides in the web of our relationships rather than as a stable and individualised personal trait.

2.3 Research Frame: Collaborative Autoethnography

Qualitative research approaches attempt to bring the complexity of human relations to the fore, acknowledging that applying quantitative analysis to human behaviour may fail to observe the rich and unexpected nature of humans. Yet many times, these approaches attempt to keep the researcher as an "objective outsider". For example, the case study approach described by Thomas (2010), narrates work situations, and reflects on them, similar to how we work in the programme, yet the

researcher may not have been involved in the event as an active participant. The methodological approach on the DMan is that of a subjective and engaged researcher, who takes a reflexive position of detached involvement, i.e., staying in touch with our emotional reactions to our situational narratives, and at the same time being rational and analytical with a broader perspective on our and others' experience (Stacey & Griffin, 2005).

To accomplish that, we use narrative inquiry that draws on autoethnography (see section 2.3.3 below for more about this research method), yet both these methods are taken up in a highly social and collaborative context described below.

2.3.1 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is at the heart of the DMan research method, in which our narratives accumulate over time as our key data source. Connelly & Clandinin (2006) regard narrative inquiry as the study of experience as a story, highlighting people's lived experiences. It moves beyond simply the telling of stories to seek to understand the broader significance of the stories by analysing them in their social and historical context.

Tsoukas & Hatch (2001) make the case for the narrative approach as a way of exploring second order organisational complexity.

In this vein, the narratives are focused on patterns of relations between us as researchers and others with whom we interact within our practice. As we explore our experience in the narratives, significant themes emerge that are further explored in light of the relevant literature, enabling us to gain research insights. We use thick descriptions, focusing on the emotional, embodied, paradoxical nature of encounters within ordinary organisational life, to tease out the relational nuances that usually go unnoticed, yet have significant impact at work (Geertz, 1973).

The research data in this thesis comprises four narrative projects. The narratives present moments and events at work which disturbed me and that I wanted to explore and reflect on in order to make sense of my experience. I often found alternative explanations and interpretations of what had happened as compared to my initial assumptions, allowing a challenge to some taken-for-granted assumptions I had held.

In the first project (P1), an intellectual autobiography, I developed a narrative account of the events, influences, literature, and traditions of thought that have

shaped and are currently shaping my practice. This was a foundational project that broadened my view on my own cultural, familial, and social history. Following this project, I could identify thought traditions that were influencing my work, that I was previously unaware of, such as the manifestation of the scientific, cybernetic theory in my work with people, or my working under the ubiquitous organisational development (OD) assumption of the 'manager as a hero'.

Each of the following projects (P2-4) took a particular situation I was involved in at work and presented a narrative account of what I and others were doing and feeling in that situation.

In project 2, I explored a leadership offsite that occurred while we were in a midst of a company crisis, in which the planned agenda derailed into a shouting session between everyone involved, and where I found myself speechless and unable to help the group reflect on what was going on. This led to an exploration of the unspoken emotional aspect of organisational life, and how our need to collaborate at work masks battles and competition and renders them unspeakable.

In project 3, I explored my relationship with the new CEO and his close circle of confidants following the acquisition of our company, in which I felt I was being misrecognised, pushed out of the circle of influencers in the merged company, impacting my level of self-confidence, and ultimately causing me to leave the company. My exploration of self-confidence emerged and deepened in the analysis of that narrative and continued in P4 when I started as head of Human Resources in a new company, and where I already had some awareness that self-confidence is highly influenced by our relations with meaningful people at work rather than being a steady trait.

Thus, there is an emergent nature to the narrative writing and exploration that gradually makes the inquiry deeper and enables me to come up with insights. This deepening is not only due to the self-exploration in the narratives, but also thanks to the deep involvement of the research community that actively supports the process of reflexivity.

2.3.2 *Social, collaborative research*

The research community's formal and informal social routines and activities are a fundamental layer of the research. This socially engaged nature of our research and writing methodology enables us as researchers to develop a reflexive stance by

opening up to other people's views, ideas and life experiences and critically analysing our own.

To that end, we meet four times a year as a community for four-day residential, during which we follow a structured programme of lectures from faculty and invited guests, student presentations, discussions of each student's project and community meetings. In the shared work with the community during residential and online video meetings, we experience and make sense of the power configurations, identity negotiations and group dynamics that impact us during the research and at our workplaces.

In addition, students form smaller learning sets which consist of four students and a supervisor (total five participants in a small set). Each learning set member is in a different stage of her research, and this contributes to a constant opening and re-opening of assumptions and re-shaping of ideas. In the learning set we continually read, comment, and discuss each other's projects through several iterations of each of the four projects.

The number of project iterations (each one with detailed comments by the learning set) can span four to eight and even more revisions. The deep commentary by learning set members and supervisor on each project iteration helps to question assumptions, identify thinking patterns and decenter us from our own life narrative and develops our own individual perspective on what it is that we are actually doing. In my second project which spanned over a year, it was quite challenging for me to articulate academically the key themes that I was attempting to extract from the narrative. I wrote nine iterations of that narrative, until the learning set felt that my articulation of the key ideas was good enough. The burden of writing a narrative that is plausible enough, that is enriching enough, that has new academic notions in it, is shared by the entire set, although it is written and developed individually. To be able to take up this learning opportunity, I had to change my approach to my writing, by being less defensive about my work and my identity as a professional and opening up to a more critical view of my practice.

During residential we also regularly engage in the large group, where we start every day with a 'community meeting' in which we explore and discuss patterns in our relationships that relate to our research and practice. The community meetings are significant in drawing attention to the rich context that often goes unnoticed in day-to-day organisational life, both the formal and informal context. For example, as a newcomer to the programme, the community meeting helped bring to the surface the emotionally difficult experience of being an outsider in an established group, an

experience that in organisational life is often taken for granted and not thoroughly explored. Another example is noticing and working with gossip, the type that is co-created in informal conversations at dinner or at the bar, and later shows up as relational dynamics connected to fear, shame, or other social norms. Gossip is a strong vehicle for expressing our views informally and thus for negotiating the status quo and our own and others' identities and power relations (see Scott, 1992, for an eye-opening elaboration on gossip and other informal means of power relating).

This way of working is influenced by group analytic approaches (Foulkes, 2018) which emphasise increased awareness about how the group contributes to the shaping of our own identity while we shape others' identities. In these ways, the community meetings and engagement in the learning set support a process of de-centring of the self, mentioned earlier, made possible by engaging with the emergent issues which tend to be located in particular individuals and attempting to re-locate these issues towards more generalisable organisational issues affecting the whole community (ibid).

2.3.3 Autoethnography

Narrative writing draws on autoethnography, an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to inquire into and understand cultural experience (Ellis, 2011). Narratives (stories) are complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that teach us morals and ethics, introduce unique ways of thinking and feeling, and help people make sense of themselves and others (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018).

Although in autoethnography the researcher often works alone, the rigorous social feedback to our narratives contributes to the generalisability of our conclusions and can therefore be seen as a collaborative autoethnography. In other words, the underlying assumption that human beings are social through and through lends itself to the ability to draw from personal experiences and apply them to broader community patterns. Seeking resonance to my narratives and research insights from my colleagues as part of the consistent research method strengthens the validity of my arguments.

For example, my argument about the influence of gender (being a female in a male-dominated environment) on the propensity for decreased self-confidence at work changed a significant number of times, as I developed it during my fourth project and my synopsis. Initially, some of my female colleagues could not quite recognise the pattern that I was describing in their own lived realities at work. After some

discussion, and after many questions that showed up as comments to my narratives, and after more self-exploration I came up with an argument that more accurately described the process I was referring to.

2.3.4 Reflexivity

In our day-to-day work in organisations, we routinely reflect on the way things are done in an attempt to continuously learn and improve. Reflexivity, however, is a different and deeper process, attempting to critically examine our deep-seated ways of thinking. Reflexivity means being able to examine and, if motivated, transcend established templates of how to think and act (Alvesson et al, 2017), a rarity in the typical organisational setting.

Alvesson & Skolberg (2018) address how reflexive methodology can productively facilitate qualitative research and they emphasise two major purposes of reflexivity. One is to disrupt the strong inclination to simply follow established lines of thinking. The other is to work more 'positively' with alternative interpretations in the hope of coming up with something clearly novel. Thus, being reflexive about our research has the potential of eliciting more powerful insights about our professional practice and research (Mowles, 2015).

When writing a narrative, the research stance we aspire to is that of detached involvement. Norbert Elias (2001) uses the analogy of the swimmer and the airman to show that two congruent perspectives need to be applied if we want to make a plausible argument to research society (and in our case to practice as well). The airman's point of view represents our ability to detach ourselves from our own situation, setting aside immediate wishes and personal sympathies so we can notice a trend. The swimmer's point of view represents the need to take decisions here and now with the ebb and flow of day-to-day life, being somewhat constricted by our needs, yet being close to our own human experience. Balancing both these perspectives in our narratives enables us to conduct a productive social inquiry.

In my personal experience, as I started writing P2, I found it very difficult to articulate what was happening to me at work in that particular narrative. Over time, and over iterations of comments from my learning set, I realised that I was so immersed in the story, so emotionally engaged, to a point of not being able to see a broader pattern. In Elias' terms, I was just starting to develop an "airman" view, one that detaches us from our work and enable us to see a trend. While immersed in the perspective of the swimmer, I was so attached to my own feelings and needs that it was difficult for me to look at my actions and perspectives more critically. Every challenge by others to my own perspective was felt as a personal offence. Over time,

as I started integrating the airman view, I was able to take a more reflexive stance on my work and make breakthroughs in my theoretical thinking related to self-confidence. The balance between the swimmer and the airman perspectives is important for obtaining the reflexive position. Being too aloof and detached from our work (taking more of an airman position) may prevent us from bringing our feelings and our rich day-to-day experience to the forefront. In such a case the work may lack depth. Being too close to our human experience obstructs views of broader trends and leaves us quite closed minded in the emotionally turbulent “here and now”. Thus, reflexive research should strive to be that of detached involvement, a paradoxical stance that integrates airman with swimmer and is enabled by the iterative nature of our work group, and by enabling others view our world with a critical lens. In practice the airman and swimmer perspectives may permeate each other and their apparent polarity be less defined.

This research process is highly revealing, sometimes surprising and unsettling, and is a deep discovery process. An example of a deep change in my approach to my work, that I attribute to the reflexive stance we take on the programme, is my relationship with the CEO, the person with the strongest formal power in the company. My habitual stance was to join forces very quickly with the CEO as a way of consolidating my authority and power on the team. During the research, I realised that joining forces with the CEO could be interpreted as a threat to my colleagues on the team and could undermine some of the work I was doing. In fact, I gradually came to see that it was the entire team that I wanted to join forces with. In other words, my relationships with everyone (not just the CEO) affected the dynamics and actions of the whole group. It took many conversations in the small learning set, quite a lot of tears and a lot of soul searching to realise that I could be quite manipulative in my use of power (I previously thought I was ingenuous). These types of insights and “aha moments” are what arise when embracing reflexivity and when enabling a critical lens to focus on our work and indeed, on our identity.

“Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.”

Hanna Arendt (2019), p 57

2.4 Ethics

It is rare that academics study the ‘lived realities’ of their own organisations. There may be good reasons for this as it is difficult to study something one is heavily

involved with. One may fear that those targeted for study may experience breaches of trust. Personal involvement should not necessarily rule out inquiry, however, because that is linked with intimate knowledge, which means involvement may be as much a resource as a liability (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018).

From the perspective of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating, ethics constantly emerge in the ongoing interactions between the researcher and participants, and as such the researcher is constantly aware that whatever he or she does will have ethical consequences (Griffin, 2002).

The use of narratives of personal experiences and relationships with others poses important ethical questions. Writing about other people with whom one is interacting, and the related issue of disclosing confidential material is a critical ethical dilemma. In a more conventional approach, involving interviews, for example, the ethical approach is usually for the researcher to inform those being written about of what is being done and then show them what has been written, concealing identities as appropriate. Contrary to this approach, in autoethnography, the researcher who is writing about our own personal experience of everyday work activities can hardly keep informing people that we might write about what we are doing together. The best that can be done is to inform colleagues in general about what we are doing.

Additionally, we are focused less on what others are doing or thinking in our narratives and more about what transpires in the relationships and are fully aware of our subjective perspective on what is occurring between people. Thus, my views on other organisational participants do not claim to be the truth but rather, are an inquiry into my own experience and my interpretation of it.

This in itself poses an additional ethical dilemma: that there can be no objective validity for the obvious reason that the research is an interpretation, a subjective reflection on personal experience. However, it is not any arbitrary account in that it must make sense to others, resonate with their experience and persuade them. It must also be justifiable in terms of a wider tradition of thought that the community being addressed finds plausible. The value of this kind of research is that it presents accounts of what people actually experience in their organisational practice with all its uncertainty, emotion and messiness, rather than highly rational, decontextualized accounts and their hindsight view (Stacey, 2011).

Lastly, by completing and signing an ethical application form after joining the DMan research programme, we as researchers become aware of our responsibilities

towards the participants in our projects, who are colleagues at work and on the research programme itself. For my research, this means that I have thoroughly anonymised the people and organisations that appear in my narratives. In addition, I also notified my colleagues that I am writing narratives related to my work which include engagement with some of them in our work situations. However, the inherent emergent nature of narrative exploration precludes fixed ethical assertions and relies on my ongoing sensitivity and awareness as a researcher as to how to ensure I do not compromise others in my research.

3. Projects: Four Projects in Full

Project 1

Reflexive Narrative of Life and Work – The “Entrepreneur’ Mindset

Michal Goldstein

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1. Shaping of the 'Entrepreneur' Mindset

I was born in Israel in 1970, the first of four children to immigrants from Beirut, Lebanon and Bucharest, Romania. My parents had joined this young, newly formed country in the 1950s in the onset of a battle for survival. While the new State of Israel fought for its growth and development, my parents were fighting their own personal battle for economic survival, attempting to elevate our family through education and hard work.

As I step back to reflect on my values growing up in such an environment, I perceive that they were largely focused on tasks and results, coupled with a big appetite for taking on huge challenges in a volatile environment. At the same time, there was always a sense of looking forward with optimism in an attempt to and belief in building a better future. I very much wanted to succeed in life. In my world, that meant living up to the high expectations set by my parents that many times required putting away any negative feelings, self-doubts, ponderings and difficulty in favour of a positive outlook and getting things done. An implicit question was always: what does it take to be successful and appreciated in a world of multiple challenges, unexplained expectations, and conflicting messages?

Later in life, I found myself thriving in work environments that had these same characteristics. From an emotional and psychological perspective, I learned to operate well in an environment of big expectations and even bigger dreams but where the day-to-day experience was frustrating and confusing, and there was a constant sense of not being good enough or performing well enough. This was a world of always needing to do more, to work harder and believe that ambition, hard work and openness to change can lead to achieving anything we wish - the foundations of Western entrepreneurship. This outlook manifested itself strongly in my approach to work later in life. Schumpeter, in his 1911 work, refers to this approach by defining the entrepreneur as a "Man of Action", someone who does not accept reality as it is. For example, if no demand for goods exists, the Man of Action will create such a demand, and he will make people want it. He is full of energy and leaps over any obstacles. Ideas are cheap, according to Schumpeter, and what is truly difficult to face is the risk and uncertainty that comes with doing, not just thinking (Becker, Knudsen & Swedberg 2011). This approach to entrepreneurship also resonates with the culture of the Israeli people, as they had to turn a barren land with swamps and disease, danger and poverty, into a flourishing state. It was the need to invent a new reality by sheer will as a premise to survival. In retrospect, the close alignment of the values of the Israeli State, my family's foundations as immigrants, and the philosophy of the Western entrepreneur, all contributed and reinforced within me the self-perception that entrepreneurship is essential to survival and success.

In their professional lives, my mother was a nurse and my father a scientist and technologist. He holds a PhD in electronic engineering and was the CTO of multiple companies based on his technological inventions. From a gender perspective, our home was rather traditional, with my mother gradually shifting her focus towards the house and children, while my father focused on what I perceived as the exciting outside world and on his socially acknowledged accomplishments. Of the two, my father turned out to be the more influential on my character and life decisions, as well as on my work-life. The fact that I was a woman, embracing male values and following in my father's footsteps, did at times create difficulties, and it also affected important aspects of my life and wellbeing, especially in my thirties as a young mother, and in multiple interactions at work. However, from the perspective of material success, as well as my own self-image, it transpired as a choice that I am proud of today.

I grew up in the city of Haifa, which was one of the first emerging technology centres in Israel. At school everyone was encouraged to study mathematics, physics, chemistry and other technology subjects (computer sciences were not yet a profession per se at school during these years). I was an average student, not particularly bothered about school achievements or about excelling in my studies. I was more concerned about socialising with friends and my first love as a teenager, and this is where I spent most of my energy. I was not very strong in the science field, and, to me, mathematics seemed unintelligible, meaningless, and highly theoretical. I never understood why it was important to prove formulas and it required a lot of work for me to connect the theory and practice. I suppose that I was reluctant to make the effort, and over time, as teachers tried to show me the logic and the sequence of solving a mathematical problem, it became scary and inaccessible when I could not follow. It was one of those areas that, at the time, seemed beyond my will and effort, and just too difficult.

Interestingly, although this was diametrically opposed to my father's profession and most likely to his expectations of me, neither of my parents expressed any direct dissatisfaction with my reluctance, at least not most of the time. When, in tenth grade, the time came to choose professional majors, the head teacher recommended that I choose geography and literature. These courses were looked down upon as easy courses for average students. I must have been disappointed with her assertion but by then I accepted the socialised notion at school that if you do not excel in physics, you must not be smart enough. When my father heard that this would be my direction, he set a personal meeting with the head teacher. We sat with her for a while, and he simply asserted: "My daughter is going to study biology and advanced mathematics". This was the first key turning point in my life that would later greatly impact my academic studies and career.

I suppose that although my parents were very busy with their own careers, with running a house, and more, my father was still keeping an eye on my progress and had simply decided not to intervene until it was important. The head teacher asked why it was so important and

gave her opinion that these subjects would be challenging for me and may cause needless frustration. My father's justification was that I was smart and could do anything I set my mind to, and it was important for my future. And that was it, I was registered for classes in biology and advanced mathematics. My reaction to this situation was mixed. On the one hand, I was proud that I had been trusted to withstand this challenge, and that my father recognised my analytical capabilities and sharpness despite the mediocre grades and lack of interest I had displayed until now. I interpreted this as a sign of caring and involvement, unusual in our house where we children were largely left to our own devices, running around, and taking care of our own business, while our parents were out working most of the day. I did concur with my father that if I wanted to make something of myself, I would need to be more ambitious at school. I therefore did not feel that I was pushed into this decision, but rather that I was backed up and supported in an important moment when I was unable to imagine the potential consequences identified by my father.

When, as part of my father's sabbatical at Bell Labs, we relocated to New Jersey the following year, I was to carry with me an extra bag with all of the relevant science books and workbooks and start studying on my own for the Israeli final exams scheduled for my senior year. I took that heavy bag full of books related to mathematics, chemistry, biology, and physics and put it under the bed in my new home in New Providence, New Jersey, where it stayed for a full year before returning to Israel untouched. I may have occasionally opened a book and read a page or two and then put it away again. The pages were unintelligible, and I found them difficult to follow without help. This bag of books was an always present sense of burden that I could not really shake and a hint to my future in the workplace.

Nevertheless, after returning to Israel for my final high school year, my parents agreed to my request for personal tutoring in all of these school subjects, and I completed the exams and ended up with a very good diploma that got me into most of the optional BA classes I wanted to attend at Haifa University. These classes included psychology, law, economics and business, which are notoriously difficult to get accepted into in Israel. It ended up being a journey of some frustration, mixed with inspiring and interesting moments which generated the feeling that I could succeed in anything I put my mind to. In this important milestone my father evoked the cultural narrative of the high achiever, a gesture that contributed greatly to the construction of my own identity as a high achiever throughout my life.

During these early years, my work ethic towards entrepreneurship was already starting to take form. At the onset of this choice of studies, I started to feel the burden of the need to achieve.

The aggregated impact of the culture of my country and the values of my family upon my expectations of how to influence at work were set right there. When I later found myself in multiple work situations in which a manager would brush me off (along with the work of

Human Resources or Organisational Consulting) as irrelevant for the business he or she needed to conduct, the 'Entrepreneur' would jump right in to 'create the demand'. This resulted in me turning away from experience and relational aspects, and instead focusing my attention on the task at hand and on achieving. Little attention was paid to the way my own identity was being shaped and questioned by each relationship, or to how, by leveraging entrepreneurship and focusing upon a task, I was attempting to self-confirm and build my identity and power as a professional.

In *Rethinking Management*, Mowles (2011) describes this attitude as part of the dominant managerial discourse in organisations and the resultant reluctance of leaders, managers, and management consultants to step back and pay attention to the negotiation of power and the strong feelings that are provoked in different organisational contexts.

2. Psychology is a science, right?

I was largely interested in the human psychology professions, perhaps because the focus on achievement and results left me with some unresolved questions about human interactions, relationships, and feelings. Therefore, I chose to study psychology and to professionally develop my understanding of humans and, perhaps unconsciously, also of myself and my close relationships. What was on offer during my psychology studies was an opportunity to become more aware of the importance of relations between people, as well as an exploratory field for developing what drove and motivated me.

In my BA years at university, the syllabus was very much within the framework of psychology as a science, the science of people. The curriculum was eclectic (ranging from clinical, social, cognitive to behavioural psychology) but the approach was uniform. We were studying scientific experiments and making broad observations and hypotheses about individuals and groups. The underlying assumption was that just as we can observe and control the natural environment, we can also observe and make empirical assumptions and judgments about human nature.

In my second year, I took a practicum at the local mental institution as an exploration of the domain of clinical psychology. My job was to meet on a weekly basis with one of the in-patients, a woman who suffered from schizophrenia. We had weekly group meetings to discuss our insights. Although I fulfilled the work diligently for a full year, never missing a meeting with the patient or the support group, I distinctly remember meeting with the clinical psychologist who led the practicum at the end of the year and sharing with her that I did not really connect with the work of clinical psychology. Looking back, it was reflective of my perception that an

encounter with a person – one person – does not have much impact on what I considered ‘the big world’. I later encountered this approach amongst many managers in organisations who would measure their impact levels according to the size of the groups they were leading.

There is another aspect to this story, namely that interacting with this in-patient posed a psychological difficulty for me, possibly because it reflected the possibility of failure in life. She was an older woman (45 or so) who had lost her family due to illness, and she obsessively requested me to take her to her old neighbourhood in the city to see her house and family that she claimed were still there. It was frightening and sad, but I could not connect personally or acknowledge my own feelings. Instead, I focused intently on her and on what I could do to support her. In my world (family settings, at school, even with friends), expressing feelings and enabling the dilemmas and question marks was frowned upon, and engaging with experiences was not practiced, as up to that time the focus was always upon looking forwards and outwards. A lot of the focus of my personal development and identity-building journey has been learning to be introspective and come to terms with my feelings, emotions and worries without being terrorised by what I might find. I have also worked to open myself to new experiences, as perhaps focusing on the abstract notion of ‘system’ as impersonal, distant, big and intriguing was a way of escaping anxiety in my earlier years.

Thus, the emergence of what I labelled as the ‘systems’ approach in my thinking seemingly lessened the importance of the individual and placed the focus on the abstract and impersonal. However, this was contradicted by the centrality of the individual as an entrepreneur and shaper that I grew up embodying. This duality is built into Western society, starting with the Kantian notion of human beings as part of a deterministic nature governed by natural laws like all other beings, and at the same time unique in that we are free beings who can chose our own goals using reason. Traces of the duality of (individual) free will and (systemic) determinism can be found right at the onset of systems thinking at the age of reason where the organisation was thought of ‘as if’ it was a living breathing entity with a will, and at the same time the rational autonomous individual making choices and controlling her destiny (Griffin 2002). I was oblivious to this duality most of my career, taking for granted the ‘both... and...’ approach and treating the system as an idealised and whole entity to be dissected and ‘improved’.

Having completed my BA, I started working at various administrative positions in the Haifa technology hub. This was one of the first technology centres to emerge in Israel, a country that would soon become a ‘start-up nation’ with many hubs across the country. I remember the huge and spectacular Intel buildings where, as a student, I worked in the photocopying room, and I felt right at home in that technological environment, even though I was never a technologist. I liked the people, who seemed smart and gentle but rather cynical, the environment that was upscale and comfortable with its multiple innovations such as the awe-inspiring computerised calendar one of the engineers was using while stating boldly that this

was the calendar of the future, when everyone was using paper calendars. My gravitation towards the world of technology can also be explained in its magnetic pull to connect me with my father's world and get closer to him despite not being an engineer. I later found myself in technology organisations for most of my career, and I still practice my profession in the technology sector today.

An MA in psychology in Israel is a must if you want to practise any form of psychology, as the BA is considered more of an introduction. I therefore decided to continue my organisational psychology studies to obtain my master's degree. I had heard of an interesting programme at the University of Nottingham, UK, and so, with my parents' blessing, I registered to a one-year full time M.Sc. programme in Occupational Psychology. This was another example of 'the sky is the limit, just dare to dream' as my parents at the time had to make a significant financial effort to sponsor my studies and living costs.

My year at Nottingham was one of the best years I can remember. Although I was already married at that time (my husband was at medical school in Israel and so we had decided that I would relocate to Nottingham alone and he would visit part of the time on a student exchange programme), I was young, free, unable to work as I had no work visa, and, most importantly, I was studying interesting material that resonated deeply. I fell in love with Occupational Psychology. It seemed to fulfil so many of my longings all at the same time – it was about the psychology of people, yet it was all about quantification of human behaviour, statistical assumptions, personal assessments, and typologies that seemed to make simple sense of human behaviour and stay away from the confusion and conflict of emotions and feelings. It was presented as a science like any other, and I thrived on that at the time.

Whereas medicine and engineering were the most valued and prestigious practical professions based on scientific method, psychology was always regarded as lesser, as something prone to interpretation and that was not accurate or formulaic. Here was a way to frame psychology in a way that made it seem scientific in the sense of simple linear equations that work, very much in keeping with my preference for scientific prestige and non-personal interaction. This is termed by Mowles (2011) as a body of realist literature that assumes there is a world 'out there' that we can come to know as objective, individual observers and which can be controlled towards specific ends that we can identify in advance and manipulate.

I later learned that in the workplace there is a dissonance between these predictive formulas and the actual behaviour of people, and that these practices and tools do not always yield the anticipated results. In retrospect, I can now see that much of the branding of modern management theories as sciences may have developed in an attempt to control an organisation's results within a highly complex, volatile, and uncontrollable environment, and at the same time contributed to the recognition of the professional groups associated – managers,

management consultants, HR professionals. I personally benefited from embracing the notion of organisational psychology as a science, and it also helped manage the perception of my parents, friends, and colleagues.

I conducted my M.Sc. research project in London, at the Chase Manhattan Bank. As part of their Human Resources department, they had a Head of Psychology (I realise now it was the Organisational Development (OD) department) that partnered with the university to promote research projects for the bank. I distinctly remember looking at the head psychologist with such admiration and awe. In my mind, it was a dream job. Later, when I did this same job at NICE Systems as the Head of Global Organisation Development, I could recognise why that same individual seemed mostly worried and overwhelmed in our interactions with him.

As I was many years later, he was trying to implement scientific numerical linear tools in an attempt to solve significant people and performance issues and was in a constant struggle with actual people who were trying to leverage and gain from these tools in a productive manner but were not always convinced. I had overlooked the exhausting, confusing and overwhelming nature of living within these organisations in general, and more so in trying to implement change techniques in the expected way according to the acceptable discourse. The project assigned to me was to assess the bank's performance review system quantifiably and qualitatively and to suggest improvements.

This was 1997, a time that seemed to me to be the peak of performance appraisal systems as a catch-all driver of decision-making related to people. I interviewed many people in the bank, ran a questionnaire, and went ahead to aggregate my assessment, and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it. I thrived on the ability to complete this analysis and my analytical capabilities emerged as a strong backbone of my future contribution at work. I also flourished in my ability to bring together multiple and diverging individual perspectives into one, seemingly cohesive set of 'organisational recommendations' that can provide a solution. This moment of connecting the individual and the whole posed a kind of solution to my career. It seemed that I could practice a kind of science that I liked and that I could contribute to. It was a science in the sense that it strove to look at phenomena in an objective and scientific way, yet it was broad and endless in nature as it pertained to large groups and was centred around people and their nature. It involved high conceptual and analytical thinking yet required no theoretical mathematics, no physics, no chemistry, and no computer programming.

3. If it is a science, why is it not linear and straightforward?

Looking back at my implicit understanding of system and systemic processes during my years at university and later in my work, I can now identify the taken-for-granted influence of the cybernetics and cognitive approaches that form the foundation of today's management discourse, importing the engineering notion of control into understanding human activity. The cybernetic approach to organisations regards the organisation as a goal-seeking entity that strives to adapt to its environment by having constant negative feedback from an outside regulator fed back into the organisation in the belief that the self-regulated system will correct itself and resume equilibrium and progress towards the pre-defined goals. The cognitive approach assumes linear and computable thought processes and decision-making that integrates well with the cybernetic approach to drive systematic goal achievement (Stacey, 2011).

The focus on numerical and statistical data that drives decision-making and the implicit lower interest in the individual interaction interprets behaviour inside the organisation as less relevant. This underlying philosophy was manifested strongly throughout my interactions within organisations, but I failed to notice it as such and instead focused on the humanistic approaches that at the time were the prevalent ideas used in the professional OD community. These approaches strove to tie personal choice, motivation, and engagement to organisational success.

After completing my UK studies, I returned to Israel armed with my personal version of a solution to a professional career direction, ambitious and ready to 'conquer the world'. I started working as a junior consultant in a small privately-owned management consulting firm but quickly realised that I did not enjoy the role very much, and so I started looking for a position within an organisation that I thought would enable me to build experience and credibility should I choose to practise consulting in the future. Looking back now, I imagine that this choice may also reflect my need to be part of an intimate group or 'in circle'.

I chose the Israeli army (IDF – Israel Defence Force) as my starting point, as it was known to be relatively highly developed in the behavioural sciences and OD. I was hired to the army's Division of Behavioural Sciences as a civilian. At that time, the IDF were placing OD Consultants in all logistical units, and I was placed as the first ever OD Consultant in the army's logistical transportation unit. This was a national unit spread across the country that the other army units leveraged to transport forces and goods from place to place. The unit had thousands of trucks and semi-trailers, the drivers were the core unit professionals, there was a driving school, and more. As one can imagine, this was an extremely male-oriented environment. The head of the unit was a colonel. This was his final job in the army, and he was older than my father. His

leadership team was a group of older men, lieutenant colonels that never really regarded women as professionals or considered the aspect of organisational development as a legitimate part of work to be owned by a professional with OD expertise. My job was to set up an organisational psychology unit that would drive learning by surveys and assessment, leadership development at all ranks, and organisational assessment and improvement. I was placed as part of the leadership team reporting to the colonel and worked side-by-side with his leadership team of lieutenant colonels. My initial response was somewhat naively matter of fact, as I had not considered the multiple constraints I would soon encounter.

As part of the very elaborate training that I received in the army behavioural unit, the concept of the OD consultant as an external observer into the system that they support was stressed as a cornerstone of the ability to impact that system. Our job was to be emotionally detached observers who would provide tools, processes and recommendations for organisational improvement. The theoretical training and expectations of the role sat well with my previous studies, although they turned out not to sit very well with the reality I encountered in the field.

The group of leaders running the army's transportation unit made it as difficult as possible for me to implement any method at all. However, by sticking it out I learned quite a few things about myself and about how people can affect each other in work settings. A couple of examples give a good indication of my learning:

During my first encounter with one of the lieutenant colonels on the leadership team, and as part of a larger discussion with a group of the unit's leaders, I explained what my mandate was and how I was planning to get to know this logistics transportation unit and its mission and business in order to support organisational improvement. His answer was: 'Great that we have a consultant on the team! But why are you not wearing shorter trousers? You're beautiful!' I was 27 years old and did not have much experience with this kind of environment – I had lived a largely shielded life in the technology town of Haifa where very few gender references were made. Later in life I realised that up until the birth of my first son two years later, at the age of 29, I was not really aware that being a woman held any significance in the world or that it would impact upon anything I desired to do.

Although my home was rather traditional, my parents had always indicated that, as an individual, I could make the choice of what I wanted to be and how I wanted to live. This incident was a blunt indication that I may have been wrong in my assumptions. I was furious and dumbstruck by the comment, and I could not come up with a smart response to re-balance my position. I may have found an elegant way to set it aside and moved on with a smile, as I was taught at home, disregarding the experience and its potential meaning. In hindsight, I can see that me introducing a potentially threatening area of work may have triggered some

anxiety in the group. This, coupled with my young age and gender relative to the entire group, had a strong influence over my ability to work with them professionally as an equal.

After some time in that unit in which, despite their glaring distrust and lack of support, I kicked off a few initiatives and established the domain of organisational consulting, I brought a set of survey results to a discussion in a weekly leadership team meeting and attempted to present some disturbing data to the team. The data related to internal service within the unit's many sub-units. The response rate to the survey I had conducted was just short of 30% and at the time I didn't realise that this was considered a good response rate for such surveys. Instead, I felt that the data wasn't robust enough but decided to go ahead anyway and use it, as my instinct told me that the data was reflective of people's feedback and therefore worthy of being surfaced. The minute that the first data slide appeared, everyone in the room started attacking the data, attacking me, posing strong objections to what I was showing, and generally making comments that I interpreted as undermining the premise of my role and authority as an expert. The head colonel, who, up until now, was relatively accepting and supportive of the new concepts I had brought to the table, must have felt some risk or just sensed the anxiety in the room, and he sided with them. The presentation ended abruptly mid-session and the meeting disassembled. This was a hard hit for me and after some conversation with my mentor in the professional psychology unit, who reflected that objections are a normal part of the profession and that it was not personal at all, I went home, got into bed and had a mini breakdown for a few days.

For me, a breakdown was temporarily giving up my 'happy face' while giving myself time to reflect and feel emotional pain. I did not get up the next day and go to work to start yet another project. Upon reflection, it felt very personal indeed, yet at the time I honestly didn't grasp how, as my wise mentor had advised me, it could not be personal. The humiliation in front of the entire group, the lack of support by the head colonel, my inability to gain professional recognition despite the substantial effort I put in. It took me a week to show up at work again after rationalising my feelings and making a conscious decision to tough it out. I was learning about power and how acceptance by the group is a critical factor in any individual's success in a group setting. That incident along with others also helped me unbundle some of what seemed to be my apprehension of male authority. This perhaps stemmed from my relationship with my father, who was quite emotionally volatile and had occasional outbursts of anger, yet at the same time tended not to communicate and verbalise or share his feelings, although they were very present in our family life.

My resultant attitude towards men of authority was somewhat timid. This incident helped me identify my disposition and later conduct myself independently as a strong professional in the face of resistance of any kind – male or female. It took many years, but this was my starting point. Later, as I developed as a professional, I was more able to discern when group processes

were at play and what my role in the group may have represented. I desperately wanted to succeed but I didn't realise that I was coming in with a set of quite 'heavy lifting' tools that attempted to predict, (and even control) human behaviour, for example, by measuring performance, or psychometric tools that enabled people to assess each other's behaviour and contribution. I took this approach for granted, having been indoctrinated by the dominant managerial approach that this was the way to drive organisational advancement and success. I also perhaps wasn't attuned to the apprehension these tools would arouse in people and didn't know how to interpret the apprehension in an effective manner and work with it. Since my approach and the toolkit that came along with it were perceived as a given, I altered my interpretation of organisational reality and concluded that to work in this profession means dealing with resistance and objections at all times, and that sometimes these tools yielded no results or different results to the ones I expected, and at different times than planned for.

My first son was born two years later, and after my maternity leave, I decided not to return to the IDF. An opportunity arose to join an up-and-coming technology company called Drone (pseudo name) as an HR Consultant, and I found my way back to the familiarity of a technology environment.

Starting with my first role in the technology industry at this global software company (where I ended up spending almost 12 years), and for the entirety of my professional career thereafter, I was unconsciously working under assumptions of some combination of the approaches of strategic choice theory and the learning organisation. According to strategic choice theory (Stacey, 2011), the rational and objective leader's role is to set strategies for the organisation and plan their execution by designing structures, goals and process that enable accurate implementation by others. The organisation focuses on the implementation of the vision and values of the leader and her management team as a means for success. People in the organisation simply implement, and the role of the leader is to stay detached, assess, measure and control the results. In this theory, much emphasis is placed on leadership, analysis and the formulation of future strategy, vision and forward-looking goals and plans. The experience of individuals is less emphasised in this approach. The learning organisation approach, on the other hand, is more humanistic and is best represented by the work of Peter Senge (1990), who stipulates that the strategic development of organisations could be better understood as arising in processes of learning. Senge believes that an organisation excels when it can tap the commitment and capacity of its members to learn. He identifies five disciplines required for an organisation that can truly learn and adapt strategically – systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning.

These approaches appealed to me as they provided a simplified model of influence and a promise of success if one simply followed the prescribed approach. Senge's approach seemed

to empower and enable everyone in the organisation by focusing on deep learning, and by motivating and connecting people towards a shared vision and goals.

However, when the overall experience of day-to-day life was one of confusion and uncertainty and the blame inevitably fell on a lack of leadership, a lack of strategic direction or a break in communications, there was still no questioning of the underlying assumptions. This phenomenon is explained by Stacey (2011) as part of the deeply engrained managerial discourse in organisations. Operating within these assumptions, and even though the work was a daily struggle, I continued to soldier on, assuming that part of the profession of human resources and change management is “dealing with objections”. This continued positivity and push for results in the face of continuous adversity and objections can be understood in what is termed by Han in ‘The Burnout Society’ as “achievement society”. To Han, achievement society, more and more, is in the process of discarding negativity, as it is being abolished by increasing deregulation. Unlimited CAN is the positive model verb of achievement society. Its plural form, the affirmation, "Yes, we can", epitomises the achievement society’s positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. Disciplinary society is still governed by no, and its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers (Han, 2015).

I desperately wanted to be a winner, and that meant positivity at all costs. I approached my work by striving to consult, coach and facilitate results that seemed to be what ‘the organisation, the whole’ needed, as expressed by the leader and group of leaders I was working with in each role. Drone was largely a software services company, providing the largest global telecommunications companies in the world with their billing and customer relations management (CRM) software. The company implemented large-scale projects that were at the heart of the customers’ ability to manage and bill their users in the height of cellular voice communications. The end result of this business environment was a brutal employee culture driven by results and task orientation, where projects must succeed at any cost. In a world of multiple failed systems implementations, Drone systems ‘always delivered’ (that was the slogan for many years – ‘we deliver’). Consequently, employees were expected to do whatever it took in the service of ‘the system’. People were expected to be available 24/7, and they were. Anyone who had a problem with this approach was replaced by somebody more motivated. Everyone was expendable in the service of a successful project that yielded millions to the company. Performance management and control systems were implemented, and the infamous bell curve weeded out bottom performers who did not contribute enough. In my first role there, I was an HR business partner, negotiating the managers’ needs with the needs of the organisation. Using humanistic tools of organisational learning somewhat blurred the underlying repression and brutality. It seemed that for a long time I and the people around me felt like ‘pawns on a chess board’ being played by ‘the system’. The system was its own entity,

different from any single individual, and there was nothing paradoxical or unclear in this view, it seemed natural. Keeping positive and finding ways to say YES was the expected norm. Given the never-ending dissatisfaction of employees and managers around me in such an environment, I perceived myself as a saviour, a mediator, someone who could convince people that by complying to the needs of the organisation, we would all succeed on a personal level and develop. Interestingly, I interpreted my own task-orientated approach as a personal inclination towards achievement and results, something that I brought from my home and society, and wasn't completely aware of the multiple layers at play.

My final role at Drone was quite significant, as I was nominated Director of HR for the global Product Business group. This was a group of 4000 people, and I personally had a staff of 30 reporting to me on consulting and change management. After a few years in the customer and sales domains, I returned to the R&D side of the map again. Our leadership team was based in the US, Europe, Israel and a large site in India. This was my first senior role, and I considered it a more 'strategic' role with an opportunity to make more of a personal impact. It also enabled my first meaningful experience with trying to implement strategy, and in what I can now recognise as strategic choice theory. In my first few months in this role, I re-enacted the values and behaviours of my previous customer-facing groups which were more informal, tactical, and intolerant to people's individual needs. This was very different to the new group I joined, much like moving to a new company. I found the approach to be relatively more people-centred, and the innovation focus to be more towards complexity and conceptual thinking, and less towards execution. After my first communications and interactions with the people and teams, I immediately felt that I didn't fit in. The president of that unit told my manager in HR at the time that I may not fit the role as I was too junior and too tactical. She told him that I was one of the best professionals on the HR team and to give me time.

I remember an informal conversation with one of my direct reports in which she told me, rather casually, that I should have chosen a sales or business-oriented role such as Customer Business Executive because I seemed to be business and task-oriented. She said it was surprising to her that I chose to practise Human Resources. My reaction was twofold. I felt proud to practise a business-oriented 'HR' and that I was perceived as someone who could be a direct business contributor to the company. At the same time, I felt somewhat embarrassed that my team member was pointing out that I may be in the wrong profession because I was not very people focused. This was a beginning for me, of starting to notice that my approach was not in line with my professional community's expectations. Here, it was being reflected to me by my own community member identifying me as being on the 'wrong' side of the professional discourse. Ironically, the organisation seemed to reward me and others who were on the 'wrong' side of the discourse and we were consistently promoted to senior roles over time. However, I can now see how detached I was from people's experience all those years, underplaying its

importance in driving the same organisational results I was attempting to achieve through processes and tools.

After some time in this role, an opportunity presented itself that would change my perspective on my work and in general and would help me to better grasp experience and interaction. The company's management noticed the changing leadership needs over time and attempted to initiate a process to build a more rounded leadership approach throughout the company, a classical corporate-led OD programme intended to change behaviour. I can now see the heroics of such an attempt alongside the grandiose approach taken. The emerging typical leadership behaviour in the company was highly directive and centred on pacesetting as well as being task oriented. Drone contracted with a consulting firm called Star (pseudo name) to run a large-scale leadership assessment and development programme. A few of the more seasoned HR Directors were chosen to be trained as a "Star 360 leadership coach" and help with this change effort. We were to go through a Star training on their leadership model and tools. I did not quite realise it at the time, but it turned out that the Star training was, in effect, an assessment centre for us, the potential leadership coaches.

After the training was over, a few of us were told that we had not been certified. The Star coaches picked up on a phenomenon that now seems trivial but that was surprising at the time, that we all had the same leadership characteristics as the other leaders in the company, and this posed a dilemma as to how we could help to alter the way people behaved. I was personally told that I was too focused on my own agenda of obtaining results and wasn't focused enough on the individual in front of me. They showed me that on the values and motives assessment that I took, I was ranked in the 99% percentile on their parameter called 'achievement', which they considered an astonishingly high score (relative to tens of thousands of global leaders in the Star survey), and that this drive was taking away from my focus on people and power relations, the other two core motives in the model. They also showed that my stated value of the importance of people was lower than my innate motive, expressing a gap between my need for affiliation and connection with people (a high need) verses my value of task orientation and lack of people focus (a low expressed need). This really shook me. It was another moment like that little meltdown at IDF, where I was learning something extremely new and important. Looking back at this process from a different perspective and focusing on the fact that all of us in HR were going through a similar process, I can see the ongoing emergence of the HR community at Drone as more focused on experience and connection and as challenging the broader behavioural and value status quo in the company. There was no doubt a movement of my own identity at work, but it was in a larger community context. In *Mind, Self & Society*, G.H. Mead regards the self as a process in which the conversation of gestures has been internalised within an organic form (a human). This process does not exist for itself but is simply a phase of the whole social organisation of which the individual is a part. The

organisation of the social act has been imported into the organism and becomes then the mind of the individual. It still includes the attitudes of others, but now highly organised, so that they become what we call social attitudes rather than roles of separate individuals. This process of relating one's own organism to the others in the interactions that are going on, in so far as it is imported into the conduct of the individual with the conversation of the "I" and the "me," constitutes the self (Mead, 1934). From this perspective, I can see an ongoing development of the HR community which culminated in the Star process in which my identity swayed and was impacted more from the dialogue in my professional community vs. the company wide dialogue.

After some debate, I was given a chance to re-train with a personal coach, who worked with me on this change and ended up certifying me for the role. In those few months I was extremely appreciative of this new perspective, and I distinctly remember sitting with people who brought to the table dilemmas and difficulties and being able to focus on them without constantly driving for my own version of 'results' inside the conversation. It was ground-breaking for me, and my practice as a professional started shifting more rapidly after that experience. It was not long after this that I left Drone, feeling that my personal journey there was complete.

4. What contributes to organisational success? Some questions left unanswered

I started in my current role as Vice President of People at a company called Symphony Edge (pseudonym) in January 2016. This was my first role as Head of Human Resources, part of the executive team, as well as being the first privately owned company I have worked for. Symphony Edge is a growth start-up which is partially funded, meaning that there are incoming revenues, but the company is not profitable yet and is thus dependent on external funding to complement its earnings every year until growth has enabled self-sustainability. I took on this position after an additional five years spent at a large software company as Head of OD, in a role and company that was similar to my work at Drone.

I found Symphony Edge very different to my previous experience. It has a sophisticated data product at the forefront of internet SaaS (software as a service) technology, with multiple big-data challenges.

The company was founded in 2006 but was built on a much simpler product version which it was selling to small companies with a relatively low-price tag. Under that initial model, which was valid until 2015, everything was managed from Israel and operated virtually via the internet.

At the end of 2015, a large investment bank decided to invest in Symphony Edge and replace the CEO and executive team with the assumption that we would transform the company to be able to serve the global enterprise space. The challenge was to grow the product from a small statistical tool to a full data platform, while globalising the company to enable sales and service to the largest enterprises, and at the same time ensuring we were building services and production capabilities that match these top tier customers' expectations. An ambitious transformation was expected by the board of directors and investors within an extremely short timeline.

I was excited to be chosen to fulfil such a role. It fit well with my tendency towards ambitious challenges, and I felt that after the significant experience I had accumulated, and the personal learning that I had had the opportunity to absorb throughout my career in companies who served global enterprises, that I could now bring together everything I knew to make this transformation project a success. Yet again, great expectations were coming into play.

My implicit approach was still quite aligned with the typical managerial discourse in organisations, although I did recognise this by now and was more sensitive to the complexity and multiple factors that impact such a process and the role of everyone within that process. However, I still placed the activity of vision, mission and strategy led by a cohesive management team at the centre of my work, for example, essentially implementing elements of strategic choice theory implicitly. I still had no sense that this approach was a recurrence of things I have done in the past with moderate to no success. When I started to delve into complexity literature, I was surprised to discover detailed descriptions of the exact process we went through at Symphony Edge described as a generic process. It was eye opening to read a generic description of a process that felt so unique and singular to my personal experience when I was a part of it. Stacey describes the process as follows:

“What people usually mean when they talk about the long-term big picture for a whole organisation is a clear view of the purpose of that organisation and the direction in which ‘it’ is intended to move, ‘going forward into the future’, so that its ‘resources’, ‘capabilities’ and ‘competencies’ are ‘optimally’ ‘aligned’ to the sources of competitive advantage in its environment as ‘the way’ to achieve ‘successful performance’. These activities of strategic management are normally taken to be the primary function of an organisation’s ‘leader’, supported by his or her ‘top leadership team’ and it is widely thought that strategic purpose, direction and alignment should be expressed by the leader in an inspiring, easily understood statement of ‘vision and mission’. When those lower down in the organisational hierarchy experience confusion and uncertainty, they frequently blame this on a failure of leadership, a lack of strategic direction on the part

of the top management team, or at the very least a failure to communicate down the hierarchy”

(Stacey 2011, p. 3)

Indeed, our first goal was to ‘build a cohesive leadership team’. Through one of our board members, we came across a book called ‘The Advantage’ by Patrick Lencioni (2012). I have practiced Lencioni’s work on building cohesive teams in the past, but this book seemed to simply articulate everything I had practiced in my career into one concise approach that, if followed and implemented thoroughly, seemingly had the potential to drive endless success and health in any organisation.

In retrospect, when asking myself why I was so attracted to this approach, I believe the attraction lay in the promise of gaining control over a process and the results it may yield. In a business environment of high stakes, the number one goal of any executive on the team is to be able to control the results they are asked or aspire to bring about. Lencioni’s methodology and all other similar models offer a recipe to success that somewhat alleviate anxiety ahead of a very ambitious goal.

We followed chapter one – build a cohesive team, and chapter two – write up a clear mission and strategic pillars, and even some parts of chapters three and four – communicate and over communicate your strategy. However, the further we progressed within the business and organisation transformation, the less control we felt over the process, and the less clarity we had as an executive team on where we would end up and even if we would or would not be successful. As we have evolved and continue to carry out the work we defined together, the inevitable feedback from the employees in the company which pertains to lack of clarity, of strategic alignment or communications, exactly as cited above is endlessly present. Stepping back and reflecting on our work over the last three years, I intuitively feel that there were some significant accomplishments, and I can even point to some of them such as globalising our sales and support organisations and scaling the product, but the day-to-day feeling is of a lack of success, progress which is too slow, and a lack of support and energy from the employees in the company and ultimately from the board of directors.

This last year has been brutal from the perspective of top-line revenues that did not materialise, a product that is suffering growing pains and breaking, and overspending that is not supported by the company’s board, requiring new funding to continue operating. We had to cut back on costs, meaning reducing our head count and controlling expenses, predictably resulting in more loss of trust in the leadership team, increased employee attrition and a feeling of losing control over the organisation and its future. Employees repeat again and again that the vision is not clear, and the strategy is not understood, and solid communication efforts fall on deaf ears.

This all-round crisis was not described in Lencioni's book, and in general, I can see different patterns and processes emerging that were not planned or expected.

Interestingly, the crisis this year, while requiring a reduction in the number of people, did enable some operational and leadership changes that had been discussed in the past but failed to materialise. Now, since there is no choice as new funding may not come in if we do not become more efficient, these changes are coming together more rapidly.

From my personal perspective, I increasingly question our general approach, and in particular my role as the one who is leading the people and culture domain in times of a company in crisis. I see that a lot of the methodology we tried to implement simply did not have the impact we had hoped for. I can also now see more clearly how power struggles between people on the executive team that were not resolved over time have affected the dynamics and results. I can see with more clarity how the dialogue and personal interpretation of what is going on between people in the company is a contributor to the success or lack of it, rather than structured models imposed by the leaders. I can see – and it even strikes me as somewhat comical – that it is not enough to put a model in front of a team in order for them to adhere to that model. This was exactly what we were trying to do with the Lencioni cohesive team model (chapter 1, Lencioni), instead of sensitively managing the responses of some members of the team to that model and what it had represented.

After what feels like a lifelong attempt to figure out what goes on in organisations, I find myself increasingly confused and puzzled, and certainly with a feeling of being less able to control what goes on. I would like to explore the role of the leadership team in organisations, and how inter-relationships and the dynamics in this group affect developments in organisations. In project two, I will dive more deeply into what was going on amongst us, the leadership team of a company in transformation, and what role we played in the journey of the company over the past few years. I would like to explore more specifically my own role as a participant in this team and to make sense of possible ways of contribution as an HR / people domain leader in this type of transformation.

Project 2

Shifting Sands: Exploring Power Relations and Leadership Volatility on an Executive Team

Michal Goldstein

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1. Overview

In this project I will explore the interpersonal relationships between the members of the executive team at 'Symphony Edge' (pseudonym), a global technology company undergoing significant transformation. I will also reflect on my role as the Vice President of Human Resources, a member of this executive team and a key liaison to the CEO. In a context of extreme change and breakdown, I will attempt to examine the relational dynamics in the executive team and my perception of how they developed in the last offsite we had as a team.

As I explore these relational dynamics, I will extract several key themes relating to power dynamics that people in positions of leadership may experience during turbulent times. I will also examine how power relations can change and be manifested in unexpected responses such as scapegoating and open conflict amongst team members. These responses, and the emotions associated with them, are usually kept hidden in day-to-day organisational life. I will, in a general way, explore the topic of masking the impact of emotions and conflict in organisations, and try to bring to the fore some explanations for our tendency to focus on an analytical, rational approach that is centred on measures and results. Drawing on our historical origins as social human beings who needed to collaborate in order to gain more lucrative hunting opportunities, I will show that our need to collaborate and maintain relative harmony in society has evolved in organisations as an art of avoidance of conflict. In exploring some of the relational, unspoken dynamics at Symphony Edge, I will discuss the possibility that conflict avoidance may ultimately backfire as we realise that goals and plans simply fail to materialise as prescribed and that our sense of control as players in organisational life may be misleading. I will attempt to show that although we tend to be rational, suppress all emotion and push ourselves as humans to collaborate, we are, in effect, in an endless power struggle for self-assertion, personal recognition, and the need to be accepted.

As I examine the relations in the executive team from an angle of power and identity, I will also explore my own role as a Human Resources specialist on the team and demonstrate how the expected impartial and objective consultative approach may in fact not be realistic as, just like the other team members, Human Resources consultants share the same need for recognition, acceptance and impact. We are ultimately playing in the same power game, and, even more so than the others, leveraging relationships of power with the CEO and others in positions of power in order to drive our own personal agendas.

In the coming section I will attempt to set the business and organisation context in which we operated as a team at Symphony Edge in the years prior to the above mentioned offsite that I will later share and explore.

2. Setting the context

I joined Symphony Edge just over three years ago as the Vice President of Human Resources, part of the executive team, and reporting to the CEO, Tarun (all names in this project are aliases). This was my first role as HR leader for an executive team. The company had recently received a significant investment intended to turn it from a local Israel-based start-up catering to small and medium businesses, to a global company servicing the world's largest enterprises. As part of this transformation, Tarun was nominated CEO, and during his four years in this role the revenues of the company tripled while the customer base, employee base, the way we were organised, and the way things were done, were completely overhauled.

Looking back on his first months as CEO, optimism was at its highest. Tarun had hired a few new executives, me included, to work with him on this transformation project. Of these new hires, a few were US-based American executives who would be at the forefront of the globalisation change. According to my understanding, globalisation was required as many of the customers and prospects were US Fortune 500 companies, and thus much of the transformation that took place had to focus on adapting the operational structure and employees' mindset and behaviour to the expectations of these customers. For example, customers in the Fortune 500 category expect service on site delivered by local professionals. At the onset of this project, most of our employees were based in Israel, not necessarily working in US time zone-oriented shifts, and most were not native English speakers.

This was a significant undertaking, and even though the team members who Tarun had hired had backgrounds in organisations that were geared at servicing these types of customers, they (and I) did not necessarily realise the magnitude of the project. To most of us on the executive team, it was very clear from the outset that to serve global enterprises we needed to hire local US-based employees, and that this would likely be a pivotal part of the change ahead of us. Many of the Israel-based employees and leadership did not see this need so clearly and were still hoping that the previous business model and associated people relations and roles would remain intact.

I can characterise my mindset at the onset of my experience in this company as very much attuned with my previous work experience over the years. I assumed that there was a book of tools and techniques for change management and organisational development that I could bring to the table and that, together with the new CEO and executive team, would most certainly and quickly connect us together as a team and shortly after drive the success of the company as a whole. I envisioned a rather linear process in which specific activities led by the top team would generate specific and predictable results. I assumed I would have some control over this process of extreme change that we were all a part of.

In parallel, I was also building my reputation as a professional voice of authority on the domain of strategic Human Resources and consulting. Given the dismissive opinions and pre-judgments of many managers about human resources and consulting in an organisational context, I have learned over the years that this is not a simple task.

From this standpoint, it seemed highly advantageous for me to implement what I considered a success-guaranteed approach to organisational change – practical, prescriptive, simple, linear, and concrete. This was manifested in implementing ‘The Advantage’ by Patrick Lencioni (2012). In this book, Lencioni prescribes executive team practices that guarantee a healthy, successful organisation, providing they are ‘well implemented’. This caveat indeed hints at where the complexity lies. One who is unaware of the significant complexity of implementing change may get the impression from reading this book that the phased approach to change management it presents is easy, clean, and one hundred percent guaranteed, if only it is ‘implemented well’. During our transformation, I was approached many times by one of the executive members who told me that we were not implementing our vision well, pointing out gaps and suggesting more communication opportunities or other mechanisms that were designed to ‘fix’ the situation, assuming it is controllable and fixable.

As I was the one who was charged with enabling the ‘Advantage’ methodology and driving this complex transformation from both a people and organisational perspective, I found it helpful that Tarun and I had an immediate and intuitive mutual understanding of what we were trying to achieve together. This understanding, perhaps stemming from somewhat similar histories as Israelis who had lived and worked in the US, was immediately felt from our first meeting in the hiring process where a natural bond emerged, later to strengthen and grow. Tarun, who is an avid organisation development supporter, and who felt that my role and background was a critical component of his and the company’s ability to succeed, gradually involved me in many aspects of the business, either to help drive initiatives or as someone with whom to consult and reflect with on people and functions. A contributing factor for me was Tarun’s efforts to make me feel worthy and listened to as his right-hand person for the transformation project. Unlike with some of my peers on the leadership team, I felt that I had a seat at the table with him from the start.

In hindsight, I recognise the strong influence that Strategic Choice theory had on my work. Strategic Choice, as introduced by Child (1997) and critiqued by Stacey (2011), is a theoretical approach that assumes it is possible for powerful individuals to stand outside of their organisations and model them in order to control their results. This can be done by forming the ‘correct’ strategy and goals, and by specifying in enough detail the overall design of the organisation to enable goal attainment. An underlying belief also rooted in Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1976) is of the rational individual making rational choices and implementing them. I can now see that this was very much the assumption under which the whole team was

operating, with no recognition of how the emotional and relational dynamic was affecting each of us.

As can be expected in any academic study, my perspective on organisational theory shifted during the DMAN program. Applying the complex responsive lens, I started seeing some of the theoretical stances that I implicitly worked with in companies over the years and giving them new interpretations. For example, I noticed the continuous tendency to simplify work in organizations and attributed this need to the multitude of influencing parameters that create an intense and often conflict-inducing day-to-day experience. Simplifying and building a sense of control is a key method to manage this complexity. Driving 'clarity' and 'simplification' via processes such as those described in Lencioni's work is appealing in their promise for gaining control over an uncontrollable situation. In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998) describes how certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision, thus bringing into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex reality. According to Scott, this view of selective reality enables a degree of control and manipulation. Instilling management-driven processes (such as creation of vision and values) gives the managing team the illusion of control and thus allegedly enables the building of influence and power. Paradoxically, this type of conduct by top teams implicitly excludes other participants and can create the serious side effect of hostility and disengagement on the part of everyone in the organisation, disrupting any effort for materialising a top-down change. Stacey (2011) describes what happens when the expected goals and visions fail to materialise, and when those lower down in the organisational hierarchy experience uncertainty and confusion. What they usually do is blame this on a failure of leadership, a lack of strategic direction on the part of the top management team, or at the very least on a failure to communicate down the hierarchy. Indeed, in this case too, I felt the project was failing in this way or another most of the time and this shift of perspective enabled me to search for other ways to approach these issues. However, this is not meant to imply that complex responsive process theory represents an answer to all organisational theorising but rather that it has been helpful for me at this time.

In parallel, my alliance with Tarun certainly influenced my work and made it more difficult for me to establish my relationships with others on the team as an 'impartial' HR professional, as is expected in our profession. Doing what I typically do when I trust and respect authority, I can see now how I positioned myself as the trusted partner who helped him influence. At the same time, perhaps, I was also leveraging our relationship to ensure my position was secure and that I maintained a seat at the table and a level of influence over the team. Over time, a lack of separateness in roles and perspectives between Tarun and I emerged as we consulted and worked together day-to-day. Although I recognise this pattern now, I was not fully aware at the time of how this may have impacted my work and how our close partnership may have been perceived by our colleagues.

Thus, a side effect of my close partnership with Tarun was that I was immediately challenged by my colleagues as we started our shared journey as a team. I assumed that they resisted my involvement in various projects because they considered my role as being purely administrative and/or an interference in their autonomy as managers. I was blind to my own role in fostering this, and to the role of the power play between all of us on the executive team, as we struggled to position ourselves as key participants on the team, especially in the eyes of the CEO.

As I reflect on my work at Symphony Edge, I can see the significant relational influences that were at play, but that were not necessarily recognised as such at the time. A useful way of thinking about and exploring strategy and organisational dynamics is that of Complex Responsive Processes, an approach that has been developed over more than twenty years by Stacey et. al. (Stacey, 2011; Griffin, 2002), and that sees humans as fundamentally and inescapably interdependent.

The central theoretical perspective of Complex Responsive Process is that the organisation is nothing more and nothing less than patterns of interaction between people. Strategy is considered as social processes of interaction between people, in which their very identities emerge. The content of strategy is considered as patterns of interaction, and therefore strategy is all about sustaining and changing the identities of involved individuals.

From this perspective, leading change lends itself to a deeper understanding of social aspects of life that move away from visions and prescriptions and focus on what happens in the day-to-day interactions between individuals.

In *Rethinking Management*, Mowles develops a perspective on change leadership:

Social life does not proceed predictably and according to anyone's choosing, no matter how powerful they are. Instead, daily communicative interactions between highly social interdependent selves produce continuity and the potential for change both at the same time (Mowles 2011, p. 89).

Indeed, when we embarked on our journey together at Symphony Edge, we did not anticipate what would eventually transpire. Over time, while continuing to see growth and momentum, we encountered a gradually increasing cost base and were spending more funds than anticipated by our investors. In parallel, significant product difficulties gradually slowed the company's growth. In the final year, these trends led to a downturn in revenue growth, prompting the need to drastically reduce costs and eliminate any associated difficulties. This culminated in Tarun's agreed departure, initiated by the board of directors and ultimately leading to the nomination of a new CEO and the sale of the company to a competitor at a lower-than-expected value. This significantly impacted us as a leadership team, in our relationship with Tarun and with each other towards the end of our work as a team under his leadership. After replacing both VPs of Product and R&D, and later replacing the CFO too, and

yet continuing to experience difficulties, it became abundantly clear that we could not continue much longer in this formation.

In the next section, I will explore the dynamics in our last leadership offsite led by Tarun, which took place a couple of months prior to his leaving Symphony Edge. The narrative will be an entry point to exploring leadership, survival and power in work teams, and why we avoid emotions at all costs and defer to the rational as an almost automatic managerial stance of business making.

3. Narrative: ‘Truthful Team’

Mentioned in the narrative:

- Tarun..... CEO, Israel-based
 - Amir..... VP Strategy, US-based, owns ‘Skunkworks’
 - Evan..... VP Sales, US-based, owns ‘Skunkworks’
 - George..... Chief Marketing Officer, US-based
 - Sergei..... Chief Finance Officer, Israel-based, new
 - Gene..... VP Research & Development, Israel-based, new
 - Michal..... VP Human Resources, Israel-based
-

We started late, at around noon, a decision that Tarun made the night before as we were finishing a long day with the potential new investors in a restaurant after dinner. He approached me at the end of the dinner and asked if ‘it was all right’ to start late the next day due to the intense two days, saying we were all very tired and he wanted to come prepared to his opening session tomorrow. It felt as if the ownership of the offsite was with me rather than him, as he requested permission rather than making a decision, reflecting the lack of separation in our relationship and perhaps his weaker leadership position at that point in time. I enjoyed being consulted with and feeling significant, but I also felt impatient. Part of me considered that this was precious time lost, yet I was also relieved. I had no idea what we were going to be doing anyway as it was not as organised as our usual, structured offsites. We had invested in quite a few preparation meetings to discuss what could be effective in our specific context, and yet I personally felt under-prepared. It seemed to me that we were colluding and stalling, and that neither of us really wanted to start that offsite at all. Rather than returning the responsibility right back to Tarun, or pointing out what I was thinking, I said ‘Sure, why not?’, feeling simply relieved. I went ahead and called my team to rearrange the later start, possibly

reflecting that I was tired and most likely demotivated. Later, my behaviour during the entire offsite would also carry some of this tone. At this point, I may already have lost some confidence in Tarun's leadership although I would never have admitted this to myself as I was always loyal and supportive.

The next morning, I arrived earlier than the others to ensure the place was all set and everything prepared. The location was in an industrial area in the south of town with no parking, and the directions we had been given on how to get there were poor. I arrived at the venue feeling perplexed, only to find a beautiful studio perfectly set up and full of sunshine. I immediately relaxed. Tarun arrived around thirty minutes before the offsite was due to start, very angry that there was no parking and snappy that the place was in such an awkward location. The staff made him coffee and he started to relax. As we sat down on the couch to prepare, he said he has not given a single thought to the offsite since we last talked, that he was unprepared and thought we should have skipped this altogether, because of all the funding issues and investment activity in the background.

It felt uncomfortable to be starting the offsite in this way, and Tarun's apparent lack of preparation and general low level of control made me feel almost desperate, as if there was no hope for us if our CEO was not ready. At the same time, I almost felt sorry for him that he had to go through all this turmoil of board battles, budget issues (we barely had two more payrolls left), recent employee layoffs, multiple investment meetings, and now this offsite, as if business was as usual. Did I push him to do this offsite? Am I 'guilty' of creating the situation? At this point in our working relationship, I was not sure about who was influenced and who was influencing, but I knew for sure that I personally felt we should get together as a team. In the weeks leading up to the offsite, I had shared with him some of the disjointedness we all felt on the team recently, with three new members, a lot of turbulence, and few opportunities to come together and share perspectives.

People soon started arriving, getting coffee, and chatting amicably. Finally, we sat around the table and started the offsite. Leading up to this day, Tarun and I had conducted multiple exploration sessions in which the topic of truth telling was at the centre. Tarun felt that our attempts to date to build trust between the team members and effectively tackle difficult issues had failed. I tended to agree with him at the time. As I was the one who owned the change methodology and who pushed us to invest in 'building a cohesive team' and working 'harmoniously' together, I felt somewhat responsible. One of the key realisations for Tarun was that we did not speak directly and honestly with each other. Tarun labelled this 'truth telling' and identified it as the missing link in our work as a team.

Indeed, just as I have frequently observed in previous roles, we had not been very frank with each other up to this point in time. Each time we were direct, the disagreements would bubble

up, an extensive and emotional argument would start, and Tarun would shut down the discussion.

Tarun opened the day.

His opening presentation contained a lot of his own reflections on how we should work better as a team and what he as the leader wanted to personally change too. I was already familiar with the content as he had shared his thoughts and some of the slides with me while we were preparing a week previously. These slides contained his reflections on us not being truthful enough as a team in the past, on how decisions were muffled or not taken due to persisting disagreements, and how he personally contributed to these issues as the leader. However, Tarun skipped this entire slide set and simply shared the agenda. To my surprise, no vulnerability was shared in the opening, with Tarun instead simply stating that he wanted to be open and honest in this offsite. He then went directly into business matters.

The first session after the opening focused on the financial plan for the upcoming year, assuming the next investment round came in. It was led by Sergei, the CFO, and it was a relatively uneventful and informative business session that revolved around numbers. The second session was supposed to be about the product roadmap, however, something happened which I cannot quite recall, and the discussion suddenly and inexplicably landed on an old unresolved issue that we had discussed multiple times in the past.

Tarun suddenly swooped into centre stage, seemingly taking his first opportunity to start a 'truthful' discussion. What followed can well be defined as a moment of parrhesia, in which Tarun, for the first time in years, put most of the people in the room at extreme unease with some 'honest truth'.

The off-rail topic concerned several of our people, each reporting to a different executive team member, who were supposed to develop "skunkworks", or out-of-the-product functionality that we could easily bring to our customers and prospects while the main product was suffering from multiple issues and delays in delivery and was not producing innovation fast enough. We had talked about setting up this team centrally for a while, with one leader and ample resources, but it never materialised and was never discussed in depth due to the utter lack of agreement on the topic. The result was that the specific individuals who were tasked with this type of work were working alone, receiving no support, reporting to different managers, and, consequently, they were unsuccessful.

Tarun started the conversation by complaining about each one of these people individually, by name, and on a very personal level. He asserted that they were given multiple opportunities but never delivered, that they had no idea about the true complexity of our product, and that they were simply not good professionals and not smart enough. This was quite shocking for two main reasons: firstly, there was the length and level of criticism and dissatisfaction that Tarun

expressed, and on such a personal level. He talked for a long time, expressing his disappointment and anger at these individuals in a way that sounded much broader than just the specific group of people he was referring to, all of whom were not present or able to defend their position. It was as if the entire product struggle that we had experienced over the past two years was placed on the backs of a few contributors who, in my opinion, had no real way of succeeding. Secondly, most of these people were solution architects or consultant-like product experts reporting to the US-based teams, to Evan, our VP of Sales, and to Amir, our Business Development VP, whom Tarun usually protected and supported endlessly in public forums, and whose opinion mattered considerably.

Tarun was suddenly speaking as if on behalf of our previous VPs of Product and R&D, both of whom had left not long after the miserable failure of the product. Although they were no longer on the team, Tarun was voicing their frustration with the customer-facing teams. He was long-winded in his criticism of this group, and very loud. I could tell that it was difficult for him, but it seemed that he had made up his mind to 'tell his truth'. The entire discussion seemed to have an element of being out of control.

I felt uncomfortable with the tone and the personal allegations, but I certainly wanted this topic to be resolved once and for all, and so I was glad it was finally being aired. However, it did seem as if the pendulum had swung from the 'pleasant and controlled' to the 'not so pleasant and uncontrolled'.

Once Tarun had finished his piece, a long and tiring argument ensued, in which each person had to argue how their own people were doing great work and that the others were wrong. This discussion was conducted primarily between Tarun and the three customer-facing VPs – Evan, Amir and George. Each person spoke loudly and at length, trying to indirectly and respectfully negate Tarun's assertions, which took time. The others spent most of the time quietly observing and taking in the dynamics.

Amir, who already managed one of these technical solutions professionals, offered to take on the entire team so everyone would be reporting to him. Evan's reaction followed Tarun's 'truth telling' lead, as he said that he was absolutely certain this would not work since Amir had not even delivered the basics thus far, had no time to reach out to anyone, was never available, was never communicative, was not there when people needed him, and was too busy with the funding activity. Evan asked how Amir could possibly manage the skunkworks team. Evan even told Amir directly to his face that 'everyone hated him'. Amir naturally seemed shocked and offended. Until that moment, it had seemed as if Evan was backing and supporting his work, and he was sure that they were allies. He did not see this coming but kept his composure and wanted to listen and understand more. The power battle was on, as everything was out in the open.

This was not a typical discussion, and, despite trying several times, I found it difficult to get a word in. I tried to say that I believed the lack of success of skunkworks was not the fault of those individuals but rather due to a broader issue that we as a team needed to solve, and that I resented the current discussion of these individuals as they had not done anything wrong. This openly challenged Tarun, and yet still held on to the fantasy of harmony and a 'cohesive team' in that we could speak honestly but in a productive and civil way. After a break and an attempt to move forward to design a solution, I also tried to help facilitate coming to a decision on who out of the various individuals who were doing this type of work would lead this team. Should we to set it up rather than keeping the group in separate parts of the company. This discussion was a total failure as each team member wanted their manager to lead the group, and it seemed that no one was ready to look for solutions or to give up the need to control such a team on their own. I felt as if I had no real voice in this discussion or an ability to impact the new dynamics that developed.

The discussion was being managed by Tarun and there was no external facilitator to rein it in. In that moment, truth telling on our team seemed to go along with heightened emotional expression and a significant emotional toll.

Finally, Tarun concluded that Amir would gather the team for a two-day offsite with Gene, the new VP R&D, and they would define the team's charter. He said that we could agree on a leader later. The day ended quietly, and I felt somewhat reflective. The relationship between Evan and Amir was shattered for now and would take time to recover. Tarun and Evan seemed relieved to have shouted at each other in disagreement. There was low confidence in the 'solution' of Amir doing the exploration and coming back with recommendations for decision making. Everyone knew it would never materialise.

4. Power and follower dynamics in leadership positions

The management offsite described above occurred at a volatile and hectic time, merely two months prior to Tarun leaving his role as CEO after close to four years of leadership. Much was at stake, and while we tried to be optimistic and believe that our work with the potential investors would bring in new funding, we also felt extremely anxious and uncertain that this would be the case. Some of the impact of this extreme uncertainty and volatility was manifested in the power relationships that unravelled on the executive team during the offsite, as we were struggling to construct meaning about each other and the situation at hand. As CEO, Tarun was in a difficult position due to the potential loss of his authority, although this had already started in the months prior to the offsite. It was felt by all but not necessarily voiced or acknowledged in any way on the team, as we all highly respected him.

In the next section, I will explore a few possible interpretations of the power dynamics between the team members in the offsite and touch on phenomena that impacted Tarun's leadership and can more generally influence people in positions of leadership.

4.1 Defining power

“Power is the probability that an actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will, regardless of the basis on which that probability rests”

(Max Weber 1968, pp. 15-16)

According to Weber, social power is the power to command. In this context, we usually think of control over resources and a socially structured hierarchy of power. However, in 'The Politics of Uncertainty', Peter Marris (1996) explores the relationship between Weber's power and conditions of uncertainty, and points out that in the face of uncertainty, room to manoeuvre may be as critical as the resources one controls. Reflecting on our team at Symphony Edge, although formal authority was in our hands as the top team, and purportedly at the CEO's disposal, it felt at times that our room for manoeuvre was limited. Specifically, during this offsite we were all aware of our significant operational issues, that we had no funding, and that the attempt to secure new funds was the final chance for a turnaround. Thus, it seemed that we had very little or no room to manoeuvre, and this in turn affected Tarun's formal authority and his ability to influence. This prompted a shift in the power dynamics which can be explored by using a rather different interpretation of power from Weber's, as developed by Norbert Elias.

To clarify, power is different from authority. In sociology, authority is the legitimate or socially approved power which one person or a group possesses and practices over another.

Weber makes distinction between three "ideal types of dominations/authority": traditional, charismatic and legal/rational. In traditional authority legitimacy is claimed for and believed in by virtue of the sanctity of age-old rules, e.g., the masters are designated according to traditional rule. In charismatic authority, authority is given based on a certain quality in an individual resulting in them being considered special, divine or otherwise extraordinary. In legal/rational authority obedience is not due to a personal master but to pre-established laws and rules and the person in authority is subject to the same laws and rules as anyone else. Hence it is legal rather than personal authority. In this type of authority, the rules have to be rationally pre-established, they cannot change at the discretion of the person in authority (Szelenyi, 2016).

The element of legitimacy is vital to the notion of authority and is the main means by which authority is distinguished from the more general concept of power.

Elias (2001) views power relations as dynamic and shifting rather than as a stable hierarchical form. He argues that power is not simply force or violence, or a thing that someone possesses. Rather, power is a structural characteristic of all human relationships in that it reflects the fact that we depend on each other and so enable and constrain each other regardless of our position in the formal hierarchy.

According to Elias, power can be defined as the activity of enabling and constraining each other, and it is possessed by all human beings based on need. When we need others more than they need us for anything such as love, money, status, or impact, then they have more power over us than we have over them. Moreover, although social power is not distributed equally, power distribution is never absolute because the power of the more powerful depends upon the recognition of the less powerful that this is indeed so. If those in power come to need those who possess less power, then the power balance shifts. Elias expresses his relational view of power as ongoing processes of configuring power relations between people. The result is that the behaviour of each individual is simultaneously constrained and enabled, both by their own expectations and demands and by those of others. Communicative interaction is thus driven by power as it both enables and constrains conflict.

Indeed, throughout the entire transformation process at Symphony Edge, multiple players, each with their own histories and experiences, were struggling to position themselves and forcefully move in the direction that they considered to be correct. At the same time, each was negotiating what should and should not be done and trying to establish their own power position over the decision-making. Our arguments and lack of agreement about the skunkworks team, both over the years and specifically during the offsite, were a classic reflection of this struggle. Due to a lack of decision-making on this topic, over time Tarun's authority was damaged, resulting in open conflict between Amir and Evan. Tarun seemed to be aware of the potential loss of his authority and made direct attempts to change the situation. Scapegoating was one of them.

4.2 Scapegoating

Through analysing our situation at the offsite, the unintended discussion about the skunkworks team can be interpreted as a reflection of the shifting dynamics on the team and, particularly, the status of Tarun's power position. I recognise elements of attempted scapegoating that clearly point to Tarun's vulnerability and, indeed, our own vulnerability as a team, although we were reluctant to admit it at the time. We were in a tough business situation with limited foreseeable viable solutions, feeling vulnerable, challenged, and at risk of losing our jobs and/or the entire business closing, which would reflect badly on all of us. Tarun was at the head of it all, and as CEO he was in the most vulnerable position with the most to lose. Therefore, his

focus on the skunkworks team could be interpreted as attempted scapegoating with the intention of moving the focus away from our own situation and responsibility to that of others and possibly as a distraction from a more direct confrontation with himself.

Girard (1988) describes a typical scapegoating scenario and points out that there is frequently some mystery or puzzle associated with it, for example, the discussion about the skunkworks team was not on the agenda, nor was it meant to last almost a full afternoon. In general, there was an undertone of relative violence and anger when talking about the team's contribution (or lack of), as such emotion was rarely voiced. Girard stipulates that violence always seeks and finds a surrogate victim. Tarun's victims, a group of a few professionals who were not even a team as they were divided by their reporting lines, were somehow being blamed for not being able to overcome critical defects in the product. They seemed to be used as an excuse for the product situation, as the product leaders had by now left and this group was still with us, in close mental proximity.

Girard goes on to describe more aspects of the scapegoating scenario:

‘the creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand’ (Girard, location 88 KBook).

When describing the purpose of scapegoating, Girard stipulates that once we have focused our attention on the sacrificial victim, the object originally singled out for violence fades from view. In hindsight and knowing what would transpire a few weeks after this offsite, the true victim of the company's situation was Tarun, as the board of directors would blame him for the perils of the past year. The sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding, Girard continues. The participants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act and thus, through that act, the unity of the people is strengthened. There was, however, quite a lot of push-back on the accusations directed at the solutions group, hinting at people's awareness of Tarun's personal stakes in the situation.

Thinking about my own role in the situation, I was not far from being on the list of victims, as I had been Tarun's partner and advisor to the team over the past few years. I can see that although I tried to intervene when Tarun lashed out, I gave up quickly and was more silent and passive than usual, perhaps attempting to protect myself from being scapegoated.

4.3 Parrhesia: changing the dialogue by intentional truth-telling

More generally speaking, Tarun may have felt the upcoming power shift during the preparations leading up to the offsite, and thus at some point resolved to take more risk by calling out his inner truth in public. Translated from Greek by Foucault (2001) as ‘free speech’,

parrhesia refers to speaking truth in specific situations. Foucault describes the meaning of parrhesia by starting with the essential definition of the word:

The one who uses parrhesia, the parrhesias, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks (Foucault 2001, p. 12).

Foucault distinguishes this type of truth telling from 'real world truth' and points out that in traditional Greek parrhesia stories there was always an exact match between the belief of the teller and the 'truth' because in the Greek view of parrhesia truth telling, the truth is identified by the moral nature of the teller, rather than by hard scientific evidence. Thus, the speaker in parrhesia is someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and second, to convey such truth to others. This can also be described as frankness. The speaker is risking danger or threat to his or her wellbeing by being honest and truthful in the face of authority or to an audience of people who pose a personal threat to the speaker.

Moreover, the parrhesias shows a certain type of relation to himself, herself, or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. Foucault describes the parrhesias as someone who recognises truth telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as him or herself) by daring to speak up instead of acting in self-interest and moral apathy, as many do in high stakes situations.

Although Foucault speaks of parrhesia in the context of the speaker being lower on the authoritative hierarchy than the ones spoken to, which is where the danger lies, there is something in the way this type of truth telling is described that resonates with the urgency and need for Tarun to enter into this type of parrhesia dialogue with the team in our offsite, lending itself to a new interpretation of parrhesia as a broader 'exposition' that serves the progression of the group by truth telling.

Bang (2014) analyses Foucault's perspective on parrhesia as a pillar of democracy and thus gives it a broader interpretation that may help put in context the reverse parrhesia mentioned above. Bang stipulates that Foucault defines governmentality as the whole range of practices which constitute, define, organise and instrumentalise the strategies and tactics individuals can use freely in dealing with each other. According to Bang, Foucault concludes that politics and democracy must be recoded in terms of parrhesia: parrhesia is the foundation of democracy and democracy is the site of parrhesia.

Interpreting parrhesia in this broader context, we may speculate that Tarun felt the tide turning against him and needed to take a huge leap as a recovery strategy, taking on more risk in his

relationships than he had done before and creating a parrhesia moment which is usually taken by people of less power, indicating his inferior power position on the team.

But how did we arrive at this need to suddenly 'truth tell' by compulsion? What kind of dialogue were we having prior to this offsite that prevented it? In the next two chapters I will explore the managerial ethos, how we came to avoid public confrontation and conflict at all costs in current day organisations, and how this avoidance may affect relations and ultimately the success of our shared projects.

4.4 Why change the dialogue? Conflict avoidance in organisations

An intriguing and disturbing phenomenon for me during the many years of my career is the almost ubiquitous conflict avoidance in work teams that results in a general lack of truth telling. This is illustrated in that I did not call out Tarun's lack of preparation for the offsite, instead prioritising keeping the harmony in our relationship. This typical behaviour of avoiding conflict and truth telling in organisations can be further explored by examining the deep socialisation processes that humankind went through during millions of years of development.

Reaching far back into the evolution of human consciousness, C. Boehm (2012) in *Moral Origins* explores how, ever since needing to collaborate for large game hunting, humans have desired reciprocity and egalitarianism. Boehm brings considerable empirical evidence to prove his claim that via social evolution, prosocial generosity has come to be considered good, and that inappropriate selfishness considered bad. In addition, and taking the context into consideration, conflict is to be avoided. Humans, it seems, have taught themselves over generations on end to contribute willingly to the good of the group, which was a continuous need for survival in the face of danger.

Interestingly, Boehm reasons that human social tensions are simultaneously significantly generous and immensely selfish. As a species, we had to come up with considerable propaganda to avoid our egotistical tendencies, and instead promote the altruistic nature of humans to grow and survive as large communities. Boehm shows how a large part of this development in earlier human societies was to thoroughly socially suppress the alpha male aggressors who were caught freeloading or misusing the group to their selfish advantage. Thus, the ethos of collaboration and harmony is a key human trait related to our survival and flourishing as a species. In fact, the very essence of this striving for harmony is what enabled societies to form.

In modern organisations today, quarrelling, shouting or acting disharmoniously is largely considered unacceptable behaviour, which could partially be driven by this deeply set social altruism developed for shared survival and success.

Indeed, during my time across different companies and group settings, I have experienced a handful of situations in which a raging conflict has caused two people to shout at each other with sheer contempt. When the conflict is this deep it creates helplessness on both sides, and often cannot be bridged or contained. My immediate reaction has always been of terror in the face of this anger, as an instinctive feeling tells me that everything will fall apart if these key people continue to disagree. Others involved in the situation have tended to respond in the same way. The room becomes quiet, and the person in charge dismantles the meeting, usually saying something about resolving the conflict in private. They then turn to me as the HR person, the people expert, with terror and say something along the lines of 'we can't let this happen as it will ruin the company' or 'this was a mistake, we must be smarter next time, we know these two will never agree'. Boehm's research sheds some light on the seeming incompatibility between the sheer terror in the face of hostility on the one hand, coupled with the built-in rivalry and competition over resources and influence on the other, that promotes constraint. This perspective goes hand-in-hand with Elias' perspective on power as both constraining and enabling the influence of people upon each other and may also shed light on the origin of this dynamic in society and at work.

If I look at our work as a team at Symphony Edge, I can see the difficulty more clearly. Each member of the team had our own personal stake in the company that could potentially affect the success of our career, financial standing, future career opportunities and reputation. For an executive team in charge of decision-making that is highly dependent on each other for success, these stakes are high. Some form of our survival and success is dependent on this group agreeing on key goals, critical initiatives and shared priorities. However, there always seemed to be a lack of agreement as different participants had different stakes in the game and differing opinions that constantly constrained each other. We have replaced three or four key players on this team since I started the journey with Tarun, but still experience considerable conflict and disagreement. As we also still dread conflict, there is an expectation that people will work together, resolve areas of disagreement, and get along with each other. To me, and to Tarun, that was the meaning of being a cohesive team, and we did not consider that this concept may be unachievable, and perhaps even unwanted. The whole premise of 'The Advantage' by Lencioni was about building this cohesive team as a cornerstone of any company's success. Was it a realistic goal? We have tried in earnest to build that cohesive team in the last few years, and to enable trust and healthy disagreement, followed by commitment to shared decisions, yet the conflict of opinions and the disagreement on approach continues, coupled with a lack of healthy upfront conflict that enables resolution.

Thus, we can see that our social motives as human beings prompt us to cooperate and subdue public conflict in order to achieve shared goals, yet at the same time we compete and challenge

each other on a personal level that must be controlled in an organisational setting, further reducing the likelihood of open conflict.

In line with accounts of the behaviour of primates, and multiple human group experiments related to command and control, we, as primates, tend to put ourselves into a hierarchical authoritative structure which unites everyone and enables cooperation. Once this structure is broken, unity disassembles, and the power battle begins (Bohm, 2012).

In light of the deeply ingrained need for altruism and suppression of conflict in human society, it is understandable how, over the years, a managerial ethos in organisations has developed in relation to the display of emotion in the workplace. In 'Moral Mazes', Jackall (2010) researched American-based organisations and the managerial ethos relating to the controlling of emotion:

“Managers also stress the need to exercise iron self-control and to have the ability to mask all emotion and intention behind bland, smiling, agreeable, public faces....one must blunt one’s aggressiveness with blandness. One must be buoyant and enthusiastic but never Pollyannish “

(Jackall, p. 50)

The explanation that Jackall provides for this demeanour is that displays of public emotion and lack of control undermine trust in the person who is showing this emotional freedom. The expectation is, as such, to avoid any public display of emotion in order to gain the trust of key members of the group.

This is interesting when compared to Fineman’s (2000) conclusions from an interview transcript analysis that he conducted across a broad set of people who describe their feelings at work. These findings revealed that when people talk about their work, and the feelings associated with it, they rarely speak about what they are doing on the job or its meaning. They talk almost exclusively about their involvement in the life of the group, including the need to limit or regulate this involvement. They do not associate feelings with their description of the job, and even less with personal growth and development. Instead, feelings are strongly identified with a person’s place and activities in the life of the group, and the place of their work in the larger scheme of things. Pleasure and pain are associated with certain involvements. People say little about what they do on the job, but a lot about their relations with people in their group, and how they get along with them. They tend to describe their living experience with others and are affected by exclusion and inclusion in the group or groups.

What transpired during the offsite and resulted in open and aggressive conflict after Tarun ‘opened the flood gates’ to truth telling by his moment of parrhesia, can be explained further by the insights into the complexity of emotion at work shared by Ian Burkitt in his work on

emotions and social relations. Burkitt (2014) emphasises that emotional responses are unpredictable because emotions are ambivalent and constantly shifting. People can feel both love and hatred towards the same person or thing, and they can be simultaneously moved by affection and anger. Similarly, our emotions can easily develop and fluctuate between sympathy, anger and grief. Furthermore, individuals are also differently positioned in these relations with their own biographical trajectories, including their prior values, identification with others, and sense of belonging or alienation in relation to various groups – intersecting social relations and placing them in unique relation to others, or to situational events. Thus, Burkitt concludes that in our work networks we are affected by the emotions of others in the fluid, indeterminate and shifting possibilities of the immediate moment, with its drama and novelty, and by the emotional consequences of our own actions.

Thus, the puzzle of emotions at work seems to stem from the deeply ingrained ethos of rational, non-emotional conduct that we all share as a fundamental behavioural standard in organisations, negated by our strong feelings stemming from relationships with people and groups and our own need to influence and self-assert. As a team, we were struggling with this phenomenon, and it manifested itself in a lack of decision-making on critical conflictual topics. Tarun wanted everyone to get along and feel involved and motivated, and routinely submerged conflict by lack of decision-making on key conflictual issues. Rather than calling this out, I assisted with my own adherence to the managerial ethos of harmony and rational work, and by my own need to fit in and feel included in the group.

To summarise, in the Western world, and particularly in its work environment, emotion and reason tend to be depicted as distinct and sometimes competing processes. Emotion tends to be suppressed in an environment that is, as much as possible, controlled by reason. While this separation perhaps helps to protect people and relationships from the ‘fluidity’ and unexpected nature of emotional display, it does carry the negative side effect of ineffective work situations in which disagreements are submerged and each individual proceeds with what they think is the right thing to do, hindering shared projects in which mutual dependency and enablement is crucial.

As an HR professional, by complying with this ethos of rationality and harmony associated with a successful business environment, I may have contributed to the suppression of conflict. As CEO, Tarun, who was highly sensitive to people’s feelings and promoted a harmonious environment up until the described offsite, sometimes at the price of delaying decisions and being indecisive when it came to topics of conflict, consciously decided to put conflict and the emotion that goes along with it on the table in the hope that the dialogue would change, and we would be more productive as a team. He was also, perhaps, hoping to redeem his authority as the leader, as it seemed to have been declining over the last months as he struggled with the board, funding, and the product.

5. Managerial ethos and humans' innate approach to authority figures

I will now further examine how Jackall (2010) regards the business environment as a social and moral terrain as he analyses the ethics and motives in the work of corporate managers in the US. Although some of the highly hierarchical approaches he quotes in his research are changing as the talent economy develops and egalitarianism increases in the workplace, many of his insights can be easily traced to managerial day-to-day work life. Jackall examines how managers in organisations operate to increase their own personal chances of success, what moral rules they use to guide their work, and what shapes their behaviour. He describes in detail the expected behavioural conduct of a manager towards his or her direct supervisor as follows:

“One must always back their direct manager, never keep important details away from him, never circumvent him or contradict his judgment in public....to violate the last admonition is thought to constitute a kind of death wish in business”

(Jackall 2010, p. 20)

The appearance of an ‘easy breezy’ informality, Jackall says, is a concession perhaps to the North American democratic heritage and egalitarian rhetoric, yet a rather hierarchical-oriented submission to one’s manager is expected. This norm, specifically in US Corporate culture, is amplified in the presence of the most senior leader, the CEO, who carries enormous influence in the organisation.

Great efforts are made to please the CEO, and to understand their wishes and interests. In every company studied by Jackall, stories and rumours circulated constantly about the social world of the CEO and her immediate subordinates, for example, who seemed to be in the CEO’s inner circle in any given moment, and who had fallen out of grace.

Lastly, Jackall noticed in his research that managers always know the detailed career progression, areas of expertise, strengths and weaknesses of their peers, in a constant effort to map the landscape of personal influence and progression. Jackall paints a picture of a controlled and manipulative emotional environment, in which personal rivalries and personal career progression take over any interaction and decision-making. Even if rather exaggerated, clearly some of the rivalry and positioning in relation to the CEO resonates and can be detected in the narrative.

From my experience at Symphony Edge, I could indeed see and feel this undercurrent among my peers of positioning with the CEO, and how my own position as his close advisor influenced my relationships with them, sometimes causing animosity, and sometimes prompting close

liaising. To some degree, everyone took part in this dynamic, although the US-based executives tended to be more loyal to Tarun and more aligned with this code of conduct than the Israeli-based executives. Culturally, in Israel, it is acceptable to express disagreement in public and to challenge your manager. Still, the tendency of the entire group was to participate in the 'power game' as described by Jackall, and up until the abovementioned offsite this pattern remained consistent.

How can we explain this relationship with the manager and our innate relationship with authority in general? And what happens when this authority breaks down?

Marris (1996) describes a fundamental human ambivalence towards authority that stems from our attachment patterns built in our first few years when we are totally dependent on authority figures for our livelihood. We believe that security depends upon a predictable social order, strong enough to curtail our destructive instincts, yet we also believe in competitive self-assertion. Thus, according to Marris, wilfulness is at once gratifying and endangering, and order both necessary and repressive. The way in which each of us has experienced these conflicting impulses in our own childhood and resolved their contradiction, underlies our adult conception of power and authority. The idea of authority constantly swings between understanding and dominance. Our most primitive ideas of control derive from an experience of being cared for.

But what happens when the CEO's authority is questioned such as in our situation?

Approaching leadership authority from a completely different angle, Frans De Waal in 'Mama's Last Hug' (2017) traces human innate social norms by researching apes as our predecessors in social development. De Waal depicts the alpha male's position and influence in a band of gorillas to be just as central as the one described by Jackall, albeit in a different setting and context. According to De Waal's research on apes, the alpha male is the leader of the band and as such is formally recognised as number one by the entire band. Amongst the apes, the alpha male acts as the healer-in-chief, comforting others in agony more than anyone else in the community. As soon as a fight erupts among its members, everyone turns to him to see how he is going to handle it. He is the final arbiter, intent on restoring harmony.

The resemblance to human behaviour in groups is striking and is explained by De Wall as the shared need among humans, as well as among apes, for social order. This need is accomplished by having a clear and recognised leader. Once a leader is established, and there is no need for debate or quarrels amongst the rest of the group, the group can be productive for some time rather than be preoccupied with battles for dominance, although they are always anticipating the next power shift.

One way of interpreting the open conflict between Evan and Amir is that they were inadvertently challenging Tarun's authority, no longer trusting that he could be the arbiter and healer, and perhaps battling between them for the position of next potential group leader

should Tarun be eliminated. This may be a testament to the volatility of people in positions of leadership and power.

In the above chapter, I closely examined the relational dynamics on the team that I was a part of, and demonstrated how, under conditions of volatility and uncertainty, a leader's authority can be easily questioned. I also examined what types of social mechanisms come into play when a leader's authority is indeed questioned (scapegoating, changing the dialogue by using parrhesia). I later reviewed our historical tendency as social beings to keep the harmony between us and how this social tendency is translated into the modern workplace to avoiding conflict at all costs, and how we have come to be highly suspicious of emotional displays at work. Some of the consequences of losing control and openly displaying conflict were visible at the offsite – people offended each other, and relations were impeded as a result. I concluded by looking at our innate attitude towards authority, showing that keeping the power configuration stable by clearly identifying the top leader and ensuring he or she has the number one arbitration role is a key social tool to enable humans to set aside power battles and focus on shared projects. Our experience at the offsite hinted at what may happen when the leader loses authority and others on the team immediately step in to battle for the lead position.

For me, a key learning about the dynamics on the top team was the significant void between what is 'on the table' (rational ideas, debates about production, lists of 'to do's') and what is 'under the table' (emotion, debates about power and positioning). A key question that I will explore next relates to my role on the team and during the offsite, and the considerable complexity and multiplicity of the roles expected to be played by any VP HR or consultant on a team. How can the HR professional be effective and successful in the gap between what is overt and openly discussed and what is covert and not?

6. Conclusion and key arguments

In trying to synthesize my key conclusions from the above exploration, I would like to put forward a few central arguments about our innate interdependency and relations as social beings and how they impact us at work.

#1 Social interdependence forces us to work in harmony and avoid conflict.

As social beings, we are interdependent on each other for achieving our personal and collective goals. In 'The Society of Individuals', Elias (2001) provides a helpful perspective on the totality of people's interdependence in society. This is a totality of dependence that is very much underemphasised in the strongly individual-oriented society we are all part of today:

‘Each individual person is really tied; he is tied by living in permanent functional dependence on other people; he is a link in the chains binding other people, just as all others, directly or indirectly, are links in the chains which bind him.....and it is this network of the functions which people have for each other, it and nothing else, that we call ‘society’’ (Elias 2001, p. 16).

Our social evolutionary origins have entrenched within us the deep understanding that we need each other in order to survive and thrive as a species (Boehm 2012, De Waal F. 2017). In order to cope with this interdependency in social and organisational life, humans idealise harmony and cooperation, especially in organisational settings where the stakes are high and power battles can easily cause conflict. Thus, we have learned to cooperate and keep strict rules of conduct that brush aside emotions (Fineman S. 2000, Burkitt 2014), ensure harmony, and subdue conflict. In the push for this seeming harmony and collaboration, managers in organisations keep to strict behavioural norms which ensure they gain trust and are promoted up the ladder at work (Jackall 2010).

#2 Hierarchical configurations regulate conflict.

In both social and work settings, we as humans choose to organise ourselves in patterns of clear hierarchy. This is because, through our social evolution, we have learned that this is an effective strategy for limiting power struggles between peers and focusing on attaining individual and shared goals (Boehm 2012). A direct impact of adhering to the hierarchical structure is subdued power battles and the avoidance of public conflict in work settings (Jackall 2010). Thus, hierarchy regulates conflict and enables gains from cooperation.

#3 Hierarchical configurations are unstable and prone to change and can easily crumble with shifts in the status quo.

While the CEO, sitting at the top of the hierarchy, is perceived as strong and powerful, and everyone works hard to satisfy them and to be in their closest proximity, this influential position always comes with significant instability and volatility, along with constant questioning of the legitimacy of the person in the role. As the market and economics shift, instability becomes the norm, and the danger of losing power increases. When the leader at the top of the hierarchy is perceived to have fallen from their position, we can observe conflict and competition, which is usually subdued. Open conflict emerges through potential shifts in the status quo when the group perceives an opportunity to negotiate a potentially new formal power structure.

#4 Leaders will do anything to stay at the top of the hierarchy.

When the leader senses that he or she is losing power, whether formally or informally, they will use various tactics to sustain their power and stay in control. This is often not done consciously.

Sacrificing others, changing communication patterns, and manipulating intergroup conflicts are some of the tactics that they may leverage to distance themselves from being blamed by others and losing their position. Conflict, previously avoided at all costs, now emerges as a legitimate process in the face of losing power.

#5 Conflict can be both helpful and destructive at the same time.

When recognised and dealt with effectively, conflict can be helpful for identifying potential problems in the current configuration that may need to be managed in order to work more effectively together. Effectively managing conflict can help leaders identify opportunities for restructuring, problem solving, relationship building, and changing the environment to work more successfully together. Subduing conflict, and masking issues and problems, may lead to dysfunction and lack of success, as we experienced at Symphony Edge. At the same time, enabling conflict to take centre stage, to dominate the dialogue and create personal battles, as it did in our last offsite, may lead to chaos. Additionally, when we start to see strong public battles, this may be an indication that the power configuration is about to shift.

7. Further research and exploration of the HR Advisor role

Upon reflecting on my personal need to achieve power and influence in the teams and groups that I work with, and especially as the people expert and consultant on the team, I would like to further explore the complexity of this role and add the important factor of gender to the equation.

All Human Resources consulting specialists find their work inherently complex as we are often considered to be simultaneously playing the unique and individual roles of 'uninvolved outsider' (as we are not associated with any direct delivery function) and 'involved insider' (as we report to the same manager and are accountable for the organisation's overall success). Mowles (2011) discusses this typical prism of the consultant's work in organisations as part of the strategic choice paradigm. From this perspective, the consultant is presumably a detached, objective observer who can help staff bring about specific and necessary change. Many organisational consultants still ascribe to themselves the power of analysis and intervention which will lead the organisation to greater organisational health. In their practice, the consultant is considered able to rise above or be objective about organisational politics. They are inherently expected to behave authentically, creating relationships of trust and honesty which dissolve interpersonal conflicts and help facilitate change.

This was exactly my perspective as a consultative member on the team at the onset of writing this project. My personal involvement in relationships and my personal stake in the shared project was not in focus, precisely as Mowles (2011) describes.

However, I can see how deeply involved I am in positioning my personal impact on any team I have joined. I consider myself as one of the 'soldiers' of the HR revolution over the past twenty or so years, elevating the role of HR to match the other executives around the managerial table (Charan, 2018). My state of mind has always been and still is to a great degree of a 'fighter' for an equal voice around the table, to be recognised for my relevance and as someone who helps drive business results. My toolkit to date contained prescribed plans and processes that seemingly 'drive results', and my strategy for gaining influence was to liaise closely with the CEO and other key influencers in the organisation to drive visible results on the team by leveraging their formal power to my advantage (which I related to the promoting of our shared projects).

The VP HR role is conflictual in that we are charged with building democratic processes that empower and build dialogue, but at the same time we need to push our opinions in more directive styles and play the game just like the other players on the field. It is not easy to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the consultant, the supporter, and the process owner, and on the other hand, the business driver, the results seeker, and the opinionated professional.

Furthermore, as the only woman on the team for most of the duration of this project, I can see that my need to fit in involved abiding by the rules of harmony and collaboration even more than the others. Abiding by the male code of conduct many times means subduing emotion and emphasising results, actions and rational choices.

In a recent article linking emotion with reflexivity, Burkitt (2012) stipulates that emotion is the source of all our thinking as it is integral to the relations we have with our world and the people within it. The emotional-volitional sphere is behind every thought that arises in human consciousness. A whole range of emotions colour, enliven and animate these social relationships and are central to our reflexive thinking and choices.

Exploring in more depth the added complexity of my gender and how it interplays with the role of an HR Advisor and my personal interpretation of emotion may help gain further insight into this complicated profession mainly occupied by female executives.

Project 3

Outsiders Looking In: Exploring Shifts in Self-Confidence as a Relational Phenomenon amongst Executives in a Post-Acquisition Process

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1. Overview

In this narrative, I will continue to explore how power relationships in executive teams are affected by periods of change and uncertainty. More specifically, I aim to develop a perspective on the sense of self-confidence of those who make up these teams. I will explore how feelings of confidence, or the lack of, emerge in organisational life.

In exploring confidence, I will attempt to compare traditional psychological constructs of confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Bandura, 1986; Rogers, 1961; Rosenberg 1965; Korman 1976; Pierce et al 1989) and current positive psychology (e.g., Seligman 2003), with social and relational perspectives introduced by Elias (1994) and the Complex Responsive Process perspective developed by Stacey et al. (Stacey, 2011; Griffin, 2002), while sharing my own personal experience reflexively. I will attempt to develop a more relational view of self-confidence than espoused in traditional psychology that sees it as an individual's characteristic. I will explore in detail how self-confidence can play out in top executive teams which I have personally been part of for many of my professional years.

1.1 A relational view of organisations

In viewing self-confidence from the Complex Responsive Process point of view, I will focus on power relations between several active players on the executive team, myself included. I will attempt to draw a relational meaning of self-confidence that lies in each player's self-identity and our mutual influence upon each other as we negotiate our power positions in the organisation. I will attempt to build the case that my and others' self-confidence is dramatically influenced by my relationships within these significant groups.

In the following two sections, I will explore a situation at work that shook my self-confidence and led me to question my ability to assert myself as a professional in a significant change process that I was part of. I will first describe the context that I had been operating in, and later share a narrative that explores my relationship with the CEO and my personal strivings for impact and influence as a key member on his team.

2. Setting the context: new company, new role, and a motivational experiment

Dramatis personae

Harmonica	Ex-Symphony Edge (now Harmonica)
Jansen: Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Evan: Chief Revenue Officer North America (CRO NA)
Neils: Chief Operations Officer (COO)	Sergei: Chief Finance Officer (CFO)
Price: Chief Revenue Officer (CRO)	Michal: Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO)
Jo: Chief Strategy Officer (CSO)	

I have been performing my new role as Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) of Harmonica (pseudonym) after it acquired Symphony Edge (pseudonym, explored in detail in Project 2) for a few months. My nomination to this role was quite unexpected by my immediate colleagues and by myself and followed a long and rather difficult period of extreme uncertainty.

Harmonica was a direct competitor of Symphony Edge and leveraged Symphony Edge’s unique financial difficulties to acquire the company for a relatively small capital investment. In this transaction that I thought was quite brilliant, the founder and CEO of Harmonica, with the backing of his investors and executive team, acquired a complementary technology, a talented global employee pool, and tens of millions of dollars in customer revenue, while at the same time being able to take their key competitor (us at Symphony Edge) out of the market and establish themselves as the largest player in our market category.

Although a minority of the investors at Symphony Edge recovered their investment in this transaction, it left most others, including the founders, the inventor of the ground-breaking technology and all of us employees ‘out of the money’, in a transaction that literally saved Symphony Edge from bankruptcy and each of us, Symphony Edge’s employees, from being out of a job. For most of the people in Harmonica, this was a huge win over a key competitor. To us at Symphony Edge it felt that we had failed. Rather than being the ones who captured market share, we had lost the game. Our perception of Harmonica was that they were less experienced with an inferior product and a less significant customer footprint in our markets. It was painful to realise we had lost, and this spurred feelings of inadequacy and low morale as the acquisition was confirmed. I believe this starting point set the stage for lower confidence in all of us ‘acquired’ employees.

In a typical post acquisition strategy, the top executive team is usually let go, and most of the acquired employees end up reporting to new managers coming from the acquiring entity. The Harmonica executive team that led the acquisition had a different perspective to this acquisition. As part of the integration strategy, they decided to hand over critical managerial roles to key players coming from Symphony Edge, including my own nomination as the company's CHRO and at least 15 more key leadership nominations. For them, this enabled business continuity and growth potential for the newly combined company. Their reasoning for this unique approach was interesting and made sense: first and foremost, we were handling customers of multiple million dollars' worth, and keeping key people helped with customer loyalty and continuous business growth. We at Symphony Edge represented about 40% of the total combined company employee base and more than half of the revenue.

In addition, the executives at Harmonica were highly impressed with how we were able to scale and globalise the business, and by our level of managerial and leadership maturity. Harmonica is a much younger company, founded in Spain, with a total of six years in the market and less than two years in the North American market. The average age of the employees is ten years younger than that of the average Symphony Edge employee, and once our company was acquired, the need for mature and established leadership became critical, especially in order to maintain the lucrative US customer base.

This gap between our perceived sense of capability and maturity at Symphony Edge and the fact that we had 'lost the game' paradoxically contributed to a reduced sense of confidence. Therefore, although many of us were nominated to key roles in the integrated company, we started off with a sense of failure at a company level and, for some of us, at a personal level too, simply because we had been acquired.

Within this context, it was quite a surprise to find out I was being considered for the job of CHRO of this combined 'giant'. I perceived this as a significant vote of confidence in my skills and relationships in the company. As mentioned above, it is quite unusual to retain executive members in a post-acquisition situation. We truly expected to be let go, and indeed half of us were. At the same time, it felt somewhat instrumental, as if I were being used as part of a plan that I did not fully grasp. For example, they made it clear that the previous Head of People who now reported to me must not resign and rejected my initial proposed organisational chart that had an additional senior HR leader reporting to me (the HR Director from Symphony Edge). See Appendix 1 for a full organisational chart at the executive level in the combined company.

Up until the job was formally offered by the CEO, we (Symphony Edge's previous executive team and all the people involved in the deal) went through an excruciating negotiation process related to retention bonuses, retention stock, reporting lines and the decision of who would stay and who would be let go. We had to manage uncertainty at its highest levels and keep a

perceived attitude of relaxed and positive confidence, leading to this privileged moment when the new structure was announced with the confirmation of our new roles in the combined company.

However, before the confirmation arrived and I was able to celebrate the winning moment, a caveat was introduced by the CEO, telling of the significant work I would have to do in order to gain a seat around the table with this new executive group in the new integrated company. The entire package hinged on the condition that I would report not to the CEO, Jansen, but to the Chief Operating Officer (COO), Neils, who was directly responsible for many of the operational functions in the company and had started as the right-hand man for Jansen in his first year when the company operated only in Spain. The rationale that was shared with me was that Jansen was not much of a 'people function advocate' (a 'red flag' right at the onset) and that Neils was more closely placed to the topic of people, that he was a trusted executive, and that I would remain a part of the top executive team and so my interaction with Jansen would be close and productive, nevertheless.

My personal interpretation of the move was that it was intended to protect Neils's power after he had to give up some other functions that he had managed prior to the acquisition. These functions were moved to the Harmonica Chief Revenues Officer (CRO), Prince, who had to narrow his regional scope so that a new North American CRO role could be allocated to Evan, Symphony Edge's ex-Global CRO. Thus, although everyone was somewhat marginalised in this game of 'musical chairs', on the Harmonica side they made sure the top executives remained with an equivalent scope and impact to what they had prior to the acquisition. In hindsight, and knowing what transpired after, I can see this as an indication of the low inclination amongst Jansen and his close advisors (Neils, Prince and Jo - who was leading the integration effort and was highly involved with this small group in daily decision making) to changing the known power structure at Harmonica. It is worth mentioning that the top executives at Harmonica were all Spanish, and they had been working together for quite a long time. They were bonded by a strong cultural affiliation and were extremely proud of this global company they had grown together.

I was devastated when I learned about this new reporting line proposal. I felt that reporting one level down would surely mean less influence on strategic decision-making and less of a chance to make significant changes and quickly position myself as one of the key players on the new executive team. This was an important turning point in my sense of confidence and self-doubt was starting to make a footprint. From a company perspective, it would place the people function in an inferior influencing position, signifying that it was less important or less of a legitimate function. Finally, I felt it was a (perhaps unintentional) signal that people from the new company were not as valued as the veterans. From a change management process, it would slow down the pace and depth of changes that the orchestrators of this new company so

badly wanted, as with less access to the CEO and less power, I might not be able to implement the change needed in the people domain to scale the company to its next growth phase fast enough.

I tried negotiating against this move, pointing to the business disadvantages in such a structure as reflected above, but was told that 'everyone had to give up on something in this integration'. Based on some of the remarks made, and on Jo, Neils and Jansen's visible lack of patience with this topic, I was made to feel that insisting on the reporting line would mean being tagged as ego-driven, political, and not a team player. Even though I was putting all my efforts into convincing them it was bad for their business, which I truly believed it was, it seemed that their answer was personal, i.e., it was required in order to keep the equality between the new executive members, so 'play along'. They really did not seem to comprehend the business disadvantages of such a configuration.

I was ultimately unsuccessful in convincing them that this was a mistake, and I had to decide whether to walk away and risk being unemployed for a while or take the role at this difficult starting point which I felt was not structured for success, and which made me feel humiliated and unappreciated at the core of my professional being. My general feeling was of inferiority and of 'losing' in the power game. I asked myself how I ended up in this situation. Marris (1996) suggests a way to think about power which emphasises control over contingencies rather than control over resources – the ability to manoeuvre in the face of uncertainties, often at the expense of others who have less power. Perhaps my feeling of humiliation stemmed from my fully grasping the inferior negotiating position I was in. If I could refuse the job and sustain myself financially, I would refuse it, yet I felt forced into taking a position which I did not feel I could succeed in. An immediate reduction in my self-esteem followed, as I was downgraded to reporting one level below the 'true' executive team.

Four of us from the previous executive team of Symphony Edge were offered new roles, and four were let go. Of the four who did stay, one was to report to the CEO, and the other three to Harmonica's executive team. One of these three, Evan, whom I mentioned above and was leader of Global Sales at Symphony Edge, immediately found another position in a new company and was ready to submit his resignation. Because of this, he was able to negotiate his reporting line to the CEO and ended up staying at Harmonica. He received everything he asked for. I was in no position to find another job so easily, and as a single mother I found myself in a more vulnerable position.

Was this because I am female? Perhaps it is my profession, which is often undervalued. I will explore the effect of being a woman in a largely male dominated environment later in section this work. In hindsight, I can see that everyone was stretched and challenged with the negotiation and no one from Symphony Edge or Harmonica was offered exactly what they

wanted. However, the dynamic of the whole negotiation left some of us better off than others, and me feeling somewhat powerless and inferior.

After some soul-searching and multiple consulting sessions with friends and colleagues in my profession, I decided to give the role a try within this reporting structure. I negotiated that I would receive half of the retention amount after 6 months and the whole amount should I be let go during this period. We also agreed that towards the end of the year, six months into the role, we would open the reporting line discussion again. The financial discussion helped a little with my sense of security, yet my confidence remained quite shattered.

My main reason for accepting these terms was financial security, and it was the first time in my career that I had chosen a financial arrangement over my perceived ability to succeed. I convinced myself not to be emotional about the decision, to take the money rather than fight for my principles and to treat the next six months as an experiment in using a different type of motivation and perhaps even to somewhat de-prioritize work and start being more open to taking on a new role elsewhere if these next six months turned out to be unsuccessful.

To summarise, I started the new job feeling secure, proud that I was able to negotiate a good retention package, and proud of my achievements that enabled the nomination in the first place, yet at the same time, quite paradoxically, I felt underappreciated, inferior and somewhat pessimistic about my ability to succeed under this challenging configuration.

The last few months in this role have been a significant learning experience with many frustrations. I have felt that my ability to assert myself as the leader of the people domain is quite limited and this has affected my confidence as a professional, although this is what I was expecting and ready for. Something about the day-to-day interactions with my colleagues at the executive level impacted me negatively and my confidence was reduced, although rationally there was no reason for this.

In addition to the difficult reporting structure, the overall atmosphere was challenging. Many of the employees at Harmonica were dismayed and disappointed to find out that so many ex-Symphony Edge executives and managers were nominated to key leadership positions in the merged company, and they actively resisted their new colleagues and superiors in overt and covert ways. Gossip was at its highest in the first months after the announcement of the new roles, and multiple disappointed employees from Harmonica approached their leaders to share that they were opposed to this integration strategy.

I was now formally a key player in the wellbeing of the employees of the integrated company, yet I still had no relationship with the Harmonica teams, no authority on the executive team due to the reporting line and the lack of bonding, and no real back-up by anyone in this very demanding role. After the nomination, multiple people came to me to express their appreciation and congratulations, alongside others who came to ensure I understood that my

role was the most challenging in the company, and they hinted that I had low chances of success. I was overwhelmed with the gap between the expectations for deep change to the people experience and people domain and my actual ability to make an impact.

In the next section, I will share an event that may be considered a turning point in my journey and enables a deeper exploration of the political power struggle that is part of any interaction between people trying to work on shared goals. Naturally, power struggles are heightened during times of extreme change as described above, yet interestingly are never openly admitted and explored in the corporation's behavioural code, where self-control is one of the highest-valued assets. Thus, I kept my feelings of increasing self-doubt to myself and went about my job as nonchalantly as I could.

In his book about managerial social conduct in corporate America, the sociologist Robert Jackall (2010) points to the indirect and ambiguous linguistic frameworks that managers employ in public situations and that, according to him, typify the symbolic complexity of the corporation. The public language of managers is best characterised as a kind of provisional discourse that tends to be euphemistic. For instance, managers do not generally criticise or disagree with one another or with company policy openly and in public. A certain finesse in handling people, a 'sensitivity to others', is expected. This leads to the use of an elaborate linguistic code marked by emotional neutrality, especially in group settings.

Indeed, during this entire negotiation process with Harmonica, we all behaved in a composed, practical and optimistic manner, showing 'no cracks in the armour'. It felt as if we were being tested on our ability to stay composed in times of turbulence and continued to be tested throughout.

In Jackall's words:

'Managerial work requires a psychic asceticism of a high degree, a willingness to discipline the self, to thwart one's impulses, to stifle spontaneity in favour of control, to conceal emotion and intent, and to objectify the self with the same kind of calculating functional rationality that one brings to the packaging of any commodity. Moreover, such dispassionate objectification of the self, frames and paces the rational objectification of circumstances and people that alertness to expediency demands'

(Jackall 2010, p. 217)

3. Narrative: I stomp my foot, therefore I am

After my decision to stay in the company, I started off cautiously optimistic and decided to focus on a few key areas of work. The first one which I deemed critical was the compensation and benefits approach and practice. It seemed as if this area was managed in a way that is

appropriate for smaller start-ups, in which managers were changing employees' compensation as they saw fit and not taking a company-wide view on compensation at large. Following conversations with a few of the executives, my initial impression that this was an area requiring transformation was confirmed, and I started by getting together with Jansen and Sergei, the CFO, to review a simple compensation approval process. I received confirmation from both that my suggested process was good, and that we could start implementing. We later had an executive team meeting where I was allocated a slot to review this new process with the team. Just a few days later, I found out that compensation was continuing to be managed in the old way, as Jansen was still approving ad hoc requests which were coming in sporadically from the various executives in the company. I tried reaching out to him so we could be in alignment on the situation and discuss how to manage it but I did not receive any response. My reaction was initially tolerant to the situation, as I understood that this required him to make a significant change to his way of working. I noted to myself that I needed to speak with him on an ongoing basis and help him adjust to the change, while also understanding that he was required to back me up and support our new process if he really wanted to make impactful change. I asked for a one-on-one meeting, and yet it was delayed, making me feel marginalised.

As I continued to touch upon various topics that I was used to driving on behalf of the CEO and the executive team in the previous configuration of Symphony Edge, I realised that quite a lot of them were, in effect, managed by other members of the executive team and were not part of the official human resources domain. These included topics related to budget and position approval, topics to do with employee communications coming from the CEO, and topics to do with budget planning for the following year, etc.

For example, as the budget planning began, I realised that there was a kick-off meeting between Jansen and Sergei, to which Neils (my new boss) and Jo, who acted as an organisational advisor (also a function that I used to lead previously) were invited as the representatives of the organisation and people budget perspective. The budget is mostly to do with head count cost and is therefore a critical area requiring my involvement. When I realised that I was not invited, it painfully resonated that my role was not well positioned, and that in fact my boss, Neils, was the one acting in the CHRO role and represented this function in strategic discussions.

The deeper I dove into work, the more prevalent this gap became. The department of Human Resources in this company (called 'People Department') was an operational machine focused on hiring and firing with low strategic impact and no voice around the executive table.

My frustration was growing, yet in conversations with some of the key influencers I was continuously told to have patience and be mindful of the big change I was trying to lead in building the people function as a professional and credible domain. For a while I maintained a

positive outlook but as time passed, I realised that I was simply being marginalised due to significant parts of my job being done by Jo and Neils, and that the more I waited, the less my chances of being able to make a change would be. I was also concerned that I would be perceived as too weak to carve out my own executive presence in this new team I was part of.

I had a distinct feeling of being invisible to the key players in the company and I felt hurt at being marginalised and concerned about my ability to impact. All this time I continued to interact positively with Jansen, calling, emailing and texting to get attention, contacting his personal assistant and others who work in the remote office where he is located to get his attention on various topics, but getting very little response.

In month three of the new job, I was asked to prepare some material for a board compensation committee. According to the required preparations, I was led to believe that this was an important and meaningful board committee and that I was expected to lead the agenda and leverage it to improve this domain. However, in the meeting itself, everything that I presented, including items that I had prepared with the relevant board member, were disregarded by the CEO as irrelevant, either to the committee or in general. For example, we agreed to prepare a review of the executive team performance and compensation status, yet Jansen did not want to touch the topic at all. The one-on-one preparation meeting that I had asked to set with him prior to the committee was cancelled, thus hampering my ability to align with him.

When the meeting ended, I took a few minutes to stop and identify my feelings. I felt quite humiliated and had the distinct feeling that my nomination to the CHRO role was all just for show and there was no genuine intention of changing anything. I felt shamed and ridiculed. I knew at that moment that I needed to do something differently and to test Jansen's willingness to truly change things. I was aware that I only had two or three months left to test this, and that if I did not feel that there was a genuine intention to do things differently within this time, I would have to leave once the associated retention money materialised, as the prognosis for achieving impact was low and this was not something I could sustain.

I decided there and then to stop being so patient and non-confrontational. Therefore, after failing to speak with Jansen or set a meeting with him, I texted him a clear and assertive message:

"The board committee was a disaster and a waste of time. I am unable to represent you impactfully in any compensation-related matters and therefore no change is happening, even though we agreed to structure the process. You had a budget planning meeting last week which I should have been part of but was not invited to. You are unavailable, and yet if you want to see changes in relation to people it should be a top priority for you as CEO. I really can't work effectively like this and it's a waste of both our time. Call me when you wish to discuss, Michal."

Jansen responded very quickly, calling me a few times over the weekend when I was not available to answer. In fact, I intentionally did not answer so as to send a clear message of my frustration and perhaps improve my power position in some way. On the Monday following the weekend, he called again a few times and we finally had a short chat in which he apologised for his lack of responsiveness, the lack of backing I had received from him, and he asserted that he would do everything in his power to change his mode of operation. We discussed what it meant to be the CEO of such a large company that wants to go public and agreed to have a weekly one-on-one in which all the people issues could be placed at the forefront of the company's activity. I felt a momentary sense of relief and hope, and it certainly increased my confidence and sense of worth. It is striking how strong people's need to be professionals can be, and how this quite relational aspect impacts our sense of personal confidence.

Following this conversation there was some slow progress. We started meeting weekly, yet I was still experiencing a daily struggle to be included in strategic discussions and to truly impact the dialogue and agenda of the company.

In his exploration of uncertainty, Marris (1996) stipulates that managing uncertainty is an individual endeavour as each of us learns patterns of events to develop our own strategies of control. It is also social as it distributes the power to control relationships and the freedom to act unevenly between its members. According to Marris, the greatest burden of uncertainty tends to fall on the weakest. In trying to retrieve some sense of autonomy and control, they often compound and confirm their own weakness.

Was I confirming my weakness with this open exhibition of emotions or was I asserting myself and building a power base? In the situation at hand, what prompts a feeling of weakness? Are others who are in my situation also experiencing the same doubts as I am, feeling unseen and interpreting the experience as personal inadequacies? How was my reaction or his responses related to me being a woman? Did the men around me feel any self-doubt during this difficult process of positioning? While keeping to formal organisational etiquette, we were all nonchalant and apparently confident and positive.

To continue with Marris' (ibid) perspective of self-confidence, he states that we tend to interpret the uncertainties of everyday life in terms of our insecurities and self-doubts rather than in terms of the social structure which conditions them. We imagine that if we were cleverer, more educated, less shy, or more attractive, we would be as secure and confident as other people appear to be. Since we do not share this with each other, we fail to see how pervasively our culture induces these feelings of inadequacy, particularly towards women. To interpret this low confidence as personal and to change our own behaviour is a control strategy that enables us to adapt and reduce uncertainty, yet it overlooks a broader social pattern that we are unaware of or perceive to be uncontrollable. As part of our coping strategies and in

dealing with a highly individualised society, we tend to focus on our own individual traits or characteristics. In this case, interpreting my exclusion as personal and doubting myself was an expression of agency in the situation and an attempt for control, yet I possibly misread the broader power dynamics, which I will now go on to explore.

I will attempt to examine what happens to our self-confidence in the workplace, and how my own self-confidence in my ability to be included and impactful at work deteriorated over time within the context I have just described. In section 4, I will examine the evolution of the concepts related to self-confidence and specifically explore research related to self-esteem at work. Conversely, in section 5, I will explore self-confidence from the relational point of view and build the argument that self-confidence is a complex construct that is impacted immensely by power relations with others.

4. Traditional thinking about self-confidence

Traditional psychology research attempts to understand the concept of self-confidence, insulate it, and research its antecedents and consequences in efforts to leverage research results for practical purposes, both for the benefit of individuals and the workplace. One of the preliminary attempts of scholars to define self-confidence concluded that it is an individual attribute concerned with the belief that a judgment is accurate or correct (Berger, 1992). Vealey (1986) considered self-confidence to be an individual's certainty about their abilities. In addition to the definitions that assume self-confidence to be a cognitive construct (i.e., a belief), Compte & Postlewaite (2004) consider it to be an affective concept and defined it as a feeling of assuredness and lack of anxiety.

Self-confidence strongly relates to Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory. Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as an individual's conviction in their ability to regulate motivation, thought process, and environment to achieve certain outcomes. Since Bandura coined the term, many studies have recognised self-efficacy as a motivational outcome. For example, Carpenter (2011) suggests that an individual's self-confidence in their ability to complete a difficult task will increase their likelihood of engaging in such a behaviour in the future. Likewise, lack of self-efficacy can reduce an individual's inclination towards a behaviour or action when faced with challenging or complex circumstances (Hebert et al., 2014).

Gist & Mitchell (1992) attempt to draw a distinction between the two concepts, in that self-efficacy is about abilities, whereas self-confidence comprises abilities and certainty based on knowledge.

In reflecting on my own experience as described in the narrative, I cannot agree that reduced or lack of self-confidence is a personal characteristic of mine. In fact, judging by the strength of my position as Head of HR prior to the acquisition, I had high self-confidence, and those who

worked with me often mentioned how much influence I seemed to have and how strong I was as a leader. Thus, there is more complexity hidden in the feeling of self-confidence or lack of than perhaps these conceptual definitions offer. In addition, and possibly due to this complexity, there is quite a lot of interweaving of self-confidence with several other psychologically defined and researched concepts in the literature. There is considerable debate as to whether self-confidence reflects a stable trait or a state (see Perkins, 2018 for a comprehensive literature review).

Another concept that is frequently treated as synonymous with confidence and closely relates to self-efficacy is self-esteem. Self-esteem quickly came to have a prominent role in humanistic psychology when Carl Rogers (1961) identified it as a key to psychological growth. As seen in his famous hierarchy, Abraham Maslow (1964) strengthened self-esteem's significance by linking it to authenticity and self-actualisation. Rosenberg (1965) created an easy-to-use self-esteem assessment scale that became the gold standard for researching self-esteem in relation to a host of phenomena such as race, income, adolescence, school, and so forth (Tafarodi & Swann, 1996; Mruk 2008). The basic hypothesis guiding most of these works suggests that the way individuals react to life experiences varies as a function of their level of self-esteem, or the extent to which they perceive themselves as competent (Korman, 1976).

In an attempt to solidify the construct of self-confidence, Perkins (2018) defines self-confidence as an overarching latent structure which is mainly influenced by three factors: self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-compassion. Together, these constructs determine how trustworthy an individual considers themselves to be, and how much they trust themselves.

I find it quite difficult to link the intensity of my own experience and the circumstances and history that led to my lost self-confidence at Harmonica to either of these definitions and conceptual structures. They seem to try and pin down in simple terms a much richer experience and attribute it mainly to me as an individual, quite isolated from others in my environment. Looking into the concept of self-esteem as it pertains specifically to the work environment may be more useful in reflecting on my narrative.

4.1 Organisation-based self-esteem

Building on Korman's (1976) work on global self-esteem, Pierce & Gardner (2004) define Organisation Based Self Esteem (OBSE) as "*the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organisational member*" (p. 593). They suggest that people with high OBSE have a sense of personal adequacy as organisational members and a sense of having satisfied needs from their organisational roles in the past, and thus perceive themselves as important, meaningful, effectual, and worthwhile within their employing organisation. They see OBSE as a stable construct, like a personality state. That is,

although early in an individual's organisational relationship, before a discernible pattern of organisational experiences has transpired, OBSE is malleable, shifting, and very much state-like. With the passage of time, and as organisational experiences accumulate, OBSE increasingly evolves into an unquestioning and stable belief as to one's organisational worthiness, thus shifting towards a more stable direction.

Research has indicated that organisational members who believe they are important and competent have lower turnover intention than employees who believe they are not important or efficient (Pierce and Gardner, 2004). In addition, a meta-analysis combining data from 24 studies of OBSE found employees with high OBSE were strongly influenced to commit to their places of employment (Bowling et al., 2010). The researchers explain these findings by the fact that OBSE is expected to be positively related to both job satisfaction and organisational commitment. These two attitudes, in turn, are strongly associated with turnover intention (Tett & Meyer, 1993).

Over the past several decades, as well as in recent years, extensive literature has emerged focusing on employee self-esteem within work organisations. Much of this research is influenced by positive psychology (Seligman, 2003) and focuses on enhancing individual strengths and reassuring employees so as to increase their happiness, sense of self-worth, and subsequently commitment and retention. When reviewing this large body of work, I can see two main underlying assumptions that seem to be influencing the research community.

First is the strong focus on the individual and on stable personality traits that define the person, somewhat in isolation. Various aspects of the environment are mentioned, however, the research itself is usually focused on interventions and means that are seemingly under the individual's control. For example, Costanini & Ceschi (2019) show that levels of OBSE increased significantly after a 'strength-based intervention' that provided employees with active guidance and training on how to use their strengths at work. Individual strengths were defined in this research as ways of behaving, thinking, or feeling that an individual has a natural capacity for, enjoys doing, and which allow the individual to achieve optimal functioning while they pursue valued outcomes. 'Using' individual strengths is, according to this research, not only beneficial in that it drives high performance but also because it is intrinsically motivating, enjoyable, engaging, satisfying, and energising. In reading this research, it is tempting to conclude that one can simply follow a prescribed training programme and come out with higher levels of self-esteem in the workplace in a linear way. The underlying assumption is that the main factor of OBSE is the individual themselves, and that by enhancing their personal toolkit, one can control their OBSE.

The second underlying assumption is that an organisation is a 'system' that can be manipulated and controlled by managers, and that everyone who is part of that system is a means to an end

who can be influenced by all sorts of behavioural interventions. In many cases, the organisation is considered an entity on its own, almost a person, that can control the behaviour of others. The research assumes that managers can pull various specific levers to obtain an outcome, much like in a scientific experiment. For instance, De Cremer et al. (2005) examined 'rewarding leadership styles' as a possible antecedent of OBSE. Rewarding leadership styles emphasises complimenting employees on their achievements and motivating them to reward themselves for their successes. They reported a positive relationship between rewarding leadership styles and OBSE, implying that messages from significant others (like managers) have substantial effects on OBSE.

Note that across the board, the research is looking for prescriptions and formulae that enable behavioural control, which in turn enable various positive influences for the business such as motivation and reduced turnover. It is taken for granted that humans can be linearly controlled. Not surprisingly, many such behavioural interventions at work either have short-term effects or none at all.

This approach reflects the dominant discourse in organisations today, where leaders and managers in powerful coalitions are expected to objectively observe their organisations and use the tools of rational analysis to select appropriate objectives, targets and strategic visions. They are then to formulate macro change strategies, design organisational structures, procedures and required behaviours to implement actions to achieve these targets. We are expected to know what is happening through organisational scanning and behavioural control and to constantly implement improvement mechanisms to ensure success. In this line of thinking, it seems logical to have a prescribed way to manage employees that will increase OBSE and thus ensure low attrition. It is often genuinely surprising to us as managers and leaders that unexpected and uncontrolled events occur, despite our best efforts.

In looking critically at what is really going on, it is useful to note that strategies in fact emerge in the ongoing local interactions of many people and in the interplay of many different intentions and choices (Stacey, 2011). In my case, messages from my manager, the CEO, and various others were consistently positive about my performance, yet my self-esteem regarding my interaction with them and others in my environment remained low, possibly due to the constant sense of exclusion, subsequently impacting my choice of whether to stay or leave the company.

Did I believe I was competent? I believe I did, and I still believe I am a competent and seasoned professional in my domain, yet perhaps I did not feel included in the discussion that would enable me to have an impact and influence. My reaction to exclusion was of a personal lowered sense of self-esteem. Feelings of importance are relational, and thus provide a perspective on

OBSE which moves away from the psychological focus on personality of the individual and finds meaning in the relational focus, which I will take up in the next section.

5. Social influences on self-confidence

In the above descriptions of self-esteem and confidence in the workplace, a strong emphasis is placed on the individual and their response to a variety of environmental factors that ‘the organisation’ imposes on them. Based on their own experiences, individuals can choose to either react with confidence, which over time becomes almost a personality characteristic, or they can react with a lack of confidence.

In all these accounts coming from psychology, the person is portrayed as an isolated individual. In *Social Selves*, Ian Burkitt (2008) stipulates that seeing ourselves as isolated cuts off the primary connection we have to other people. Moreover, who we are, or what we can become, is often a political issue involving rights and duties fought over with other participants in society, much like in my situation described above. Becoming who we want to be, if that is possible, often involves a political struggle. Even when we do not think that being ourselves involves politics, this is often a misguided assumption.

When analysing why I felt so worthless and unimportant in the situation described above, I will try to examine the broader social context that I was operating within and, rather than asking a psychological question of ‘am I a confident person?’ or ‘do I have a strong sense of self-esteem?’, I will attempt to ask a question that takes into account relational and social circumstances that the group I was in had to deal with. The question to be asked is thus, what kind of political, relational circumstances evoke a sense of low confidence in the people who are part of them?

I will attempt to analyse these relational circumstances from a few different vantage points in three separate sections:

1. The established and the outsiders: analysing the acquired group’s position relative to the veteran group in the newly merged organisation.
2. The power relation gender formation that may have implicitly affected my relationship with the CEO.
3. The political and power position scenario the CEO was part of, that directly impacted me.

5.1 The established (acquiring) and the outsiders (acquired)

Power differences establish the grouping of those who are included and those who are excluded. Elias and Scotson's (1994) research on the relationship between adjacent neighbourhood resident groups living in a rural community in England illustrates the power dynamic between these two groups. Their research indicates that there were no differences between the two groups in terms of nationality, ethnicity, occupation, income and educational levels. The men and women worked in the same factories and the children went to the same schools. The main difference between the two groups was that one group was comprised of veteran residents who had established the neighbourhood, and the other was a group of newcomers who had come to live in the neighbourhood's new estate. During the research that took place a significant time after the establishment of the new neighbourhood, there were marked and deeply entrenched gaps that made the veteran, 'established', group more prestigious. The veteran group had a high degree of internal cohesion, which enabled them to form and keep their power and superiority over the newcomers, the 'outsiders'. Gossip about the newcomers' manners was a mechanism to maintain their power and exclude the newcomers. Yet, the newcomers' own acceptance of the situation in which they were deemed inferior maintained the split of 'us'– 'them'.

In this research, Elias and Scotson show that power relations are a dynamic process that is built and maintained over years between wider social groupings. As I was starting in my new role, I was a part of the 'outsider' group, the 'others' who had been acquired. We were all immediately put under a magnifying glass of gossip and mistrust, in a possibly unconscious yet prominent attempt to belittle, reject and segregate us. Any difference in behaviour was used as a point of gossip.

When analysing these types of gossip patterns in his research, Elias points to the distorting effect which the dynamics of competition within closely-knit groups has on group beliefs in general, and on the subject of the gossip in particular. He notes that the effect is an anomaly leaning towards the most favourable, most flattering belief about one's own group and towards the most unfavourable, most unflattering belief about non-submissive outsiders, with a tendency towards increasing rigidity in both cases.

Thus, the Harmonica veterans, though well-entrenched in the company and largely from the same country and cultural background, and who were part of the tight knit group that started the company with the founder and CEO in Spain, and thus powerful in relation to the newcomers from Symphony Edge, certainly felt that the new members had threatened their established way of working at its very roots. Our way of selling and engaging with customers was different, the product that we were selling had different value, and, specifically in the US, we had a huge market share while they had close to nothing before the acquisition. Thus, they responded to all those who came from Symphony Edge with the highest degree of intolerance and suspicion. Gossip was patterned accordingly, and the entire narrative cantered around the

lack of leadership, finesse, and vision of the newcomers and our total inferiority to the values and way of life of the Harmonica veterans. For example, in North America Evan was rumoured to be an unintelligent cowboy. It was also rumoured that Symphony Edge were over-paying our people to keep them from leaving. I personally had to review the compensation data and help explain that we needed to hire more senior professionals to treat the calibre of customers we were servicing, and indeed the average age difference between the company employees was more than ten years, accounting for the gaps in pay.

Under these circumstances, while I was given the role of Chief Human Resource Officer of the entire company, those same people who had offered me the role were part of the network of gossip that tightened around the ex-Symphony Edge group. Some of my new allies whispered in my ear that this or that person from Harmonica was sure that I was biased towards the 'unruly' and 'anti-leadership' behaviour of Evan and his crew, and that there was no chance that I could ever be objective and representative of everyone.

Not surprisingly, I felt unsupported and like an outsider by the mere fact of not being part of the established group. As time passed, I started asking myself why I felt so ostracised. As I experienced this deep frustration, I started connecting more closely with other ex-Symphony Edge employees and leaders who had new roles at Harmonica and, to my astonishment, I heard that they were feeling the same way as I was.

Thus, I started meeting with everyone I could as frequently as possible, leveraging my HR position and my formal power as an executive member to reflect the bigger process and to rebuild our self-confidence, reflecting to the others that some of what they may be feeling might be broader than their own personal limitations, their relationship with the new members or the onboarding process to the new company. I felt somewhat re-energised by finding out I was not alone, and for a while more willing to 'fight' for recognition on behalf of the group.

5.2 Women, self-confidence, and cultural habits

In a reflective review of her work on gender in the workplace, 'Men and Women of the Corporation', Rosabeth Kanter (1987) re-confirmed her claim that when men and women were dealt similar cards and given similar places in the corporate game, they behaved in similar ways, yet they were rarely dealt similar cards. Although noticeable advancements were made to women's power and status in organisations in the 1990s, Kanter still describes the female role at work, mainly at executive levels, as tokens that suffer the effects of difference, of being the only one of their kind in a group of another kind, namely 'the one O in a group of Xs'.

During my entire career and leading up to this last role, I have always been either the token woman on the executive team or, at most, one of two out of a circle of approximately ten men.

The position in which I felt this gender difference in its most extreme was when I started at Symphony Edge, almost four years ago.

It was my first role as a Human Resources executive in a top team, my first experience in the global software business industry, and the entire executive team were white men over 45. I felt like an outsider and was possibly perceived as such by the others. One of the visible symbols of my otherness was my low to zero knowledge of anything related to football, basketball, or any other team sport that the others were quite obsessed with. I had to work very hard to prove value and to become an equal member around the table. I initially perceived (perhaps unjustly) a total disregard by some of the members, based on my being a woman and also perhaps with some impact of my profession as a Human Resources executive. This role is expected to be the epitome of female influence in the work force (soft, collaborative, mediating), and negates the necessity to be pushy, direct and aggressive when trying to build power in a male environment. This set of conflicting and confusing expectations is a characteristic of my experience as a woman in a male team and contributes to self-doubt and reduced confidence because there was a constant double bind to manage: if I displayed 'male aggressiveness' I would be ostracised by the men, and if I displayed 'female softness' I would be overlooked and disrespected by them.

In reflecting on the meaning of being the token woman, I remember a conversation with a female VP colleague who was experiencing a lot of difficulty in her role. I attributed this to the fact that she had been with the company for many years and was struggling to adjust to its new business direction, and was perhaps also experiencing issues with her boss, my (white, male, over 45) colleague on the executive team. It shocked me to hear in our final conversation just before she left the company that she felt personally disappointed in me, as I had failed to represent women on the executive team and had let the company be run by men. She may have been referring to the male-dominated culture. How could I alone be responsible for a history of social struggles and power differentials that are so profound and part of being human, and that all the women on earth together could not change? Reflecting more deeply on what it means to be the 'token woman' in my social groups is an important aspect of my personal journey and contribution to the journey of gender equality, an aspect that I am just now starting to explore and can be the focus of a larger work.

In her paper 'Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey', S. Sullivan (2000) stipulates that gender configuration, as well as other aspects of identity such as race and sexuality, is constitutive of subjectivity in a way that is crucial to identity. We are our habits; they are our very structure as corporeal, bodily selves, and thus there is no thinking of who we are separately from the habits that we embody.

Sullivan applies Dewey's concept of habit to the gender problem and establishes that Dewey's illumination of the role of habit is crucial to our understanding of the gendering of our bodies, and thus of ourselves, because he develops an explicit account of the formation and possible transformation of our habits, as well as the role that culture plays in them. In other words, cultural customs (i.e., habit at the level of society or culture) tend to reproduce themselves through individual habits because our social network (be it in life or work) 'instructs' us on 'proper' habit formation in its response to our engagement with them. Breaking that vicious cycle is difficult, which is why making social changes to how gender, race and other human identity aspects are perceived is so difficult and slow.

In trying to reflect on my newly formed relationship with Jansen, the CEO of Harmonica, one of the first things that I can remember him telling me was 'you have a beautiful smile, never lose your smile'. Can I regard that comment as one that speaks to my femininity? That suggests or hints to the expectation and norm that women should be beautiful and preferably also quiet? Sullivan comments on that smile as well, and notices that it is a habit of many women to always 'wear' the smile on their faces, possibly as a habitual tendency to avoid being perceived as threatening. Hochschild (2012) terms this emotional labour, a labour that requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.

Sullivan continues her analysis of Dewey's approach towards gender change by focusing on how we can change habits. To acquire a new habit is a positive accomplishment according to Dewey. It is to grasp a new significance and to establish a new form of power in and through the body, continues Sullivan. That is, to acquire a new habit is for the body to learn a new comportment of itself, one that opens the meaning of one's world and provides expanded powers in a new way.

In analysing my attempt to put my differences on the table with Jansen in that very combative text message, I may have tried acquiring a new habit which I noticed was more compatible with the requirement for success around the executive table at Harmonica. I was implicitly searching for a way to come across which was not aligned with the expected gender behaviours.

Yet after that first conversation with Jansen in which he apologised and promised to work together better, and although he showed up to our weekly meetings and did his best to cooperate, it felt as if there was a barrier between us that I may interpret as related to gender and the power relations between us. I interpreted his initial reaction to my text message as similar to that of a scolded child, immediately impacting my self-image as a 'mother figure', thus hinting that gender roles were at play. He initially told me that he expected me to coach him and the other executives, yet I had a distinct feeling that no matter what I would ask, probe, do or say, he was not going to be open and trusting enough to have that kind of

relationship. His reaction to my questions was typically 'let me think about it', and when I reflected on things, I noticed he would write them in his notebook and refrain from reacting. If he did react, it was usually some sort of self-defence. I imagine that he did not previously have this kind of relationship with anyone inside the company, let alone a female, and not a female who is assertive and mature rather than a smiling and adoring young subject who does exactly what he asks. There was a conflicting message of wanting to develop, learn and collaborate with me, and not wanting to truly hear what I wanted to say, perhaps even being intimidated by the whole situation. Every time we ended a meeting, I would feel that all he wanted to hear was how great he was as a CEO and that he expected me, perhaps because I am a woman, to adore him. At the same time, he was too smart to think that adoring him would really bring him any value. Therefore, for this pattern to change, both of our habits needed to change.

In summary, I feel that we were both conflicted about our roles and that my being a woman was one of the sources of this confusion. This dynamic gradually eroded my confidence that I was giving any value at all in our exchange, and my attempts at opening a more trusting dialogue gradually declined. Continuing to challenge the expected status quo and to be frank about my feelings may have gradually tilted this relationship and both our habits and routines towards a more productive exchange.

5.3 Power relations on the executive team: One, two, three, or four CEOs?

Elias (1978) understands power as a structural characteristic of all human interactions, neither good nor bad (or possibly both) but a relationship in which, paradoxically, we are enabled and constrained by the figurations of power in which we find ourselves. As players in a game, we simultaneously become co-operators and competitors among ourselves, and co-operators and competitors towards other groups.

In describing The Civilizing Process, Elias argues that as society evolved over time, a greater differentiation and specialisation has grown, and people have become more dependent on each other. Our need for love, respect, recognition, care, money, and a career make us dependent on others, and paradoxically they are dependent on us. As we are interdependent human beings, we are inevitably involved in power relations:

“We are tied together as though by bonds of elastic in what Elias termed “figurations”, where the movement of one person affects, and is affected by, the network or web of relationships, the figuration of which they are part”

(Mowles 2015, pp. 250)

In Elias' work, embodied, feeling human beings form intentions and act on them but do so within a web of other people's actions and intentions, the precise outcome of which can never be predicted. From this perspective of interdependency, the person or groups of people who have stronger needs usually have less power within the power dynamic. However, power may shift as needs change over time due to context and situation (Elias, 1978).

Jansen, the CEO of Harmonica, had founded the company merely six years ago upon finishing his studies. This was his first real job, and it had started off as a handful of people working together, with his personal leadership, charisma and vision paving the way for the young start-up. Within two years, the company had reached 100 people and the product had started to mature and increase its sales. Within four years, he decided to move his family from Europe to the United States for the next growth phase of this now significant and well-funded company.

Within the first four years, as the company doubled and quadrupled every year, a few significant leaders emerged as supporters for Jansen: the COO, Neils, who had started when they were fewer than 30 employees and took on all of the day-to-day operations of the company, the CRO, Prince, who had started shortly after and built the sales organisation, and finally, the Chief Strategy Officer, Jo, who had started later, when Jansen had already relocated to the United States, and who managed the buying and integration of Symphony Edge.

All three leaders were older in age (towards their 50s) and far more experienced than Jansen, and they brought multiple years of experience from other global software companies. In addition to his relatively young age and inexperience, Jansen's personal character is an important factor. He is a smart, talented and visionary person with the capacity to take significant risks and not to take 'no' for an answer. However, he also tends to be volatile and unpredictable, is known to throw tantrums and to take impulsive decisions, as well as to cross boundaries and approach anyone, anytime, anywhere, in a personal style that causes much chaos and confusion around him.

As the company grew, this group of four became de facto the real 'Executive Team' of Harmonica (see Appendix 1 for the executive team organisation chart – espoused and covert).

As I started interacting with this group it was clear to me that I now had to interact and get the buy-in of all four 'CEOs' if I ever wanted to initiate any kind of significant impact. I also had to factor in the new executives coming from Symphony Edge, so I began my role with a feeling that this would be quite a challenge.

I did not expect, however, to find out that Jansen was not really functioning as the CEO in the full sense, but rather he was validating every decision or opinion behind the scenes with one or more of the other three. I gradually started to notice that when Jansen did not respond to a certain request, he was re-routing it behind the scenes to one of the three to get their opinion, and later to an additional one of them to get further input.

I was 'stuck' on a classic CEO model, my mental image drawing on years of assumptions about the impact and leadership of CEOs as part of top executive teams, backed by multiple management books, as well as research literature that places the charismatic leader at the top of the influencers of the organisation, its strategy, and, ultimately, its success. For example, Ling et al. (2008) explore the transformational CEO's role in fostering corporate entrepreneurship, working under the assumption that the CEO is the key influencer on any top executive team.

Under this working model assumption, I assumed, perhaps somewhat from a traditional HR point of view, that part of my job was to align myself with him on decision-making and strategy related to people topics and that he had the decision-making authority to enable our mutual decisions to materialise. Therefore, I thought reporting directly to him was the sensible organisational structure. The reality was that Jansen was not at all acting as such. Gradually, I learnt from the rumour mill that the company may have become too big for Jansen to continue leading, and that in fact the three senior leaders around him were doing everything they could to re-route decisions behind his back and NOT involve him in key decisions to avoid the turmoil that he tended to create.

Thus, the formal source of power that I was used to collaborating with in order to make people decisions in the company and with whom to establish a coalition was not enough to make an impact in this company. Jansen was also grappling with finding a way to influence this new organisation. He was used to making independent decisions with no consultation at all, and his ability to make good calls was high while the company was smaller, centred in his home country, and he was thoroughly involved in day-to-day business. Was I the one with the reduced sense of confidence and self-esteem in my new position as the CHRO of Harmonica, or was I affected by a CEO who was struggling to make an impact and experiencing low self-confidence himself? Paradoxically, there is a good chance that we were both in a similar position.

Was I doing good by bringing key people topics to him and thus helping him with his own personal transformation and strengthening him with my professional authority, or was I causing damage by pulling a capricious CEO into the work that three other seasoned executives were doing everything in their power to un-involve him from? And how would all of this influence the company's chances of succeeding during the rapid growth following the merge? As I reflect on the decision-making dynamics between these three seniors, I notice that they often do not agree on how to move forward and negotiate thoroughly between them, sometimes dividing the decision-making and sometimes stopping it altogether.

Stepping back and looking at my situation relative to the CEO and the other key members on the executive team, I can clearly see the vigorous competition at play between all of us. From one vantage point, I can see a group of smart, caring, hardworking people who really want this

combined company and its CEO, who is a lovable and admired figure, to succeed. At the same time, these people are experiencing the struggle to make an impact and have their voice heard or position themselves as authorities in a new configuration. In this aggressive scenario (well covered by pleasantries and rational analyses of pros and cons), no wonder I completely lost my sense of confidence.

Mowles (2015) points to the paradoxical nature of cooperation and competition in organisations. In any situation, where there are competing goods with no obvious way of sifting or choosing between them, the way forward is likely to be contested. Finding ways to explore these competing conceptions of what is good is at the heart of organisational life and life in general.

Inevitably, conflicting processes of engagement which arise between people trying to get things done together activate this paradox of cooperation and competition. Most people are trying to contribute to the broader undertaking of which they are a part of, and to see their organisation succeed and thrive, as this is what their own success is bound to. At the same time, people are interested in what they are doing at work, they want to succeed on a personal level, and they strive for recognition and status. The individual's ability to take decisions and impact others depends on the power of the independent actions concerned, the degree of reciprocal dependence, who is more able to limit whom by their activity (Elias, 2001).

Thus, the bottom line is that a great deal of managerial work consists of ongoing struggles for dominance and status:

“Real administrative effectiveness flows, in fact, from the prestige that one establishes with other managers. Prestige in managerial hierarchies depends not only on position as determined by the crucial indices of rank, grade, title and salary, and the external symbols of power. Even more fundamentally, it consists of the socially recognized ability to work one's will, to get one's way, to have the say-so when one chooses in both the petty and large choices of organisational life”

(Jackall 2010, p 208)

The final straw was when I was calculating the past year's performance bonuses for the ex-Symphony Edge group, and I sent my recommendations to Jansen, Neils and Sergei for approval. Jansen never responded. Two days later I checked with Sergei about my recommendation towards the bonus payments, and I learned that in fact he and Neils had been discussing the plan and agreeing on budget without involving me. They did not implement my recommendations and were negotiating other alternatives, yet I was not part of the discussion. At that point I realised that the reporting line was significant, and I had been excluded from the

decision-making group, although Sergei, my peer from Symphony Edge, was in the right group (he was reporting directly to Jansen). It was at that moment that I felt I had no choice but to leave the company. Three months later I received a new offer, waited to collect the retention bonus, and submitted my resignation.

Elias (1978) understands power as a structural characteristic of all human interactions, neither good nor bad (or possibly both) but a relationship in which, paradoxically, we are enabled and constrained by the figurations of power in which we find ourselves. As players in a game, we simultaneously become co-operators and competitors among ourselves, and co-operators and competitors towards other groups.

In describing The Civilizing Process, Elias argues that as society evolved over time, a greater differentiation and specialisation has grown, and people have become more dependent on each other. Our need for love, respect, recognition, care, money, and a career make us dependent on others, and paradoxically they are dependent on us. As we are interdependent human beings, we are inevitably involved in power relations:

“We are tied together as though by bonds of elastic in what Elias termed “figurations”, where the movement of one person affects, and is affected by, the network or web of relationships, the figuration of which they are part”

(Mowles 2015, pp. 250)

In Elias’ work, embodied, feeling human beings form intentions and act on them but do so within a web of other people’s actions and intentions, the precise outcome of which can never be predicted. From this perspective of interdependency, the person or groups of people who have stronger needs usually have less power within the power dynamic. However, power may shift as needs change over time due to context and situation (Elias, 1978).

Jansen, the CEO of Harmonica, had founded the company merely six years ago upon finishing his studies. This was his first real job, and it had started off as a handful of people working together, with his personal leadership, charisma and vision paving the way for the young start-up. Within two years, the company had reached 100 people and the product had started to mature and increase its sales. Within four years, he decided to move his family from Europe to the United States for the next growth phase of this now significant and well-funded company.

Within the first four years, as the company doubled and quadrupled every year, a few significant leaders emerged as supporters for Jansen: the COO, Neils, who had started when they were fewer than 30 employees and took on all of the day-to-day operations of the company, the CRO, Prince, who had started shortly after and built the sales organisation, and finally, the Chief Strategy Officer, Jo, who had started later, when Jansen had already relocated to the United States, and who managed the buying and integration of Symphony Edge.

All three leaders were older in age (towards their 50s) and far more experienced than Jansen, and they brought multiple years of experience from other global software companies. In addition to his relatively young age and inexperience, Jansen's personal character is an important factor. He is a smart, talented and visionary person with the capacity to take significant risks and not to take 'no' for an answer. However, he also tends to be volatile and unpredictable, is known to throw tantrums and to take impulsive decisions, as well as to cross boundaries and approach anyone, anytime, anywhere, in a personal style that causes much chaos and confusion around him.

As the company grew, this group of four became de facto the real 'Executive Team' of Harmonica (see Appendix 1 for the executive team organisation chart – espoused and covert).

As I started interacting with this group it was clear to me that I now had to interact and get the buy-in of all four 'CEOs' if I ever wanted to initiate any kind of significant impact. I also had to factor in the new executives coming from Symphony Edge, so I began my role with a feeling that this would be quite a challenge.

I did not expect, however, to find out that Jansen was not really functioning as the CEO in the full sense, but rather he was validating every decision or opinion behind the scenes with one or more of the other three. I gradually started to notice that when Jansen did not respond to a certain request, he was re-routing it behind the scenes to one of the three to get their opinion, and later to an additional one of them to get further input.

I was 'stuck' on a classic CEO model, my mental image drawing on years of assumptions about the impact and leadership of CEOs as part of top executive teams, backed by multiple management books, as well as research literature that places the charismatic leader at the top of the influencers of the organisation, its strategy, and, ultimately, its success. For example, Ling et al. (2008) explore the transformational CEO's role in fostering corporate entrepreneurship, working under the assumption that the CEO is the key influencer on any top executive team.

Under this working model assumption, I assumed, perhaps somewhat from a traditional HR point of view, that part of my job was to align myself with him on decision-making and strategy related to people topics and that he had the decision-making authority to enable our mutual decisions to materialise. Therefore, I thought reporting directly to him was the sensible organisational structure. The reality was that Jansen was not at all acting as such. Gradually, I learnt from the rumour mill that the company may have become too big for Jansen to continue leading, and that in fact the three senior leaders around him were doing everything they could to re-route decisions behind his back and NOT involve him in key decisions to avoid the turmoil that he tended to create.

Thus, the formal source of power that I was used to collaborating with in order to make people decisions in the company and with whom to establish a coalition was not enough to make an

impact in this company. Jansen was also grappling with finding a way to influence this new organisation. He was used to making independent decisions with no consultation at all, and his ability to make good calls was high while the company was smaller, centred in his home country, and he was thoroughly involved in day-to-day business. Was I the one with the reduced sense of confidence and self-esteem in my new position as the CHRO of Harmonica, or was I affected by a CEO who was struggling to make an impact and experiencing low self-confidence himself? Paradoxically, there is a good chance that we were both in a similar position.

Was I doing good by bringing key people topics to him and thus helping him with his own personal transformation and strengthening him with my professional authority, or was I causing damage by pulling a capricious CEO into the work that three other seasoned executives were doing everything in their power to un-involve him from? And how would all of this influence the company's chances of succeeding during the rapid growth following the merge? As I reflect on the decision-making dynamics between these three seniors, I notice that they often do not agree on how to move forward and negotiate thoroughly between them, sometimes dividing the decision-making and sometimes stopping it altogether.

Stepping back and looking at my situation relative to the CEO and the other key members on the executive team, I can clearly see the vigorous competition at play between all of us. From one vantage point, I can see a group of smart, caring, hardworking people who really want this combined company and its CEO, who is a lovable and admired figure, to succeed. At the same time, these people are experiencing the struggle to make an impact and have their voice heard or position themselves as authorities in a new configuration. In this aggressive scenario (well covered by pleasantries and rational analyses of pros and cons), no wonder I completely lost my sense of confidence.

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6. Conclusions and future research

In the analysis above, I have attempted to illustrate that although we tend to think of self-confidence as a highly individualised phenomena to do with personality or personal experience, and psychological research tends to focus on that line of thinking, in fact self-confidence is highly complex and is influenced significantly by our social relations with the important people in our environment.

Having shared the circumstances that led to my increasingly reduced feeling of self-confidence, and after touching on some of the traditional literature pertaining to self-confidence, I now present three lines of thinking on how self-confidence may be relational:

- (1) The influence of being in the outsider group: The gossip about us, the outsiders from an acquired company, made me feel ‘othered’, much as illustrated in Elias (1994), and created a situation that reduced my self-confidence within the new group. I then

discovered that many of my peers from the acquired company felt exactly the same way as I did – worthless outsiders with no chance of making an impact on the new configuration. Thus, the relational position we were all in had affected our sense of confidence in the same way, yet we interpreted it as a personal and individual shortcoming.

- (2) The influence of my gender as the only woman on the executive team and how this influenced my relationship with the CEO: In this regard, my habitual stance towards men had the effect of confining my range of optional behaviours. As Sullivan (2000) describes the habitual routine of being a woman in a male-dominated environment, it seemed to push me into offering smiling admiration and adoration while having little significant impact, or, conversely, to battle in a 'male' fashion and still have little significant impact. Thus, I felt that I was being disciplined into reciprocally conforming to a gendered expectation of power relations. Smile, admire, look attractive, and do not compete with the male hegemony. Both positions contributed to my feeling ostracised and consequently reduced my self-confidence.
- (3) As Jackall (2010) stipulates, a great deal of managerial work consists of ongoing struggles for dominance and status. Thus, being included in the right group and reporting to the right person has a significant impact on one's ability to exert power and feel confident. I can argue that my entire longevity in the company could have panned out differently had my reporting line started with the CEO and had I felt equally positioned to make an impact. Interestingly, this had more to do with being in a peer relationship with the others in his trusted circle rather than necessarily working directly with him. Confidence, especially on senior leadership teams, has to do with the power groups you associate with.

From these three perspectives and examples, I concluded that there was, by design, a game that I was not invited to participate in, which included the 'four CEOs' (Jansen, Neils, Prince and Jo), all Spanish, all male, and all part of the acquiring company. I would speculate that a significant influence on self-confidence at work has to do with the power relations in the surrounding significant environment, and more specifically with exclusion or inclusion in that group (Elias 1994). Being excluded from the dominant group created my sense of lowered self-confidence and ultimately led to my decision to leave.

Interestingly, traditional psychology literature which centres on the individual's self-confidence somewhat in isolation from the environment did anticipate my leaving, as studies consistently show the correlation between lowered organisational self-esteem and inclination to leave the company (Pierce and Gardner, 2004; Bowling 2010). Thus, it seems that the psychological literature can track the phenomena's consequences, yet I believe deeply understanding the

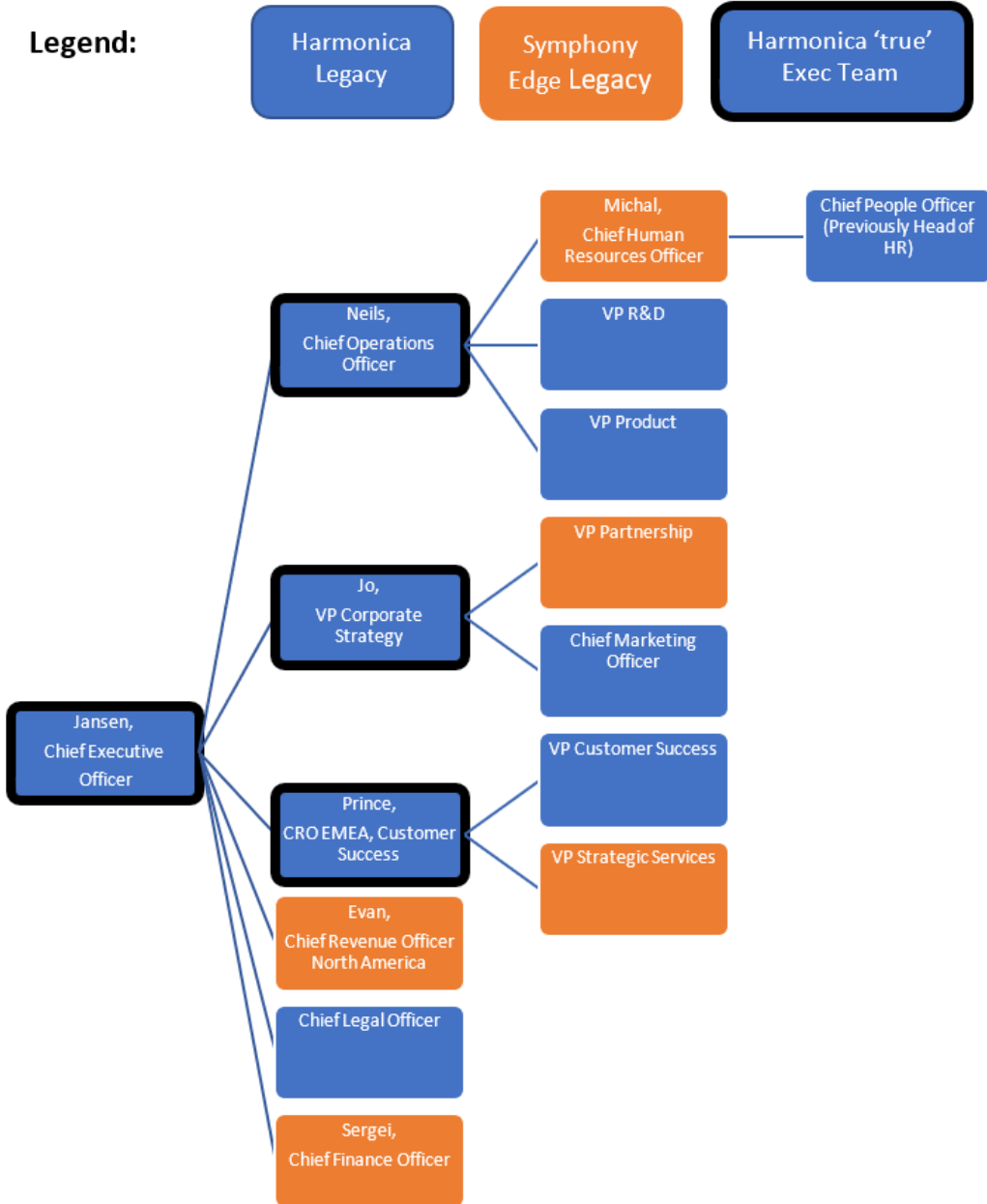
phenomena in a complex world fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity requires more of a social view.

If I were to define the concept of self-confidence the way I experienced and related to it in this project I would endeavour to name it ***social self-confidence*** defined as ***the changing sense of self-esteem based on a person's own relational history and the power group inclusion and relevance on the job; the sense of being listened to and reciprocated in relevant forums; a sense of recognition by important peers in relevant power circles at work.***

In my next project I will more deeply research the topic of social self-confidence as it relates to gender and the profession of Human Resources. During the writing of this project, I came to notice the complex weaving between the Human Resources profession and the female gender, and how this complexity further hinders self-confidence by design and places us women who have chosen to take up this profession in difficult situations.

Appendix 1

Executive Team Organisation Chart Post Acquisition – Espoused & Covert:



Project 4

Relational Self-confidence: Recognition, Belonging and Power Group Influences

Michal Goldstein

April 2021

In my third research project I explored the relational aspects of self-confidence at work, and proposed a definition for self-confidence which emphasises relationships:

Social Self-Confidence:

The changing sense of self-esteem based on a person's own relational history and inclusion in relevant power groups; the sense of being listened to and reciprocated in relevant forums; the sense of recognition by important peers in relevant power circles at work.

The above definition of self-confidence was derived from an analysis of a few narratives in my previous position in an acquired company. There, I explored how my own sense of reduced self-confidence in a post-acquisition environment was rooted in my exclusion from specific discussions in groups I perceived as important for my influence and success as head of Human Resources.

In the above definition I mention power groups. I do not refer to power in the traditional sense of how it relates to a high position in the hierarchy that entails structural (political) power and resources over others lower in status in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1968). Instead, power is referred to in relation to Norbert Elias's (1970) interpretation of power as social, and reflecting the interdependency of people on each other, so that we ultimately cannot accomplish anything without relationships with others. In this sense, power emerges in our constant competing and cooperating with others to accomplish our goals and thus is an aspect of every act of human relating. Since we need others to accomplish our goals, we cannot do whatever we please, and since they need us, neither can they. We constrain each other at the same time as enabling each other, and it is this paradoxical need that constitutes power (Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

According to Elias, the balance of power relations will always be more skewed to one person than to another, based on the level of need. Thus, power from this perspective refers to usually fluid patterns of perceived need and is expressed as figurations of relationships. These figurations are social patterns of groupings in which some are included, and others excluded. By being included in this group and excluded from that group our identity is formed (Elias, 1970).

Viewing relations and dynamics at work through Elias's theoretical lens helps understand the underlying complexity which is usually left unnoticed and dismissed in day-to-day work situations, in which the focus tends to be on tasks, models, visions and plans rather than on relationships between people.

I am now a few months into a new role of Executive Vice President for Human Resources (EVP HR) at a global technology company based in Israel. This is a publicly traded company, and the position is significantly more complex than my previous one due to the company being operational in 40+ countries. The company develops and deploys a highly sophisticated and

technologically complex set of products and includes more than 1500 employees. The executive team is comprised of thirteen people, all of whom are men except for me.

In this project, I engage in a more in-depth exploration of how exclusion and inclusion from relevant power groups (those that are important for us to be successful) at work has the potential to impact a person's self-confidence intensely. I focus on the phenomenon of recognition, and what constitutes a feeling of being recognised or not at work, especially as a member of a top management team where accountability for results heightens the need to impact fairly quickly. As our experience becomes more compounded in the increasingly volatile and dynamic modern world of achievement where nothing is ever 'good enough' (Han, 2015), I believe many professionals and leaders experience fluctuations in self-confidence which hinder the quality of their day to day experience, while also inflicting frequent and costly leavings and changes in work places, as they search for a more balanced and affirming work life.

Our emotional responses are essential to our understanding of the world. They inform us in a brief instant about our experience in a visceral, embodied way that impacts immediately. Indeed, our feelings and emotions, along with other bodily perceptions, are the means by which we meaningfully orientate ourselves within a particular situation, as well as in relation to others who are part of that situation (Burkitt, 2014).

Mowles (2015) argues that:

“Because it is impossible not to be affected emotionally by one's involvement in work, then paying attention to what we and others are feeling is crucial in order better to understand and to deal with the contradictions of working life“

(Mowles, 2015: p. 130)

With this in mind, I am hoping to shed light on feelings of misrecognition and exclusion (Honneth, 1995, 2001) and how the struggle for recognition (Taylor 1994, Honneth 1995, Fraser 2001) shapes others in our environment, while at the same time shaping our own self-confidence. I will explore the struggle for recognition and effects on self-confidence at work from several perspectives, while going deeply into Honneth's theory and some of the criticism and expansions on his views (See chapter 2). I will focus on being a new member on the team, on the fact that I am in the social and human sciences domain in a highly mathematical engineering organisation. Additional aspects of the exploration will refer to my gender as a female in a male dominated environment, and how my starting point and ongoing ability to influence my standing as a female in the recognition struggle may be weaker than that of my male colleagues at work (Syna & Palgi, 2014).

In the next chapter, I would like to share a few vignettes from my first few months in the company, in which the sense of exclusion from significant company activities and groups caused

fluctuations in my sense of being recognised, as well as my self-confidence. I will also explore why it did not, in fact, impact my self-confidence detrimentally. I will make a case for how reflexivity can be a catalysing process for increasing self-confidence and maintaining balance and well-being at work. Reflexivity means being able to examine and, if motivated, transcend established templates for how to think and act (Alvesson et al, 2017).

Lastly, in order to be more aware of the power relations in play during the exchanges reported in the narratives below, it may be useful to pause and reflect on the performative nature of our social interactions at work.

Goffman (1959), a sociologist who researched the human tendency for performative presentation in everyday life interactions, discussed the human predicament in which we are all more or less consciously playing a role.

“.....a human being in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may or may not do while sustaining his performance before them”

(Goffman, 1959, p.8)

Simply stated, in the presence of others, we often seek to control the impression that others form of us in order to achieve our goals.

1. Being new in the role, outsider again, and a potential for reduced self-confidence

The main characters in the narratives included in this section are as follows (in order of appearance, pseudonyms, except for me):

Michal (me) – Executive Vice President for Human Resources (EVP HR), reporting to CEO

Adam – Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Henry – Chief Financial Officer (CFO), reporting to CEO

Lilly – Director of Compensation & Benefits (C&B Director), reporting to me

Bob – Chief Information Officer (CIO), reporting to CEO

1.1 My business or not my business?

I opened the video channel for my weekly one-on-one with Adam. These meetings started to be online very shortly after I started my new job, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic hitting the world, my country and our workplace. As mentioned, Selenium, my new company, is a global organisation. From an organisational culture perspective, it was quite traditional (e.g. hierarchical, locally oriented, etc.) so as the pandemic hit us, we had to adapt quickly to a new world of working. With no prior notice, all at once everyone started working from home, using video and functioning as if we were at the office. We were now operating in a virtual environment that no one had ever thought could be successful before the pandemic hit us. Paradoxically, although I started as head of Human Resources just a few days prior to the onset of the pandemic, and had to onboard in a virtual manner, my ability to make quick strides as a leader in the domain of people was enhanced. I felt that I was making significant contributions very soon after I had started, due to the crisis in general, the need to facilitate significant change (working with video, as well as other necessary projects to sustain the company's wellbeing in a crisis situation) and the need to keep people engaged and connected. I believe this unique entrance into the role, in which my presence and ingenuity were highly needed for business survival, may have enhanced my self-confidence and helped buffer some of the difficulty of being new. From Elias's (2001) perspective, the power balance tilted in my favor as the need for my services was higher due to the pandemic.

As any CEO I have worked with, I knew it would take time to establish a relationship of trust with Adam and that I would have to bring complex and sometimes difficult issues to his table as our relationship develops.

This video meeting surprised me, nonetheless. It was our weekly one-to-one, about two months after I started. We got on the call and exchanged pleasantries. I mentioned I had a long list of topics, yet I would like to start with the compensation and performance reviews of the executive team, his direct reports. Specifically, I mentioned one of the regional presidents who had asked me what the status of his compensation increase following his promotion this year. The minute I raised the topic, I could see Adam's facial expression change, he became very angry and asked me why I was raising this topic? It was none of my business, I had already asked him about the performance reviews for the executive team a few times and he said he would take care of it, he did not understand why I was dealing with issues that were not my responsibility and told me to leave it alone.

I was dumbfounded for a moment. Speaking on the video has an amplifying effect at times, when both our faces are so close to each other on the screen. Paradoxically, I could probably sense his emotional unease via video more than I could if we were seated across the table in his large office at work. He was looking right into my eyes and telling me to get off the topic which

was clearly part of my responsibility. How do I deal with this uncontrolled, disproportionate anger? There was also something about the way he framed his dissatisfaction which seemed to attribute the issue to me, personally. “Why are you so obsessed with the compensation of the executive team?” he had said. “We have a great compensation scheme at Selenium, and I don’t need another person voicing issues related to compensation, this is my business as CEO”. It made me feel as if he sees me as a manipulator, as someone trying to gain power by addressing a sensitive topic related to my peers perhaps, or as someone who is ‘poking her nose’ into other people’s business.

But I am leading the domain of people, and every single participant on the executive team has mentioned their compensation and were sharing their frustration at not being told what the status of their proposed increases was, or how Adam summarises the previous year for them in terms of their performance and contribution to the company. Nothing was communicated to them. Clearly, this is a topic requiring a discussion at the very least, and obviously (to me) as his HR business partner, it was part of my domain to influence Adam as the one responsible for the executive team’s wellbeing and motivation.

I questioned possible reasons for his reaction. Perhaps it was his sensitivity that people were coming to me rather than directly to him, that triggered his anger. Perhaps my predecessor did not directly deal with the executive compensation, perhaps the way I worded the topic made him suspicious that I had alternative motives (such as pushing for my own compensation). All these scenarios and questions were running through my head as I tried to make sense of it in a brief moment of time.

In previous roles, I most likely would have taken offence and stopped talking or I would have argued that he was getting it all wrong, he does not know me at all, how dare he make such an allegation about my motives, etc... I would then question myself: maybe he was right, maybe I really got myself involved in a difficult topic much too soon. In this meeting, I understood immediately that this issue is a difficult one for him judging by the amount of discomfort that he displayed, rather than having anything to do with me. Thus, I was able to set aside my own frustration and focus on him and on our developing relationship.

In his book about performance in social relations, Goffman (1959) explores how every-day life actors, by way of dramaturgical practices, influence how other actors perceive or define the situation at hand and their role and impression making. An important part of performance is a person’s ‘front’. The front consists of the attitudes, presence and expressions actors use in order to construct a certain image of who they are. Goffman points out that a person’s chance of being taken seriously in his position relies on his comportment.

In my (perhaps unconscious) awareness of the impression I was trying to convey as head of Human Resources, I pulled myself together and said calmly that I understood this is a sensitive

topic for him, and that I am not here to push him on increasing compensations. I am simply saying that there is a communication gap and that a few members on his team are uncomfortable with not knowing what is happening to their compensation. Therefore, I do think we should talk about it for a moment. However, if he is not interested in doing so, then this is his choice, and we can move on to the next topic. I deliberately underplayed the issue, avoided 'dramatising' and sounded matter of fact in order to offset his emotional reaction somewhat, as well as mine, exemplifying what Goffman described as keeping my 'front'.

His face relaxed a little following my response. He mentioned that the regional presidents (all sales executives) can be manipulative and that he did not need them to start pushing their agendas through me. It struck me that Adam perceived a good chunk of his team as manipulative and now he is accusing me of the same. This realisation helped me distance my own feelings from the exchange. He also briefly shared that the Board of Directors did not approve implementing the executive increases in compensation just yet given the uncertainty of the pandemic. I recommended that he speak with each of them personally, acknowledge that the compensation topic is open, and reflect his plan to get it resolved. In addition, I mentioned that all his direct reports are expecting their annual performance review and that I think he should make the time for them. I then moved to the next topic on our agenda, respecting his wish.

The minute I changed the topic, Adam returned to his usual composure: reflective, open minded and action oriented. I continued the conversation as planned yet was quite shocked and surprised at how in one moment I was completely shut out, and in the next moment, it was 'business as usual'. I worked hard to avoid taking it personally or showing how shaken I actually was, exemplifying how confidence is an affectual, embodied experience (Burkitt, 1999).

In conversation with others, I found out that prior to my joining the company, Adam had had a second in command. This person had served as president of part of the regions, as well as in finance and other key functions. He had recently left, and I found out that the two used to work very closely together yet used to openly (and often loudly) argue about everything. Adam had respected that person tremendously, despite the disagreements. I asked myself whether I should have stopped and held my ground more strongly. Should I have raised my voice straight away? Does the fact that I am a woman rather than a man enable or constrain such a connection between arguing yet respecting? My female friends and peers in senior positions often share that women tend to be discounted at work when they become emotional. As a female, if you raise your voice and show up as too emotional and 'with low self-control' you risk becoming 'shrill', 'a shrew' and other unhelpful stigmas. In his book about body and self, Ian Burkitt, a sociological researcher suggests that women and minority groups tend to be shut out of power circles such as those in governance and leadership. This is because women are often equated with the dangerous, irrational, bodily forces, such as emotion which may overthrow

rational mental controls, whereas men are associated with the rational and measured (Burkitt, 1999) and therefore can express more emotions such as anger or frustration that can be accepted. See also Gibson et al (2009) who found that, compared to expressions of anger by men, expressions of anger by women are associated with less positive organisational outcomes.

My instinctual stance was that Adam may not respect this kind of behaviour from me, either because I was still new, or because I was a woman, or because as a Human Resources professional, I was expected to be calm, reasonable and unemotional, or indeed, all of the above. It could totally have been my own interpretation of the situation and not related to him at all, as I did not identify any signal or hint that this was Adam's perspective or expectation. Although I can be quite emotional in my interpretations of situations at times, I felt that a better tactic to confront his emotional reaction would be to stay calm and 'professional'. This could have been a gendered habitual response or one to do with the profession of Human Resources and partly as my positioning strategy (performance) with him and the organisation in general.

But where does the notion that being emotional at work is not 'professional' stem from?

I may have picked this mental association as part of my growing up in the US and taking up Human Resources positions there for a few years during my career. As elaborated in his book about Corporate American culture which I explored in project 2, Jackall (2010) brings robust evidence of the unwritten behavioural code that managers abide by in Corporate America. To give just one of many examples:

"Managers also stress the need to exercise iron self-control and to have the ability to mask all emotion and intention behind bland, smiling, and agreeable public faces. One must avoid both excessive gravity and unwarranted levity. One must blunt one's aggressiveness with blandness. One must be buoyant and enthusiastic but never Pollyannaish. One must not reveal one's leanings until one's ducks are in a row. One must be able to listen to others' grievances and even attacks upon oneself while maintaining an appropriately concerned, but simultaneously dispassionate countenance. In such situations, some managers don masks of Easter-Island-statue like immobility; others a deadpan fisheye; and the most adroit, a disarming ingenuousness".

Jackall (2010), p. 51

Conversely, Israeli organisational conduct tends to legitimise emotional communication, including at times raising voices and dramatising situations. Yet for all of the reasons above, my tendency is to downplay emotions and focus on cold reasoning as much possible, positioning myself as an equal and rational player in a male dominated world, a political tactic that I have learned is effective at work.

To summarise, whether it was due to my own biases or Adam's original gesture, or both, I was left asking myself whether I would ever be included in his inner circle of trust like other seniors he worked with on the executive team, a critical success factor for my role. I also noted a questioning of my own self-confidence and assertiveness, having just been shut out of a key activity that I perceived should be under my immediate domain.

1.2 Included or Excluded?

Some weeks later, Adam's personal assistant sent a request that I prepare a thirty-minute presentation for the next Board of Directors meeting relating to an important change programme we were running in the company towards next year. The topic included some technical and financial aspects managed by Henry, the CFO, who was head of the project, and some people aspects which included a change management programme which I was leading, with an emphasis for the board on people risk and mitigation.

In my next one- on-one meeting with Adam, I brought the topic up. I mentioned that I was working on the board presentation related to the above-mentioned change topic. Again, an abrupt stop in the conversation flow occurred. He looked straight at me (this time we were in his office, as we were on alternating office and home days, and today was an office day) and said, "I did not ask you to prepare these slides, I asked Henry, and I would like him to present in the board meeting". A shy smile, indicating he may not be comfortable to say it, yet he was quite firm in his resolution for Henry to present. Again, I was quite surprised, I immediately felt excluded and delegitimised. I mentioned that his PA had asked me to write the presentation. Did he not remember that he had asked her to speak with me? And the realisation that yes, this is a people topic related to a significant change program which I am handling quite intensely, therefore it makes sense that I would be the one preparing the presentation slides and, in all honesty, sharing them with the board, too (internal thoughts running through my mind)

I contemplated how to respond. If I state the obvious (this is a people issue therefore I should own it, prepare it and present it) or try to convince him that this is 'my' topic, I would possibly lose credit and be perceived, yet again, as trying to gain political power, similar to the compensation situation described above. I was very aware of the underlying power negotiation, and the automatic, below-the-surface, masking of this power game and pretending it does not exist.

If I were to say nothing or concur, we would move forward to another topic, and that would indicate that I was in agreement to let others present my topics and be my voice and thus become invisible and unrecognised. I decided to remain levelheaded and professional, not to get upset and keep my emotions to myself, again. I said that I will be preparing the slides for

Henry, and that I will prepare him for presenting the people update. Of course, I was showcasing my professional, matter of fact, non-emotional, non-personal 'professional persona' and was masking my disappointment and sense of exclusion. However, I was thinking that in the longer term I would gain more towards building our relationship and my positioning by appearing cool and calm than by struggling here to present, at the risk of being perceived as focusing on my own personal agenda.

Mumby & Putnam (1992) describe the politics of emotions at work, urging theorists to move away from the traditional dichotomy between rationality and emotionality in organisations. In their critique of Herbert Simon's concept of 'bounded rationality' they point out that his line of thinking emphasises the rational, cognitive, controlled decision making prevalent in organisations, which reflects male domination that is engrained into the cultural norm. Under these circumstances, organisations can affect cultural control of emotional experiences.

My reaction was aligned with the expected norm, and we then moved to other topics and the meeting continued pleasantly as usual, as if nothing happened. Often, these types of encounters in which emotions and power dynamics remain below ground, impact the well-being and sense of self-confidence of all involved. Mumby & Putnam (1992) inquire into an alternative mode of organising, one which is not managed under the marginalised dichotomous pair rationality-emotionality, introducing the term of 'bounded emotionality' in which nurturance, caring, community, supportiveness and interrelatedness prevail.

In my next interaction with Henry, the CFO (Henry and I have worked together in the past in a previous company, and he was the one who convinced me to come and join Selenium when I was in the interview stages) he mentioned that this people topic is part of the board agenda this time, and he thinks I should be joining and presenting. I felt recognised for a moment, and glad that I had not invented this whole story, and that it was indeed my job in the first place.

Why did Adam decide to keep me away from this important circle of the Board of Directors? This was the second time he had kept me out of a board discussion. The first time was a few weeks after I had joined, when he had to approve the compensation increases of his executive team mentioned earlier. He prepared the increases with Lilly, the director of Compensation & Benefits on my team, but did not invite me to this preparation meeting. In addition, when I asked whether I should be part of that board discussion dealing with compensation he said "No, it is too soon, I expect an ugly discussion, and you really do not want to meet our board so quickly, trust me on this one". I decided to drop the topic at the time, attributing his lack of inclusion to my obvious newness.

However, at this point I had already been in the company a few months, I am clearly leading the change program in this project so I should be presenting the topic. What is leading Adam to exclude me from that circle of the board members? Is it something that I am contributing to,

unknowingly? Is it gendered? How should I react? Should I let time take its course and wait patiently? Or am I losing momentum and an opportunity to assert myself as a professional? At this moment I was negotiating my self-confidence and it momentarily waivered, as I let the feeling of exclusion or what I perceived as mis-recognition by an important person take hold.

How much longer will I remain the new member on the executive team?

In my introduction meeting with Bob, our CIO who has been in the company for more than three years, he started the conversation by stating: "I am still new around here, only three years in the company". I was quite surprised, coming from within a company where the average tenure was 18-20 months, and where three years was considered a long period of employment. I later found out that many of the company's employees have been around for longer than 10 years, some even twenty years and above. Adam himself has been the CEO of this company for the last fifteen plus years. Clearly, being new here can carry consequences for years. The sense of exclusion, not belonging and at times invisibility based on being new was felt quite strongly and could easily have impacted on a reduced sense of self-confidence. It felt that being new is quite restrictive, as if I had to pace myself before I ventured to give an opinion.

Yet to my surprise, this attitude did not affect my self-confidence as strongly this time around as it did in my previous company. I tended to see the whole situation as a power game related to the sense of identity of all the players that was shifting, also due to my joining the organisation. I could see that part of the negotiation was about the role of Human Resources in the organisation, and it has to do with patterns of exclusion and inclusion that are played in this company (for example, in the first year everyone is considered an 'outsider'). I no longer attributed the exclusion as related solely to me, as I had done in the past, and this rather fresh perspective significantly contributed to my resilience in my first few months. I can see that my increased capacity for reflexivity in this situation led to me being far more detached in the way I was involving myself than in past roles, restoring a sense of power over the situation. I attribute this change in perspective somewhat to my increasing experience as head of Human Resources, to the fact that my newness gave me some room to evaluate and reflect on the situation more objectively, and mainly to the opportunity to develop reflexive thinking as part of my community of research where I have the opportunity to engage with my peers on the programme and explore these complex patterns of power relating, thought and behaviour formation.

1.3 Skilled or Unskilled?

These were some of my first encounters with Adam. Adam is a skilled mathematician, and very proud of his technological background in one of Israel's elite technology army units. He loves

numbers and is passionate about quantifying and controlling results via measurement. He recently shared with me that when he was quite young, he joined a special programme that teaches people to calculate large numbers easily, which enables him to look at a page full of numbers (usually 7 figures and above) and spot any discrepancy within seconds.

I must say that this is a skill that is far down on my list. As I mentioned in my first research project, mathematics always seemed very theoretical and uninteresting to me, and at the same time, I admired people who knew how to 'speak the mathematics language', starting with my father who was an avid mathematician and technologist. There were times in my career, which was mostly in technology companies, surrounded by highly mathematical engineers (mostly men), that I asked myself whether I was smart enough to deal with these people and bring value, having been socialised that mastering sciences and mathematics means being smart. After much debate and multiple interactions along my career as a Human Resources professional, I constructed my own version of 'smart' via my social relations and interactions: I was smart and analytical, yet not necessarily mathematical. Therefore, I have a lot to contribute, as I bring a different perspective, coupled with the analytical capabilities needed to convince colleagues to follow some of my advice. Over the years, I learned how to frame my insights and contributions in an analytical manner, backed up by data and supported by tools that enabled me to credibly take part in the conversation.

In this meeting with Adam, we were talking about equity. Stock options. This is a topic that I had not yet managed in public companies, yet it is part of my domain at Selenium, and I am just learning it.

During the conversation, and as Adam started calculating some stock formula, he mentioned that my predecessor 'was not good with numbers'. He seemed a bit demeaning when he said it, although I know that they were very close and that he appreciated her partnership tremendously when she worked with him. I immediately said, half-jokingly yet very seriously, 'do not expect me to be a mathematician, but I will know whatever I need to get the job done'.

It felt like I was being challenged, like both of us were challenged and looking to negotiate our level of confidence in our newly forming relationship. I also felt that I was assuming a power position of someone who knows what she is doing, as if I had the confidence to know everything I needed to in order to succeed (although this was my first role in a publicly traded company and we both knew it is a steep learning curve). My sense of my own performativity in the face of this unspoken negotiation was quite strong (Goffman, 1959).

His response was a long look, saying nothing, half smiling. His response immediately triggered the little girl in me who was expected to excel in mathematics but really didn't like it, along with the history of finding my own self-confidence in the face of this gap.

Was he really judging my potential contribution by my mathematical capability? Was this question about calculations intentional or a byproduct of the highly scientific culture of modern organisations?

Will I be able to be included in the right conversations and groups, even if I am not an engineer in this company? Immediately, a sense of unworthiness cropped up, as if not grasping complex mathematical equations made me less smart. The same feeling that I had had throughout my high school years, of not being good enough if I am not passionate about physics and mathematics, a message that prevailed in my home and schooling of not really belonging to the 'right' group.

Interpreting this exchange from Elias's perspective on power, I could speculate that my need here was stronger than Adam's. I needed him to either accept me to the 'group of engineers' as a capable 'numbers person' or to acknowledge that I am part of the group regardless of mathematical knowledge. He did neither, which felt like a power struggle and immediately positioned me on the receiving end, doubting my own capability to do the job.

Yet what is the 'right' group in this instance? I reminded myself that as a female in the Human Resources domain, I did not choose a mathematical career, and no one gave me this role because of these skills, but for other qualities that I bring to the position and the company. I also noted to myself, quite satisfactorily, that the topic of equity and compensation at large is often managed by the CFO. Managed by the finance people, this domain becomes very 'accurate' indeed, yet not always strategically managed and often fails to consider the entire world of employee motivation and reward. Part of the reason I chose to join Selenium, was the fact that strategic role domains were part of HR, and Adam made the precise decision to keep it in HR, rather than shift this work to finance because I think he understood the strategic quality of the domain of reward.

What was really happening in all these incidents and many others that I encountered during my initial few months in the company? Was Adam trying to establish his dominance in our relationship? Was he testing my resilience? Was he being much more thorough in doing so than if a male were to hold the same role? Or was he just being himself, a (white, senior) male in a dominant position, who was treating me just as he was treating the others, expecting that I would get accustomed to his style, just like the others did? Maybe all the above?

How did these encounters influence my self-confidence and how do they relate to my gender or other affecting factors such as my newness on the team, my distinct profession, and my personal history with my unique sensitivities? In the next section, I will try to explore some of these key themes and how they relate to being seen and recognised, included in relevant power groups and more specifically to relational self-confidence as I defined it in my previous project.

2. Self-confidence as Part of the Struggle for Recognition

2.1 Recognition as a fundamental human need: development of recognition theories

'Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.'

(Charles Taylor, 1994, p.26)

Theories of political recognition that were first formulated in the 1990s (groups in the social environment that were fighting to get equal rights via recognition in the public domain) (Taylor 1994), recognise that our identity is shaped through our relationships with others, and our being recognised by others. According to these theories, feelings of self-worth, self-respect and self-esteem are possible only if we are positively recognised by others for who we are. Both the academic research community and political activists helped develop theories of recognition, providing a new analytical prism on struggles and wishes of our age (Zurn, 2007).

Taylor (1994) distinguishes two changes that, when taken together, have made the modern preoccupation with identity and recognition inevitable. The first is the collapse of the social hierarchies that were part of the court society, which used to be the basis for honour (as an indicator of better 'worth') and the second is the development of democracy and with it, the egalitarian individualised identity, arising along with the ideal of being true to one's particular way of being.

Concurrent with the rise of individuality and personal identity, recognition theories noted that people do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition by themselves. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us. Thus, Taylor claims that the genesis of the human mind is not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but rather, dialogical.

"We negotiate our identity through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others".

(Taylor, 1994, p. 34)

Thus, according to the recognition literature, 'to be recognised' means to be seen and to be acknowledged as an "other" with our own identity, our own fundamental situation and circumstances, and our own right to have a symbolic cultural status and to be a full partner in a social interaction. Therefore, nonrecognition and misrecognition are considered a form of

symbolic violence, resulting in the depreciation and deformation of group identity and social subordination (Fraser 2001; Honneth 2001; Taylor 1994).

According to Taylor (ibid) the demand for recognition is given urgency by the supposed connections between recognition and identity, in which the latter designates a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. Taylor's thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, and often by the misrecognition of others. As a result, a person or group of people can suffer real damage and distortion if the people or society around them mirror a restrictive, demeaning or contemptible picture back to them. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Fraser (2001) questions whether recognition should be considered an issue of justice, and thus of morality, or one of the 'good life', and thus of ethics, as both Honneth (1995), see below for more on his ideas) and Taylor see it. For Honneth and Taylor, being recognised by another subject is a necessary condition for attaining full, undistorted subjectivity. To deny someone recognition is to deprive her or him of a basic prerequisite for human flourishing.

Fraser (ibid) proposes to conceive recognition as an issue of justice. Thus, one would say that it is unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interactions simply as a consequence of institutionalised patterns of cultural value in whose construction they have not equally participated, and which disparage their distinctive characteristics, or the distinctive characteristics assigned to them. Thus, according to Fraser, misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalised subordination – and thus, a serious violation of justice.

For example, in her recent book *Caste*, the American journalist Isabel Wilkerson describes in immense detail the subordination of African Americans by Americans of European origin throughout American history and focuses precisely on the extreme violation of justice stemming from misrecognition (Wilkerson, 2020).

Thus, the importance of recognition in the individual and political sense, and impact on self-worth and self-esteem has been long established, yet there are a variety of schools of thought as to how it pertains to interpreting the meaning of recognition and its implications for research and practice.

Scholars of traditional managerial studies or psychology tend to conceive recognition as contributing to personal, individual identity. This conception of identity is offered as if humans are 'closed off' from one another as discrete beings. See for example in Pierson (2011) who applies theories of recognition to 'improve individual resilience' at work (his research will be further elaborated later in this work).

In developing my thesis in the coming chapters, I approach recognition from the Hegelian tradition as reflected in the works of Mead, Taylor, Honneth and Fraser. Hegel believed that we cannot conceive of a single individual experiencing the world subjectively, but rather we begin with an already shared world of subjects interacting responsively. Hegel also emphasised the notion of mutual recognition to argue that there was an intersubjective unity of mutually recognising agents. Self-determination by a free subject can only occur through other persons who are also self-determining subjects and are doing the same. Another self-conscious subject resists the realisation of my desires by testing or challenging me and my self-world conception. It is inevitable that two self-determining, self-conscious subjects will conflict and struggle (Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

That said, we will see below that a sense of misrecognition could also be related to a wider understanding of the contextual issues involved in the relationship which may cause identity disturbances, and thus can be understood on occasion as a fuller comprehension of the relational context beyond the individual. This perspective about the complex nature of recognition and related influences on self-confidence will be developed in the following chapters.

2.2 Relational self-confidence and the struggle for recognition

In his work on the struggle for recognition, Axel Honneth (1995), a philosopher from the German critical tradition and a social theorist, builds the case for relations of mutual recognition as being a precondition for self-esteem and self-realisation. He stresses the importance of social relationships for the development and maintenance of a person's identity and claims that the very possibility of identity-formation depends crucially on the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself, which Honneth defines and elaborates on in a methodological manner, can only be acquired and maintained relationally, through being given recognition by others whom one respects. Thus, self-realisation, according to Honneth, is not about individualistic achievement as conceptualised in the dominant discourse in management and self-improvement literature or new age ideologies (for example, <https://lonerwolf.com/self-realization/>), but rather, a highly social process.

According to Honneth, self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem represent three distinct types of 'practical relations-to-self'. These are neither purely beliefs about oneself nor emotional states, but rather they involve a dynamic process in which individuals come to experience themselves as having a certain status. Honneth emphasises that coming to relate to oneself in these ways necessarily involves experiencing recognition from others.

Our relationship to ourselves is not a matter of a solitary ego appraising itself, but an intersubjective process, in which our attitude towards ourselves emerges in our encounter with another's attitude toward themselves. Thus, how someone else feels about themselves and about me will eventually influence how I feel about myself, in a complex pattern of relating and identity formation. For example, when Adam became angry and perplexed when I mentioned executive compensation, this may have reflected his own frustration but was directed at me. My question may have aggravated his own self-confidence as related to his lack of impact with his board.

Honneth identifies three spheres of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity (Honneth, 1995: 92).

Love refers to our physical needs and emotions being met by others and takes the form of our primary relationships. It provides a *basic self-confidence*.

Rights refer to the development of moral responsibility, developed through our moral relations with others. It is a mutual mode of recognition in which individuals learn to see themselves from the perspective of their partner in the interaction as having equal rights. This relation-to-self is also mediated by patterns of interaction, those organised in terms of legal rights, which Honneth sees as critical for self-respect.

Solidarity relates to recognition of our traits and abilities. It is essential for developing our *self-esteem* and for how we become 'individualised', for it is our personal traits and abilities that define our personal uniqueness. (Note the inherent paradox here that points to the complexity of human relations in that only through belonging and social relations can we acquire a confident individuality).

In a similar vein, Norbert Elias points to the civilising process where he argues that we become individuals because of the particular groups we belong to:

"The coexistence of people, the intertwining of their intentions and plans, the bonds they place on each other, all these, far from destroying individuality, provide the medium for it to develop...The social fabric, in this sense forms the substratum from which and into which the individual constantly spins and weaves his purposes. But this fabric and its actual course of historical change as a whole, is intended and planned by no one"

(Elias, 2000, pp. 543)

For Honneth, all three spheres of recognition are crucial for developing a positive attitude towards oneself. The denial of recognition provides the motivational and justificatory basis for social struggles. Specifically, it is through the emotional experiences generated by certain

attitudes and actions of others towards us that we can come to feel we are being illegitimately given or denied social recognition. The experience of negative emotional states can, in theory, reveal to us that an injustice is taking place (namely, that we are not being given due and appropriate recognition). Moreover, the development of society stems from this struggle for recognition, which pushes individuals and groups to change the status quo by putting up public resistance to the delegitimation they feel in their political environment, as we can see how the recent “#MeToo” and “Black Lives Matter” movements influenced the US.

HONNETH’S SOCIAL ESTEEM (SOLIDARITY)

Honneth stipulates that to be able to acquire an undistorted relation-to-self, people always need – over and above the experience of affectionate care (love) and legal recognition (rights) – a form of social recognition (solidarity) that allows them to relate positively to their own qualities and abilities. This is ‘given’ by others in relation to the degree to which others can help to realise culturally defined values of their community. In other words, social self-esteem is derived from the perceived contribution of an individual to a community of value via recognition from others.

Applying Honneth’s theory to work situations, I can see, for example, that being new to the company means not being in tune with the culturally defined values of Selenium. Part of contributing value and being recognised at Selenium has to do with delving into detail, being data driven, e.g., being able to show precise data points that back up one’s contributions and being immersed in the culture and people for a long time. From this perspective, I can understand that Adam’s insistence on mathematical equations and accuracy in the equity process signaled this cultural component and gave me the understanding that I would be judged on my technical / mathematical capability in this domain. In the subsequent board meeting to present the equity process for this year, we had a few mathematical errors, that delayed the decision-making process quite significantly and further delayed my ability to position myself as a valued and recognised part of this new community. Thankfully, this process came after a few months of great contribution in other domains, and thus was not detrimental to my overall entry and acceptance as a valued contributor in the company.

I argue that the dynamic described by Honneth can be seen in a similar vein (yet there is more complexity, see below) in organisations, in which we are all taking part in mutual recognition and misrecognition as part of the politics and power structures in day-to-day work life, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. Thus, the potential for fluctuations in self-confidence in the context of the struggle for recognition is quite significant. This endless struggle has a detrimental impact on how people perform and what they are concerned about in the workplace, and often causes reduced motivation, reduced productivity and ultimately increased turnover.

Indeed, in his research on French managers, Pierson (2011) raised awareness about the levels of suffering amongst managers that sometimes prevail in the workplace. He stipulated that struggles at work affect managers' sense of identity; when they are not sufficiently recognised at work, their sense of self can be destabilised, their self-esteem undermined and psychological suffering sets in.

Pierson relied on Honneth's theoretical framework of the struggle for recognition to try and design a training intervention that focuses on dialogue among people to raise awareness about the inherent struggle for recognition and impact on identity in organisational day-to-day life. He assumed that with this process, increasing resilience among individual managers would enable a heightened sense of confidence and less suffering amongst them. His results are inconclusive, and he seems to instrumentalise an approach to recognition which assumes that 'practicing' arguments and adversity makes the trainees more aware of and resilient to misrecognition. In fact, such an approach may indeed make things worse by potentially solidifying and entrenching adversity. Nonetheless, I find his perspective on the struggle for recognition interesting and generalisable as a manager in organisations who has personally felt the 'suffering' of struggling for recognition and the adverse effects on my self-confidence and ultimately on my contribution, energy and longevity (feelings of mis-recognition and decreased self-confidence on the job were significant contributors to my leaving my previous organisation, see project 3 in this work).

I proceed to analyse more of my interactions at work as described in my narratives, taking the Hegelian perspective about recognition and acknowledging some of the complexity which involves mutual recognition at work:

In each of the narratives that I shared above, I was participating in the struggle for recognition for social esteem, as was Adam. Together, we were forming our mutual relationship and positioning with each other, with potential impact on both of our self-confidence and sense of inclusion in this new 'team'. Interestingly, although Adam is my direct manager and therefore has more formal power than I do, I can see that he needed me to be a successful HR leader in the company as much as I needed him for my success. Therefore, in analysing these scenarios with hindsight, I can see that our need of each other meant we were both struggling for recognition in our power relations, and that both of us needed to acknowledge that we are on one team which is worth joining. As well, what may seem on the surface as misrecognition and exclusion, may in fact be interpreted as attempts at protecting and securing my success, a perspective that strongly impacts on my self-confidence and sense of inclusion.

In the first narrative, I was assuming that part of the definition of my role as the leader of Human Resources was to discuss remuneration and performance issues of the executive team members. Adam's reaction to this assumption was that it was 'not my job'. Analysing this

reaction from the perspective of Honneth, I can see that he was not recognising this part of my role the way I had expected, and potentially rejecting my professional identity. He was questioning my ability to contribute at all, not trusting that I could bring value and even hinting that my intervention could cause harm by injecting more unrest to a complex problem that he was dealing with. In short, he was not recognising me in the way I recognised myself or my role based on my previous work experience and interactions. This situation immediately placed me in the uncomfortable position of needing to struggle to be recognised and validate my profession and identity as an owner of executive remuneration.

Yet there is more complexity in his gesture, that we can access when analysing some of the criticism of Honneth's theory.

CRITICISM OF HONNETH'S WORK AND MORE COMPLEXITY INTRODUCED

If we apply a critical lens to Honneth's theory, we can ask whether criticism or disagreement really mean misrecognition?

A scholarly complaint about Honneth's work is that he offers an inadequate account of *power* and recognition, and their respective relationships with agency and identity-formation. McQueen (2015) stipulates that in placing the emphasis on the conditions of personal flourishing and psychological health, Honneth in fact produces a developmental model of recognition in which we could all, in theory, enjoy being fully integrated individuals through securing institutionalized, mutually exchangeable relations of recognition. However, such an account does not sufficiently address issues of normative authority and power. McQueen suggests that rather than focusing exclusively on psychic processes and experiences of self-making, we need to analyse how recognition orients us within a given social process and the role that authority and power play in this.

Therefore, recognition may not be purely about affirming an individual's view about themselves and making them 'comfortable'. Perhaps disagreement or contestation may be an important means of recognition that socialises us into cultural norms through relations of power and subordination. Indeed, part of Hegel's philosophy emphasises that the development of thought takes place through conflict between people.

From this perspective, I can view my interactions with Adam, the exclusion from the relevant board meeting in my first couple of months, the insinuated criticism about my lack of mathematical proficiency as a form of recognition in the sense of assimilating me into the culture of the company and into the intricacies of my new role as he viewed it from his position as a power figure in the organisation. This angle of interpretation opens up a de-centring of myself and acceptance of the intricacies of power within organisations in which the existing

group assimilates the new members into the new culture. When viewed from this angle, it is no longer misrecognition. In fact, it may be a type of recognition that I can view as critical for my success, despite the momentary feelings of discomfort. From such a point of view, there may be less volatility to my personal self-confidence and more synergy and flow in our interaction.

This point can be made more generally in relation to my experience as a newcomer to the team. Elias in his work *'The Established and the Outsiders'* (1994), shows how newcomers to an established community are condemned by the veteran group, and very quickly they come to see themselves as have a lower social status, although there is no evidence of an actual economically proven social gap between the veteran and new communities. Elias points out that the self-image of the newcomers is highly influenced by how they are seen by the veterans. From the perspective of Honneth, in the struggle for recognition, the social confidence of the new group was reduced by not being recognised as equals by a significant social group, their neighbours. But if they were to embrace part of the criticism as an introduction to their new veteran community's values, perhaps some of the decreased self-esteem may have been reduced.

Thus, the addition of a new player to a team elicits the struggle for recognition amongst the members of the existing community, in a conversation of gestures in which everyone is re-positioning and struggling to be recognised and included as part of the conversation. The existing community has patterns of power relationships through which the newcomer is inevitably disciplined, in face of the potential infringement of existing patterns of relating that affirm recognition of the status quo.

In looking more deeply into relational aspects of recognition and self-confidence, I can see that my joining in such an important role, with direct influence on the well-being of all the management team, including Adam himself, may have also triggered in them the same response of struggle and questioning of their own self-confidence. Thus, there was a negotiation for recognition occurring which I can now see as mutual, potentially impacting feelings of inclusion and legitimacy, as well as the self-confidence of all those involved. For example, it occurs to me that my questioning of the compensation issues related to the executive team may have undermined Adam's confidence in himself as a CEO who takes care of his team, given his struggles with the Board of Directors and his inability to materialise expected compensation increases. This way our dialogue was in fact shaping our sense of self-confidence in a mutual way, implying a re-negotiation for everybody of what it takes to belong to this particular group.

An additional interesting perspective on my conduct as a new hire in Selenium is my positioning, specifically with Adam as the head of the organisation and the person with the highest levels of power in the company. In *'The Civilizing Process'*, Elias (1994), describes the

evolution of social manners and 'civilising' of manners and personality in Western Europe since the Middle Ages, showing how this development related to the formation of Nation States and the monopolisation of power within them. As part of his research, Elias explores how the ruler obtains his power as the highest figure of authority in the state, by balancing between the different princes and sub-rulers in his court, such that he is always keeping his own power through personal dissociation from any particular person or group. He strengthens the weaker ones and weakens the stronger ones in an effort to keep his own power in check at any given time. Applying this social perspective to modern organisations, the CEO often acts in the same manner, keeping his distance from any one of his executive members and keeping everyone in balance (often in competition and adversity against each other in 'manageable' measures). In analysing my own reaction to Adam's challenging me and my profession, it occurs to me that I was trying to position myself as an objective player in the system, as someone who has a similar perspective to his so that mutual trust could be built, and so that my power position would potentially increase. This dynamic can explain my intuitive reaction of 'calmness' and 'rationality' in face of his frequent aggressive attitudes and clear exclusion. From a recognition and confidence perspective, I would assume that by seeing his position rather than by placing myself at the forefront of these conflicts, I was able to contain the adverse effect on my own self-confidence.

2.3 Influences on recognition and confidence: cultural, historical and individual

From the developmental review of recognition theories above, it is interesting to note the strong and complex interweaving of the political, social and personal. Elias (2001) viewed people as utterly and completely social and dependent on each other, living in a fabric of mobile relationships (with a history of sensitivities) which have been ingrained in us as our personal character. This view lends the framework in which we view our interpretations of other people's gestures as including or excluding us, and ultimately our ability to make an impact on others and make progress in our shared projects at work. Thus, when looking at my own sensitivities and complexities as they relate to recognition and ultimately to my confidence, I can see a few influences.

2.3.1 Being Israeli

As an Israeli, recognition may play a heightened role in my identity, placing exclusion and inclusion as important relational and identity stimuli in my various daily encounters in life and work, due to the historical context in which I was socialised. That is, part of being Israeli is

socialising into a history of exclusion (as Jews without a national territory), forming the State of Israel as a country we can belong to, and later on engaging with exclusion of another nation, the Palestinians. Engaging with questions of recognition / misrecognition and inclusion /exclusion is an ongoing dialogue with our neighbors in the region.

Nagar & Maoz (2017) examined psychological and ideological factors underlying the (un)willingness to recognise the pain and suffering of the other side in the longstanding, asymmetrical conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In their research, which stems from the perspective of recognition as a contributor to identity, data were collected through a public opinion survey conducted with a representative sample of Israeli-Jewish adults. Perceptions of threat/distrust toward Palestinians and dehumanisation of Palestinians each made a significant contribution to explaining Jewish-Israeli (un)willingness to recognise Palestinian pain and suffering.

In a fascinating long-term study of group work and mutual story telling between Palestinian and Israeli students in an Israel University, Bar-On and Kassem (2004) share how Palestinians and Israelis gradually find common ground and mutual recognition during their study period, contrary to (or perhaps in continuation of) both groups' cultural indoctrination not to recognise each other.

The major aim of their research was to demonstrate how storytelling can be used to work through intractable conflicts in intergroup activities. The storytelling method was applied to a year-long Jewish-Palestinian student workshop held at Ben Gurion University in 2000–2001.

In the workshop, students were asked to interview members of their parents' and grandparents' generations and to present some of these interviews in the classroom. Using theory-related materials, the students analysed their respective interviews in mixed Jewish and Palestinian pairs and wrote a final joint paper based on their analysis.

The researchers concluded that the encounters in the workshop added new dimensions to the intergroup process, especially in terms of acknowledgement and legitimation of the other. Both Israeli and Palestinian members of the group expressed their gains from the group process as the ability to move away from the dichotomous belief that 'we are the victims and they the perpetrators.' The group process helped both sides come to the understanding that the world is complex and that some of the descendants of the victimisers suffer from the atrocities their parents had committed.

Although the conflict is not symmetrical from the political stance, the above study shows that when seeking mutual recognition, both sides take part in the struggle. Although both Israeli's and Palestinians are equal in humanity and suffering, we are not equal in our ability to bring about broader political changes. This parallels my experience at Selenium – where everyone experienced the struggle for recognition and all of us had a stake in seeing the group as one

worth belonging to. However, the starting point of the struggle is more readily available to the established (the veterans) than they are influenceable by those trying to join, a structural asymmetry worth noticing.

Awareness of my own sensitivity in relation to exclusion, inclusion and recognition is central to analysing my reactions to the gestures I encounter in my day-to-day relationships at work. I can see that in my encounters with my colleagues as a new employee at Selenium, perhaps also based on my heightened sensitivity towards inclusion or exclusion as an Israeli, I was looking for the basic recognition of being a worthy member of my new community from the moment I joined. This may potentially impact my self-confidence if I were to sense exclusion, and I expect the same influence on Adam and many of my Israeli colleagues, who also experienced sensitivity in relation to exclusion (in fact, Adam is descended from a family of Holocaust survivors, as are many others in his generation, and this sensitivity to exclusion has direct origins in the Holocaust).

There are additional factors that could potentially impact my need for recognition and self-confidence, other than my identity as an Israeli Jew.

2.3.2 *Being new*

An additional important factor impacting my self-confidence has to do with being new. As mentioned above, in my first encounters with members of the executive team and extended leadership team at Selenium, I realised that many of them have been with the company for a long time. My need to immediately be recognised as an active and productive member of the team could not have been met quickly within a community that emphasises loyalty and longevity in the company. It was clear from day one that part of forming my identity as an active member of this new community would require a struggle, with potential adverse impact on my self-confidence.

Gilmore & Harding (2021) explore the impact of being new in an organisation from the psychoanalytical perspective and observe that newcomers can experience a fragmentation of the self. This may be hidden behind a facade and be undetectable to others, but behind that mask the carefully maintained semblance of a confident adult unconsciously disintegrates and is consciously experienced as traumatic. They describe the sense of being a stranger as palpable. The stranger does not know how to behave in a new environment – there is a sense of falling apart, of (temporary) disintegration in the terms described by Winnicott (1988). In their research, the narrator shares that she feels the need to keep up appearances, to look as if she knows what she is doing. She draws on a mode of behaviour she defines as ‘professional’. This attempt to conform with professional norms allows the possibility of recognition/acceptance as ‘a professional’ by those in the room, but not knowing what was required she reverts to the modes she knows ‘work’ elsewhere.

2.3.3 *Being a woman*

Lastly, a strong influence which connects the political with personal sense of recognition is my gender, which has had meaningful implications on my feeling (un) recognised and my level of self-confidence at work, especially in predominantly male environments such as those of technology organisations in Israel. I will explore the impact of gender in more depth in section 3.

To summarise, in this chapter I referred to the multiple social, political and personal sensitivities that influence our perceived sense of being recognised in our relationships at work, as well as our personal sense of confidence, much of which is connected to our unique relational history. Some of the sensitivities that were influencing me specifically while entering this new role at Selenium concerned a heightened sensitivity to exclusion as an Israeli, being a female in a male world, and being new in an environment that valued long term loyalty. All of these personal sensitivities influenced me as I made sense of the encounters with Adam and others at Selenium.

3. Gender influence of inclusion and exclusion from key activities, and impact on self-confidence

Butler (1997), in the context of feminism and gender in the workplace, criticises Honneth's recognition theory by raising the important point that if the very processes through which one becomes a gendered subject—and hence, a recognisable entity — are always and inescapably infused with power relations that exert a normalising and disciplinary pressure on individuals, then subject formation is co-extensive with power (e.g. power position enables more influence). Consequently, issues of power cannot be transcended or eradicated through getting the 'right' kinds of recognition in place. Rather, acts of recognition will themselves be part of the mechanisms of power through which the subject, as a recognisable entity, is produced and sustained. Crucially, if recognition and power are intertwined with the production of self-conscious people, then recognition is also part of the process by which certain forms of subjectivity are denied or undermined.

In other words, Honneth suggests that problems with recognition will be ironed out as people have their claims for recognition mutually reciprocated. By this model, power becomes extrinsic to the recognition relation — it can be corrected through altering the relations of recognition. However, Butler's (2004a) analysis rejects this. In her view, recognition is treated as co-

extensive with power and hence any act of recognition can simultaneously exert negative (e.g. normalising/exclusionary) as well as positive (e.g. self-affirming) pressure. The result is a more ambivalent account of recognition than the one proposed by Honneth and Taylor one which is better attuned to the negative effects inherent within acts of recognition. This is particularly true in gender relations when what men and women expect of each other both affirm and recognise desired qualities and disaffirm undesired qualities at the same time.

From this perspective, we can view Adam's non-inclusion of me as a type of recognition which can be interpreted as indoctrination to the nuances of conduct from others that he expects as CEO. He may be implying that until I have more experience and knowledge of the people and company, he is not expecting my contribution in the domain of executive compensation. Indeed, almost a year into the role, I can see increasing opportunities to influence in this domain, much unlike that first impression in the conversation narrated above. Thus, we can see that rather than misrecognition on his side, there is recognition in the form of indoctrination, or perhaps disciplining to the way we do things at Selenium.

Yet the complexity of the relational process placed me in a position of feeling unrecognised, potentially jeopardising my self-confidence. I attributed some of that perspective to me being a female on an all-male team.

In that moment of contemplation, upon realising that Adam does not want me involved in the compensation issues of the executive team, a few potential scenarios of how to react crossed my mind. One potential response was to confront his (in my mind wrongful) assertion and struggle openly, trying to convince him that this is part of my role and that he is wrong to exclude me, since he is losing an opportunity to get more input on an important topic. However, being most likely also influenced by performativity and calculating my steps, I decided not to reveal my emotions, and not to struggle openly. Yet I interpreted his gesture as misrecognition, and immediately self-doubt crept in with a potential impact on my self-confidence.

Part of the reason was my perception that men at work react differently to open argument (and struggle with men more than they do with women), not necessarily valuing arguments with women. My interpretation of many years of observing men working together is that it seems more legitimate to argue if you are male. Yet, when women argue with men, both sides feel somewhat uncomfortable about this, which may have consequences for the women on future promotions and the ability to influence. Some evidence of these perceptions and the differences in coping strategies can be seen in the research literature. For example, NG & Chakrabarty (2005), who found that female managers in Hong Kong tend not to court open and

direct confrontation, seemingly because it may be more conducive to their career development than being confrontational. Instead, they tend to pursue individualistic personal coping strategies, just as I did when I was confronted with the same situation.

Reflecting on how my open struggle with the CEO in my previous company seemed appropriate and even victorious in the moment, it did not end too positively. Ultimately, I felt that on his part there was some loss of trust in our relationship following that incident. Part of my assumption is that this may be tied to my being a woman.

In their work about understanding gender in organisations, Alvesson & Billing (2009) bring a multitude of perspectives on this complex topic. Although some of the literature is contradictory and it is difficult to see clear trends in this area of research, they quote Reskin and Padavic (1994: 96) who state: *'most cultures share the social value, often rooted in religious beliefs, that women should not exercise authority over men'*. Although, more finely tuned understandings of cultural assumptions are needed as these become less crude and simplistic as the world of work develops, Alvesson & Billing conclude that difficulties for women may be much more situation-specific and less general. Exercising authority in a 'non-masculine' way for example may be nonproblematic, but females perceived as being aggressive, self-assertive or dominant may lead to clashes with cultural ideas on gendered norms. Alvesson notes that occasionally females also encounter executive and other subgroups building a community around excessive male interests like hunting and fishing and aggressive sports, which automatically defines them as an outsider in the group (see also NG & Chakrabarty, 2005). Thus, these situational phenomena may reflect a higher degree of uncertainty and limited self-confidence among females (or exaggerated self-confidence and limited modesty among men).

Conversely, these assumptions may be covering up my own (low) comfort level with open conflict which also may be gendered. In a study among women in top management teams in Israel, Sina & Palgi (2014) found evidence that women members struggle in negotiating their position, acknowledgement of their contribution and determining what is considered a successful top management team member.

From this vantage point, I tend to see my response to Adam as a gendered pattern of avoiding open conflict with men. Part of the complexity of being the Human Resources leader on the executive team which is usually male dominated, is also the dual role of consultant and advisor on the one hand, who is expected to be impartial, rational and unemotionally involved (Mowles, 2015) and an active contributor on the other hand, someone who wants to succeed, is emotionally involved and has a personal stake in the game. When the gender aspect is interjected into this complexity, it is often a confusing and contradictory position to be in. Often in my role I find that my relationships with the men I work with are influenced by behavioural and cultural expectations for gender performative behaviors, usually not openly admitted by

anyone involved (see my analysis in project 3 referencing Sullivan, 2010). Alvesson & Billing (2009) note the complexity and nuanced expression of gender at work, how it is interwoven so that it is quite hard to separate the gender influences from the other multitude of influences.

Conolly (2010) critically analyses of Honneth's theory of recognition from the perspective of gender role and the politics of recognition. She questions Honneth's argument that 'love-based recognition' that contributes to self-confidence is located in the family, making it pre-political, whereas social recognition (solidarity) that contributes to self-esteem is in the public domain and therefore political. She argues that by insisting on the limited political significance of relationships within the family, Honneth loses sight of a significant arena of experience and ethics that informs social movements and can help explain how power works in and through the social relations of recognition, arguably making family relations highly political. This perspective complements Fraser's view that recognition is in fact power ridden and a strong vehicle for socialisation by dominant power groups.

To summarise, I argue that females in senior leadership positions in male dominated work teams may feel misrecognised, thus hindering their self-confidence, when in fact the conversation of gestures was an indication of the power structure at play that is more oriented towards and comfortable for men. Being attuned to the complexity at play may help them feel more like equal players in the game, contributing to their increased self-confidence and longevity in the organisation.

4. How reflexivity may impact self-confidence

Reflexivity means being able to examine and, if motivated, transcend established templates for how to think and act (Alvesson et al, 2017).

In "Reflexive Methodology", Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) discuss how reflexivity can contribute to second order learning, i.e questioning the observer themselves and why their interpretation of a situation is the way it is, enabling changes in fundamental points of view. They stipulate that in the literature there are different uses of reflexivity which typically draw attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer (e.g. the researcher). This involves operating on at least two levels in research work and paying much attention to how one thinks about thinking.

Upon commencing my research, I noticed my tendency to focus my attention at work on tasks, tools and models, usually future oriented and full of visions and aspirations, that enable a sense of control in organisational work. However, in the past few years and with my deepening research inquiry, I have been gradually turning my attention to focus on relationships among people and how they shape organisational results. An outcome of this change in prism (my thinking about thinking) enabled me to notice how my own self-confidence was highly influenced by power relations (as defined in the introduction to this work), far beyond what I perceived as my individual lack of security. Thus, through reflexively noticing influences on my self-confidence in my previous project, I started my new role with more awareness about the relational impact on my personal, individual feelings and identity, with more sensitivity to cues from others in my immediate team, noticing micro exchanges and gestures that enabled a broader perspective on our mutual impact.

A key realisation I have had while continuing to explore self-confidence is that in fact, in many of the narratives that I described above, my confidence did not diminish, but rather seemed to increase over time. I currently feel more confident within myself as head of HR than I have felt for many years. This is in part due to accumulating experience (this is my second role as Head of HR), but also can be attributed to the reflexive learning and researching about self-confidence, and in general to gaining a broader perspective on the complexity of human interactions and how we shape and are shaped by others in our environment. A significant aspect of the programme is having a research community to be reflexive with, a community that stands outside of the power relations I experience at work and that can help me reflect on what is happening from a detached perspective. Thus, reflexivity is a social act, whereby we challenge our frame of thinking via (critical) dialogue, and increasingly become more detached about the way we think. This process enables new ways of thinking to emerge and develop.

During the research period, together with this community, I gradually developed increased awareness of the inherent power struggle at work and how we constrain and enable each other at work as part of day-to-day complex responsive processes. This awareness enabled a degree of decentralisation of myself, enabled a broader set of interpretations of given situations, and ultimately enabled more detachment and balance in my reactions at work.

Thus, to return to Alvesson's research (ibid):

“Empirical research in a reflective mode starts from a skeptical approach to what appear at a superficial glance as unproblematic replicas of the way reality functions, while at the same time maintaining the belief that the study of suitable (well-thought-out) excerpts from this reality can provide an important basis for a generation of knowledge that opens up rather than closes and furnishes opportunities for understanding rather than establishes ‘truths’.

In our encounter about the executive compensation, it seems that Adam was creating a relationship of 'intimidation', a reaction that immediately reduces people's confidence and feels very personal and quite hurtful. His pattern of behaviour may have been unconscious, yet I have occasionally seen this type of reaction in other settings as well.

In my reactions, I was trying to find a middle ground that would take me out of the intimidation zone and still remain with my own position. I considered that his reaction comes from a power position. He was assuming (or used to assume) that if he yells, I will retract. He was most likely being aggressive because he was not confident in himself, given the lack of back up from his board members on this sensitive and for him, hurtful, topic. This is a good example of Honneth's (1995) insight that our attitude towards ourselves emerges in our encounter with another's attitude toward themselves. My noticing that he was also reacting from a place of reduced confidence, helped me take that moment to think about my reaction, rather than automatically succumbing to the intimidation that he demonstrated, and for my own sense of confidence to be impacted. Ultimately both of us in a relational conversation of gestures are prone to moments of reduced self-confidence, when the other side seems to mis-recognise or to position a perspective.

In his work on the struggle for recognition, Axel Honneth (1995) builds the case for relations of mutual recognition as being a precondition for self-esteem and self-realisation. He stresses the importance of social relationships for the development and maintenance of a person's identity and claims that the very possibility of identity-formation depends crucially on the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself, which Honneth defines and elaborates on in a methodological manner, can only be acquired and maintained relationally, through being given recognition by others whom one respects. The denial of recognition provides the motivational and justificatory basis for social struggles. Specifically, it is through the emotional experiences generated by certain attitudes and actions of others towards us that we can come to feel we are being illegitimately given or denied social recognition.

Thus, in the case I described with Adam above misrecognition can be seen as delegitimizing my involvement in compensation matters and therefore narrowing of my scope and impact on the job. This type of misrecognition can easily influence self-confidence in a detrimental way.

To summarise, it seems that during the research programme I increased my capacity to tolerate the discomfort entailed in the struggle for recognition in work relations. Thanks to the support

of my research community, I gained further detachment and understanding, was able to somewhat distance myself from power struggles in day-to-day work life and thus over time felt a growing increase in my self-confidence at work, and in life in general.

Thus, the broad contextual understanding of situations at work achieved through reflexivity can help gain further capacity with a broader spectrum of actions and responses.

“We do not learn from experience; we learn by reflecting on experience” ...

- John Dewey

5. Conclusions and further research, revisiting the definition of relational self-confidence

In my fourth project, I shared and analysed a few narratives from my work situation as a new executive on the team, in an attempt to explore what happens to people’s self-confidence at work as we interact, engage and perform in significant relations at work. I described the mutual struggle for recognition, identity formation and impact on confidence as part of the day-to-day negotiation and explored the impact of exclusion and inclusion in relevant power groups in the organisation. When discussing power, I referred to Elias’s (2001) definition of power as social and reflecting the interdependency of people on each other.

In this section, I would like to conclude with my main arguments.

First, I argue that self-confidence is a relational process, constantly fluctuating in response to day-to-day relations and conversations of gestures. It can be seen as reflective of a relationship rather than as a stable trait, as psychological and managerial approaches tend to view it. Within these relations, self-confidence is influenced by a multiplicity of factors in organisations, reflecting the richness and complexity of humans. I explored a few examples: being new on a team, coming from a specific history of sensitivity to exclusion, being in a unique and minor profession relative to our surroundings, being a woman amongst a majority of men. All these influence each persons’ starting point in the ongoing negotiation with others (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). Bringing our unique sensitivities to the conversation of gestures results in an endless negotiation of identities, that can easily be interpreted by all sides as inferiority and reduce self-confidence. All of us in the relevant network are part of the negotiation, and everyone is impacted, as an ongoing process of communication, regardless of formal (hierarchical) power

position, although formal power introduces further complexity in shaping others. In the special case of a newcomer, the existing community has patterns of power relationships through which the newcomer is inevitably disciplined, in face of the potential infringement of existing patterns of relating which affirm recognition of the status quo. Likewise, when someone new arrives, there is an ongoing re-negotiation of the sense of belonging by everyone involved, which encompasses issues such as whether one is inside or outside, central or peripheral, recognised or mis-recognised through the concerns of significant others.

Second, I argue that self-confidence is impacted by feelings of recognition or misrecognition as described by Honneth (1995, 2001), where recognition can play a significant part in our feelings of self-worth at work. I also argue, following Fraser (2001) and Connolly (2010), that if recognition and power are intertwined in the production of subjects (such that the dominant culture or authority impact people's identity via recognition or misrecognition), then recognition is also part of the process by which certain forms of subjectivity are denied or undermined, and therefore negative recognition (being unseen, disinvited, challenged) is also a form of recognition that can impact self-confidence, both negatively and positively.

For example, I explored above two plausible interpretations of the situation of not being invited to the board meeting to share my project. A possible interpretation that the CEO does not see my value would potentially harm my self-confidence and potentially illicit a negative cycle of pain and disengagement. A second possible interpretation is that the CEO is regulating my entrance into the organisation so that I can be successful when I approach the board with my topics. This interpretation can boost self-confidence and motivation, although it is a 'negative' gesture. In both cases there is recognition and disciplining.

Thus, the potential for fluctuations in self-confidence in the context of the struggle for recognition is quite significant, and the perspective and interpretations that we bring in our significant relationships at work are a crucial part of our experience.

Additionally, the simultaneous co-creative dynamic of recognition and misrecognition, and the fact that both processes coexist often through the same gestures making it possible to affirm and disaffirm at the same time, enable gestures of recognition and misrecognition to have a disciplinary impact which allows, over time, for the required sense of belonging within particular groups.

Third, I argue that females in senior leadership positions in male dominated work teams may feel misrecognised and are socially conditioned to translate that misrecognition into lack of self-confidence or questioning of the self, thus ultimately hindering their self-confidence, when in

fact the conversation of gestures is sometimes an indication of the power structure at play, that is more oriented towards and comfortable for men. Being attuned to the complexity at play may help women feel more like equal players in the game, contributing to increased self-confidence and longevity in the organisation.

Fourth, I argue that engaging in reflexive conversations can help change perspectives, alter the way we think about work in organisations and enable a broader spectrum of interpretations that contributes to resilience and increased self-confidence at work. During the research programme, with the multitude of opportunities to reflect, I was able to increase my capacity to tolerate the discomfort entailed through the struggle for recognition in work relations thanks to the support of my research community. With their support, I gained further detachment and understanding, was able to remove myself from power struggles in day-to-day work life and thus over time felt a growing increase in my self-confidence at work, and in life in general.

A suggestion for a revised definition of self-confidence at work is brought below, incorporating the complex aspects of recognition as it relates to confidence.

Relational Self-Confidence at Work – revised definition

The continually changing sense of self-esteem based on a person's own relational history (origin, gender, talents, national history, organisational history, etc.) and recognition or lack of recognition by important peers and power circles at work; the sense of being listened to and reciprocated in relevant forums, whether positively or negatively.

4. Project summaries and key insights

4.1 *Project 1: noticing ‘systems thinking’ and its impact on my thinking and practice*

In project 1, students are expected to write an autobiographical reflexive narrative about the development of their thinking in relation to their professional work. Reflexivity means being able to examine and, if motivated, transcend established templates for how we think and act (Alvesson et al, 2017). The purpose of this initial project, that spans six months to a year, is to identify thinking patterns and assumptions I was operating under whilst not always aware of their influence on my work. An additional purpose is to identify a research topic that I would like to further explore during my doctoral studies.

While writing about my childhood, education, family relations and my professional development path, I came to recognise influences that shaped my thinking and actions throughout my career that I was previously unaware of. As described in the methodology section, the process that enables this type of reflexivity includes a small learning set of four students and a supervisor, who constantly read each other’s work, provide comments and insights. This enables me to gain a growing detachment from my own life journey by incorporating other interpretations of my experience that come from people with different life experiences and thus different lenses than mine. Paradoxically, this detachment or de-centring through the eyes of others leads to more involvement and insight into my own story, thus developing and deepening my perspective.

4.1.1 *Western entrepreneurship and the focus on the individual*

In reflecting on my home and early years, I came to realise that as the daughter of immigrants to Israel, a young country that was struggling to form and establish itself, I was educated and encouraged to focus on big visions, hard work and tangible results and to discard any setback or negative emotion on the way to achievement.

This set of values can be labelled as “entrepreneurism”, an attitude prevalent in western modern society that started manifesting itself in the late 19th century. One example of how this quality of thinking emerged can be found in Schumpeter, who describes the entrepreneur as a “Man of Action”, someone who does not accept reality as it is. For example, if no demand for goods exists, the “Man of Action” will create such a demand, and he will make people want it. He is full of energy and leaps over any obstacle (Schumpeter, 1911 in Becker et al., 2011).

My father was a technologist belonging to the generation that established the Israeli high-tech industry, and an avid “man of action”. Although my inclination was not geared towards

mathematics or engineering, and I was drawn to the social domains, I found comfort and familiarity in studying organisational psychology (M.Sc. in the University of Nottingham, UK), a profession that attempted to systemise, quantify, and observe human behaviour from a scientific lens, essentially, engineering human behaviour. I later made organisational behaviour and Human Resources my career, the majority of the time working in Israeli global technology organisations, where I felt right at home with the focus on big and distant visions, constant uncertainty and change, and driving for results at all costs.

While writing my first project, I noticed dual underlying assumptions (both of which I now critique in my work) that seem to be taken for granted in modern organisations and certainly were taken for granted by me.

The first assumption is of the individual achiever who will do anything to succeed, subjecting ourselves to hard work, big ambitions and “doing anything needed” for success. Central to this assumption is the individual manager as a “hero”, expected to materialise visions and strategies singlehandedly, who is an “outsider” to her team who can manipulate and impact results (Griffin, 2005). The second assumption is “the system”, generally considered an abstract entity everyone works for, external to people and somewhat “above” people, seen as an almost human entity with “needs” and a life of its own, almost in diametrical contrast to the individual. While working in modern organisations, we take for granted this duality of individual and system, and it seems quite natural, yet it poses contradictions that are important to notice if we are to take a critical stance of what is happening in organisations today (Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

As I climbed the ladder in my career, from HR consultant to HR Director, to VP of Organisational Development and ultimately to Head of HR, it seemed that for a long time my role was to try and mediate between the wants and needs of senior managers and “the system” they represented, and the employees who were often disenchanted and cynical about what was needed and had their own versions of what was going on. Objections to change and the constant confusion and lack of control that I felt all along were set aside, along with any negative emotions, while I continued ploughing away, implementing humanistic models of individual and team development in an effort to connect between the organisation, leadership and employees. Quite often, these efforts were only partially effective, or not effective at all, yet my perspective on what was really going on in our day-to-day work and the models and tools I chose to implement did not change. I simply assumed that we just needed to work harder, change someone, or re-invent the task to “do the right thing”.

4.1.2 The individual in an achievement society

The world I grew up in, and later the world of the organisations I worked for, was a world of always needing to do more, of working harder and believing that ambition and openness to change could lead to achieving anything we wish.

In that spirit, I desperately wanted to succeed and be a winner, and that meant positivity at all costs. I was willing to work endless hours and do 'anything it takes' to succeed. Byung-Chul Han, a philosopher and cultural theorist in the critical tradition, calls this social trend 'the burnout society' (Han, 2015). To him, an achievement society is increasingly in the process of discarding negativity. Instead, unlimited 'CAN' is the positive model verb of the achievement society. Its plural form, the affirmation, 'Yes, we can', epitomises the achievement society's positive orientation. President Obama literally used this tagline, 'Yes, we can' in his campaign to rally the American nation behind him.

Han stipulates that by emphasising the 'yes at all costs', achievement society gives rise to 'depressives' and 'losers', and a constant feeling that we are not doing well enough, that there are always more and greater things to achieve and that we must change and adapt ourselves even more in order to be successful. When we consider ourselves our only and best resource, we also become isolated and lonely individuals who often blame ourselves for every lack of organisational or personal success or blame the 'system' and feel unsuccessful or frustrated.

The result is a heightened risk of burnout and depression (Han, 2015; Brinkman, 2017), coupled with growing attrition levels in modern organisations, perhaps indicating a realisation amongst younger generations that 'no, we can't' (for example, an 82% increase of employee resignations from 2010 to 2018 was reported in the U.S Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2018).

I was pushing myself and the people around me to the limit in order to achieve more, under constant stress, subduing emotions and putting on a 'happy face', portraying success in the achievement world.

4.1.3 System thinking and strategic choice theory

In their book about strategic management and organisational dynamics, Stacey & Mowles (2016) discuss system thinking and its implications in modern organisations today.

System thinking is the result of the taken-for-granted influence of the cybernetics and cognitive approaches to organisations that form the foundation of today's management discourse, importing the engineering notion of control into understanding human activity.

The cybernetic approach to organisations regards the organisation as a goal-seeking entity that strives to adapt to its environment by having constant negative feedback from an outside

regulator reintroduced into the organisation in the belief that the self-regulated system will correct itself and resume equilibrium and progress towards the pre-defined goals. The cognitive approach assumes linear and computable thought processes and decision-making that integrate well with the cybernetic approach to drive systematic goal achievement by managers. The combination of these approaches constructs a claim for scientific rationality in organisations today.

From the vantage point of systems theory, the focus is on numerical and statistical data that drives macro decision-making at the 'system level' with the implicit decreased interest in the individual, local, interactions (that are seen as a 'black box'). As a result, the behaviour of the people inside the organisation is perceived as being less relevant.

An example of system thinking theory is *Strategic Choice* (Child, 1972, critiqued by Stacey & Mowles, 2016). The rational and objective leader's role is to set strategies for the organisation and plan their execution by designing structures, goals and process that enable accurate implementation by others. The organisation focuses on the implementation of the vision, strategy and values of the leader and her management team as a means for success. People in the organisation simply implement, and the role of the leader is to remain detached, and to assess, measure and control the results.

This underlying philosophy was manifested strongly throughout my work within organisations, but I failed to notice it as such. Instead, I focused on the humanistic approaches that at the time were also prevalent ideas used in the managerial, human resources and professional Organisational Development (OD) community (see for example Peter Senge, 2006; Patrick Lencioni, 2002), which focused on developing individuals and teams in order to 'align' their skills and motivations with 'the system'. Senge's (2006) approach to learning, for example, strove to empower and enable everyone in the organisation by focusing on deep learning, and by motivating and connecting people towards a shared vision and goals.

These approaches appealed to me as they provided a simplified model of influence in a complex and chaotic world and a promise of success if one simply followed the prescribed approach.

The taken for granted earlier split between system and individual that I referenced earlier should be noted. On the one hand, the individual as a source for success, the manager as the one who singlehandedly sets direction and measures performance. On the other hand, the disregard of the individual and the assumption that everyone is servicing 'the system' and 'its' goals, a greater unapproachable whole. The title Human Resources is a faithful representation of this dichotomy, speaking to the human, people-oriented aspect and to the system influences, making people, in effect, 'resources' in the marathon for organisational goal achievement and success. The idea of Human Resources is also a manifestation of neoliberal

influences where economic influences are brought to bear on every aspect of the human condition.

4.1.4 *Everyday confusion and pain*

I desperately wanted to succeed and did not stop to ask myself why these very appealing approaches and tools seldom yielded the prescribed results. I did not ask myself why I found myself constantly dealing with resistance and objections by people, with endless power struggles and many frustrations on the way. When the overall experience of day-to-day life was one of confusion and uncertainty and the blame inevitably fell on a lack of leadership, a lack of strategic direction or a break in communications, there was still no questioning of the underlying assumptions or changing or challenging what I was doing, because I was so enmeshed in the dominant ways of thinking, as were my colleagues.

Even though the work was a daily struggle, I continued to soldier on, assuming that part of the profession of Human Resources and change management involves 'dealing with objections'. As I was writing my first project, I became more aware that I had been socialised to adopt endless positivity and the entrepreneurial push for results in the face of continuous adversity and objections. I wanted to explore more of what was going on.

Robert Jackall, an American sociologist, in his book "*Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*" researches and describes the managerial ethos in organisations, in which managers abide by strict behavioural rules such as refraining from displaying emotions, circumventing conflict, and appearing loyal and composed at all times (Jackall, 2010). This 'modus operandus' results from the innate organisational paradox of needing to collaborate and work together on shared goals, while also competing for resources and personal advancement. In the same vein, during many of my years in organisations, I was focused on pushing for collaboration and harmony, innately sensing the inherent conflict and power struggles associated with organisational life and participating in them myself, yet I could not put my finger on the reasons behind them.

To summarise, during project 1, as I immersed myself in the new theoretical approach of the DMan, naturally my perspective started to change and incorporate some of these new theoretical learnings. I became highly aware of how I have been running on auto pilot within the same set of commonly held assumptions about my work. I started to notice that I was highly engaged with projects, tools, and products yet oblivious to the human relations layer that was having an influential role just beneath the surface. I became curious about the underlying forces at play.

4.2 Project 2: Exploring covert power relations and leadership volatility on an executive team

In project 2, I started analysing and exploring the underlying relationships and power struggles that were previously covert and invisible to me, with a growing realisation of the influence of relational aspects, identity formation and power groups. I gradually came to see that these influences and undercurrents are usually covert, and are left untouched or seemingly unnoticed, in an effort by everyone to seem positive, collaborate and play the rational and cognitive corporate game.

Thus, in my narrative I started directing my attention to the complexity of power relations among people at work, and specifically to the leadership team that I was part of and my own involvement as a player on the team. Rather than focusing on the concrete aspects of the work, projects, and visions, I started noticing people's constant negotiation of their own positions, the need for recognition and acknowledgment and the fear of personally losing out in the uncertainty and flux of daily organisational life.

The narrative I explored focused on the emotional and relational undercurrent of a business crisis that we were immersed in at the time of writing. I noticed and narrated the constant negotiation of everyone's opinions, values, relationships and ultimately my and their own identities and success as individuals.

At the same time, I started paying attention to my own survival strategy as head of HR, which involved strongly liaising with the CEO, the person with the highest formal authority in the hierarchy. But what happens when that same person starts losing relational power, and fighting for their own survival? How will that influence my own position, my sense of accomplishment on the team and my self-confidence?

4.2.1 A summary of the narrative

I was heading Human Resources in a start-up and was part of the leadership team. We were running a complex transformation process of adapting the company to the global enterprise market. After a few years of leading the transformation, the company's funds were running out, and we were in jeopardy of losing our investor's confidence due to multiple technological and business challenges that were causing cash depletion at a higher- than- expected rate.

The narrative centred on a leadership offsite that we had following an investors meeting, in which we did not yet know whether we could secure funds to continue running the business, and in which uncertainty and a sense of a nearing defeat were undercurrent qualities. Indeed,

two months after this offsite the CEO left, a move initiated by the board of directors, and the company was downsized and sold to a competitor for a low value price tag.

In the offsite itself, rather than following the pre-set agenda, the CEO initiated an unexpected discussion, after which the conversation was derailed to a display of shouting, 'truth telling' and accusing each other like we had not done for a few years, and a general flux that I can now recognise as total dysfunction, that at the time also indicated the loss of the CEO's power. Alongside his loss of power and battle for recognition and influence, I found myself losing my own voice and self-confidence, unable to intervene in the conversation and rein it in or contribute in a helpful way. I felt that I was letting the team down and left the offsite very conscious of the precarious position I might find myself in as the CEO's liaison and confidant if he lost his position or if he could not secure new funds.

Although I started this exploration thinking that as the Human Resources, consultative person on the team I was impartial and objective and had little personal stake in the game, I ended this exploration with a clear understanding that I am just as involved as anyone on the team. I am a player in the struggle for recognition and power, and moreover that my own agency was reduced due to my close relationship with the CEO. The complexity of my role as a leader of Human Resources was starting to be revealed to me as a function of engaging in the research process.

While exploring the breakdown in our relationships and conduct as a team during the off-site, I came to a few conclusions about power dynamics between people in organisations which I will briefly describe below.

4.2.2 Social interdependence biases us towards working in harmony and avoiding conflict

As social beings, we are interdependent towards each other for achieving our personal and collective goals. In *'The Society of Individuals'*, Elias (2001) provides a helpful perspective on the totality of people's interdependence in society. This is a quality of interdependence that is very much underemphasised in the strongly individual-oriented society we are all part of today:

'Each individual person is really tied; he is tied by living in permanent functional dependence on other people; he is a link in the chains binding other people, just as all others, directly or indirectly, are links in the chains which bind him....and it is this network of the functions which people have for each other, it and nothing else, that we call 'society' '

(Elias 2001, p. 16)

Being curious to understand the need for harmony and collaboration more deeply, I came to the conclusion that our social evolutionary origins have entrenched within us the deep understanding that we need each other in order to survive and thrive as a species (Boehm, 2012 and De Waal, 2017 bring evidence to this deep human inclination from ancient human society as well as from primate behaviour). In order to cope with this interdependency in social and organisational life, humans commonly idealise harmony and cooperation, certainly on the surface, and especially in organisational settings in which the stakes are high and power battles can easily cause unproductive conflict. Thus, we have learned to cooperate and keep strict rules of conduct that reward rational, seemingly 'altruistic' behaviour, brushing aside emotions that strongly influence us, subduing open conflict and ensuring harmony 'on the surface' at all costs.

From the organisational perspective, while adhering to these norms of harmony and collaboration, managers in organisations keep to strict behavioural norms which ensure they gain trust and are promoted up the ladder at work, such as never giving away an emotional disturbance, always keeping a 'bland' smile, and always collaborating and backing up their direct boss, even when absolutely not agreeing or concurring with their wishes and directives (Jackall 2010).

The offsite I describe in the narrative was a breakdown of our usual (prescribed) harmony and indicated the delicate situation we were all in at the time, bringing to the surface the conflict that was sitting just below the surface, and placing it on the table between us. I noticed that my tool kit did not include the means to deal with open conflict. In addition, it became clear to me that I perceived part of my job as driving for harmony, yet there was a price associated with this inclination and we were all paying it.

4.2.3 Hierarchical configurations regulate conflict, yet are unstable and prone to change

In both social and work settings, we usually choose to organise ourselves in patterns of clear hierarchy. This is because, through our social evolution, we have learned that it is an effective strategy for limiting power struggles between peers and focusing on attaining individual and shared goals (Boehm 2012). A direct impact of adhering to the hierarchical structure is subdued power battles and the avoidance of public conflict in work settings (Jackall 2010; Scott 1992). Thus, hierarchy regulates conflict and enables gains from cooperation.

While the CEO, sitting at the top of the hierarchy, is perceived as strong and powerful, and everyone works hard to satisfy and to be in their closest proximity, this influential position often comes with significant instability and volatility, along with constant questioning of the legitimacy of the person in the role. As the market and economics shift, instability becomes the

norm, and the danger of losing power increases. When the leader at the top of the hierarchy is perceived to have fallen from their position, we can observe conflict and competition, which is usually subdued. Open conflict emerges through potential shifts in the status quo when the group perceives an opportunity to negotiate a potentially new formal power structure. This challenging of the CEO's authority and his own fight for remaining in power were paramount on the abovementioned offsite and manifested in the heated discussion and various self-preservation strategies that the CEO employed during the offsite.

4.2.4 Leaders will make great efforts to stay at the top of the hierarchy

When the leader senses that he or she is losing power, whether formally or informally, they will use various tactics to sustain their power and stay in control. This is often an unconscious behaviour. Sacrificing others, changing communication patterns, and manipulating intergroup conflicts are some of the tactics that they may (unintentionally) exhibit in order to distance themselves from blame and protect their position. Conflict, previously avoided at all costs, now emerges as a legitimate process in the face of losing power.

One example of this pattern explored in the project 2 narrative was scapegoating. A heated discussion emerged during the offsite, one which was not originally on the agenda, and which ended up taking up the majority of the first day. It was centred on a group of engineers who were tasked with building out-of-the-roadmap products and solutions to solve customer issues (group doing "skunkworks"). The CEO started the discussion by pointing his finger at this group's total failure, due to the lack of talent and lack of caring of the specific individuals on the team. From that moment onwards the discussion derailed to mutual shouting, accusations, and total, unproductive chaos, which I realised in retrospect may have been directed by the CEO to push the blame away from his own leadership and protect his own position as CEO.

Girard (1988) describes a typical scapegoating scenario and points out that there is frequently some mystery or puzzle associated with it, for example, the discussion about the skunkworks team that was not on the agenda, nor was it meant to last almost a full afternoon. In general, there was an undertone of relative violence and anger when talking about the team's contribution (or lack of), as such emotions were rarely voiced. Girard (ibid) stipulates that violence always seeks and finds a surrogate victim.

4.2.5 Conflict is present all the time, whether we acknowledge it or not

When recognised and dealt with, conflict can be helpful for identifying potential problems in the current configuration that may need to be managed in order to work more effectively together. Effectively managing conflict can help leaders identify opportunities for restructuring,

problem solving, relationship building, and changing the environment to work more successfully together. Subduing conflict, and masking issues and problems, may lead to dysfunction and lack of success, as we experienced at our start-up. At the same time, enabling conflict to take centre stage, to dominate the dialogue and create personal battles, as it did in our last offsite, may lead to relationship damage and ultimately to organisational chaos and leadership changes.

Putting together the above conclusions with the dynamics on our last offsite as a team, it may be interesting to view what happened from the angle of group work. In his work on group psychology, Freud (1921) describes the surrendering of one's own ego and identifying with that of an idealised leader. He describes the illusion of any group, of there being a head who 'loves' all the individuals in the group equally. To Freud, everything depends upon this illusion; if it were to be dropped, then the group would dissolve. If the leader were to lose her position, the connection between the group members would fall apart and potentially dissolve, if allowed to. The evidence that Tarun would be losing his power shortly, his battle for survival during the offsite, the ensuing controversy between the team members and the falling out between some of them that followed served as a classic example of this dynamic, which often goes unnoticed in organisations.

4.2.6 Insights about the role of HR and becoming a researcher

As a member on the executive team, and as a Human Resources leader, I have multiple roles and my colleagues have many expectations of me. On the one hand, I am a member of the team, responsible for specific deliverables, reporting to the CEO and generally an equal player on the team. However, in addition, I am also expected to be the one who arbitrates in conflict and a relationship 'fixer', the one who drives and facilitates a 'cohesive team' and the one who is unbiased and impartial in my advice and support to the whole team.

During the abovementioned offsite I had a breakdown. On the one hand I was totally involved, I was dealing with uncertainty about my own role and livelihood just like anyone else, and as the close liaison to a CEO who was challenged, I felt that my position was weakening on the team. Although I made a few efforts to help in the discussion that unfolded, I could not detach myself enough to enable a helpful perspective, and ultimately found myself shut down, losing my confidence.

With hindsight, when looking at the dynamics that unravelled on that offsite, I can see that I was fully immersed in the struggle for survival, unaware of this involvement and thus unable to detach and see the full dynamics of the team and the CEO. Thus, unknowingly, my need for survival did not enable a healthy detachment from the situation we were in as a team.

In the first phases of writing this project, I found myself heavily emotionally entangled in the narrative and in the complexity of my own experience at the time, so that it took considerable effort to write a concise and reflexive narrative. As a result, writing this project took me close to a year, which I can characterise as a year of grasping the foundations of reflexivity: simultaneously being able to see my own personal involvement in the story, and yet looking at the entire picture from a more detached perspective. When I was able to start noticing my own assumptions, relational position and behaviour from a critical and detached perspective, a new lens appeared in my writing, that of the 'airman' (Elias, 2001) which manifested in project 3, and later also in my practice at work.

When applying the perspective of both swimmer and airman, I noticed how my self-confidence started to fluctuate in the offsite, and how I started to lose my voice in the face of the conflict that emerged. Thus, in the project 3 I began to pay attention to the idea and essence of self-confidence and explored it in more depth, evolving my inquiry into self-confidence throughout project 4.

Concurrently, during project 2, my capacity for critical evaluation as a researcher started to develop and I was able to approach criticism of my work with curiosity and openness, rather than as a threat to my identity, embracing the principles of Critical Theory that are foundational to the programme. From the lens of Critical Theory (discussed in Alvesson & Skolberg, 2018), the researcher is guided by an emancipatory interest in knowledge, and an attempt to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect our lives. The work of critical theory is open-ended and fallibilistic in ways quite distinct from the science-emulating theoretical systems I was accustomed to take part in. By gradually adopting this critical lens during my research period, I was able to embrace a more dialectical view of society, viewing social and organisational phenomena in their historical contexts and identifying new patterns of human experience central to my research.

4.3 Project 3: Exploring shifts in self-confidence as a relational phenomenon amongst executives in a post-acquisition process

In project 3, I continued to explore how power relationships on executive teams are affected by periods of change and uncertainty. More specifically, I developed a perspective on the sense of self-confidence amongst those who make up these teams, focusing on how feelings of confidence, or the lack of, emerge in organisational life.

In exploring confidence, I compared traditional psychological constructs of confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Bandura, 1986; Rogers, 1961; Rosenberg 1965; Korman 1976; Pierce et al 1989) and positive psychology (e.g., Seligman 2003), with social and relational perspectives

introduced by Elias (1994) and the Complex Responsive Process perspective developed by Stacey et al. (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Griffin, 2002), while sharing my own experience in a reflexive way.

I developed a more relational view of self-confidence relative to traditional psychology that sees it as an individual's characteristics, which I defined at the end of the project as follows:

Social self-confidence: the changing sense of self-esteem based on a person's own relational history and the power group inclusion and relevance on the job; the sense of being listened to and reciprocated in relevant forums; a sense of recognition by meaningful peers in relevant power circles at work

4.3.1 A summary of the narrative

Project 3 was written immediately following the acquisition of our company by another company. This one was similar in size to ours, and was previously a competitor, which took advantage of our low financial position to acquire us for a low investment, and thus gained market share and became the number one company in our markets.

In the acquisition process, some of us on the executive team, including me, were offered senior positions in the acquired company. To my surprise, I was offered the Chief Human Resources officer (CHRO) role, yet a caveat was introduced: I was to report to the Chief Operating Officer (COO), the second in command to the CEO, rather than to the CEO himself, a move that resonated as lowering my personal power position and the chances for me to succeed in the new role. However, I chose to take the role as it came along with a lucrative monetary reward and job security.

During my time as CHRO of the merged company, and most likely due to us (the acquired) being the outsiders to the new company, and the fact that I reported to the COO rather than to the CEO, I noticed my self-confidence in multiple instances gradually dwindling, and I started doubting my own ability to make an impact and establish myself as an authority in my role. Many of the gestures by my colleagues seemed to exclude me from important circles and conversations, and I gradually felt demotivated and devalued.

My narratives detailed my attempts to position myself as the advisor and confidant of the CEO, by managing the areas of Human Resources I thought I needed to lead (such as compensation at large, executive compensation specifically (which I later discovered, also in project 4, is a personal sensitivity for the CEO), internal communications, and headcount planning and management). I realised in the first months of my new position that these domains were in effect managed by other trusted people on the CEO's executive team, and I was excluded from activities and forums which took care of these aspects. For example, when the annual budget

processes began, my boss, the COO was invited to the planning session with the top executive team, and I was not. Another incident that I explore centres around a compensation board committee that I prepared and presented per the CEO's request, in which he completely disregarded my input, to my dismay.

I described a moment in which I challenged the CEO directly and told him that I cannot and will not be successful if he continues to undermine and marginalise my position, giving him examples of how he has done so in the past few months. Following this confrontation, he changed his behaviour to enable more contact with me yet continued (perhaps unintentionally) to marginalise my position in the day-to-day work.

After a few months, as my self-confidence deteriorated and I became more and more desperate and demotivated, I decided to take the first retention bonus instalment and leave the company.

My exploration in project 3 centres on the fluctuations in my self-confidence, having been strongly positioned and highly confident in the previous company prior to the acquisition and then quite abruptly losing my self-confidence following the acquisition. I became curious as to what is self-confidence and what causes its fluctuations and dynamics in organisational life.

While reading psychological research about self-confidence, I found significant research evidence that reduced self-confidence correlates positively with reduced motivation and increased attrition, further adding to my motivation to explore the topic (see for example: Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Bowling et al., 2010; Tett & Meyer, 1993).

4.3.2 Traditional thinking about self-confidence

When reviewing this large body of work on self-confidence, I pointed to two main underlying assumptions that seem to be influencing the psychological research community:

First, is the strong focus on the individual and on stable personality traits that define the person, but which are somewhat in isolation. Various aspects of the environment are mentioned, however, the research itself is usually focused on interventions and means that are seemingly under the individual's control.

The second underlying assumption, that I have already started noticing more generally in earlier projects, is that an organisation is a 'system' that can be manipulated and controlled by managers, and that everyone who is part of that system is a means to an end who can be influenced by all sorts of behavioural interventions. In many cases, the organisation is considered an entity on its own, almost a person, that can control the behaviour of others. The

research assumes that managers can pull various specific levers to obtain an outcome, much like in a scientific experiment.

In a non-critical view of this line of thinking, it would seem logical to have a prescribed way to manage employees that will increase OBSE (Organisation Based Self-Esteem, see Pierce & Gartner, 1989) and thus ensure low attrition. It is often genuinely surprising to us as managers, leaders and HR professionals that unexpected and uncontrolled events occur despite our best efforts, because we are so immersed in the idea of the leader as a hero and the organisation as a machine and individuals as things to be managed (by themselves or others) in an instrumental manner. Although multiple instances of lack of control or success are manifested in organisational life, we continue to apply the same methods, expecting different results.

In looking critically at what is really going on, it is useful to note that strategies in fact emerge in the ongoing local web of relations of many people and in the interplay of many different intentions and choices (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). In other words, organisational strategy is social and situational rather than a stable future picture. In my case, messages from my manager, the CEO, and various others were consistently positive about my performance. Yet my self-esteem regarding my relations with them and others in my environment remained low, possibly due to the constant sense of exclusion and misrecognition, subsequently impacting my choice of whether to stay or leave the company.

4.3.3 Social influences on self-confidence

Naturally, in accounts coming from most psychology research, which is a science that primarily focuses on the individual, the person is portrayed many times as an isolated individual. In the business environment today, we tend to embrace this line of thinking, much more than sociological perspectives that emphasise relations. In *"Social Selves"*, Ian Burkitt (2008) stipulates that seeing ourselves as isolated individuals severs the primary connection we have to other people. Moreover, who we are, or what we can become, is often a political issue involving rights and duties fought over with other participants in society, much like in my situation described above. Becoming who we want to be, if that is possible, often involves a political struggle. Even when we do not think that being ourselves involves politics; this is often a misguided assumption. When exploring self-confidence from the power dynamic perspective, the question to be asked is thus, what kind of political, relational circumstances evoke a sense of low confidence in the people who are part of these circumstances?

I answered this question by analysing three aspects of the situations I described in my narrative:

- The established and the outsiders: analysing the acquired group's position relative to the veteran group in the newly merged organisation (based on Elias, 1994)
- Gender influences that may have implicitly affected my relationship with the CEO (based on Sullivan, 2000)
- The political and power position scenario the CEO was part of, that indirectly impacted me (based on Elias, 2001 and Jackall, 2010)

By analysing these relational aspects of the acquisition, I arrived at a few key influences on the relational nature of self-confidence:

- (1) The influence of being in the outsider group (as the acquired ones): the gossip about us, the outsiders from an acquired company, made me feel 'othered', much as illustrated in Elias (1994), and created a situation that reduced my self-confidence within the new group. I then discovered that many of my peers from the acquired company felt exactly the same way as I – worthless outsiders with no chance of making an impact on the new configuration. Thus, the relational position we were all in had affected our sense of confidence in the same way, yet we interpreted it as a personal and individual shortcoming that we needed to overcome. This was a good example of how self-confidence is a relational phenomenon. Yet in our highly individualised culture, we place ourselves in the centre and interpret our own activity and behaviour as the main influencer.
- (2) The influence of my gender as the only female on the executive team and how this influenced my relationship with the CEO: in this regard, my habitual stance towards men had the effect of confining my range of optional behaviours. As Sullivan (2000) describes the habitual routine of being a female in a male-dominated environment (for example the habitual expectation of women to smile a lot, and not get into open conflict at work), seemed to push me into offering smiling admiration and adoration while having little significant impact, or, conversely, to battle in a 'male' fashion and still have the potential for a reduction of impact. Thus, I felt that I was being disciplined into reciprocally conforming to a gendered expectation of power relations: Smile, admire, look attractive, and do not compete with the male hegemony. Both positions contributed to my feeling ostracised and consequently reduced my self-esteem. My awareness of the gender influences at play was negligible at the time, therefore I attributed the exclusion from key power groups to my own lack of professional adequacy and personal power rather than to the social and cultural existing structure that favours men.

(3) The contribution of power group affiliation: as Jackall (2010) stipulates, a large part of managerial work consists of ongoing struggles for dominance and status. Thus, being included in the 'right' group (the CEO's direct reports in my case) and reporting to the 'right' person (the CEO in my case) has a significant impact on one's ability to exert power and feel confident. I can argue that my entire longevity in the company could have worked out differently had my reporting line started with the CEO and had I felt equally positioned to make an impact. Interestingly, this has more to do with being in a peer relationship with the others in his trusted circle rather than necessarily working directly with him. Confidence, especially on senior leadership teams, has to do with the power groups you associate with and are included in.

To summarise, in project 3 a breakthrough in my thinking was visible. The project took less time to write, and I was able to detach myself more clearly from the described situations and recognise my own patterns of behaviour that may have contributed to my fluctuating sense of confidence over the years. I felt I was more willing and able to decentre myself and look at the situations at hand more clearly, while also more easily noticing myself as a player in the relational field.

This was enabled by a consistent challenging of my conceptual and theoretical patterns of thinking and becoming increasingly open to critical thinking. Reflexivity goes beyond calculative problem solving toward exploring tensions and recognising the ephemeral nature of our identities and our social experiences. It also draws on social constructionist assumptions to question and explore how we contribute to the construction of social and organisational realities, how we relate with others, and how we construct our ways of being in the world. By doing so, we can become more creative, responsive, and open to different ways of thinking and acting (Cunliffe & Jun 2005).

4.4 Project 4: Relational self-confidence: recognition, belonging and power group influences

In project 4, I deepened my inquiry into relational self-confidence, aiming at uncovering the multiple and complex influences on self-confidence, and more specifically as a new employee and a new executive on a leadership team.

4.4.1 A summary of the narrative

I shared a few vignettes from my first few months in the company, in which the sense of exclusion from significant company activities and groups caused fluctuations in my sense of

being recognised, as well as in my self-confidence. I explored the relational processes at play and their impact on my and others' self-confidence.

In the first vignette, I explored a one-to-one meeting with the CEO in which I brought up the topic of the executive team's previous year performance reviews and compensation reviews. His reaction was to shut me down quite strongly, he immediately lost composure and claimed that executive compensation is his role and not my business. I was quite surprised, since this is obviously part of my role as head of HR, and multiple people on the executive team had expressed their frustration with compensation in our private meetings.

After debating how to handle the situation, I found myself remaining composed and 'matter-of-fact', not contesting his assertion yet not letting go of my stand. I was left asking myself whether I would ever be included in his inner circle of trust like other seniors he worked with on the executive team, a critical success factor for my role. I also noted a questioning of my own self-confidence and assertiveness, having just been shut out of a key activity that I perceived should be under my immediate domain.

I later found out that the CEO had significant disagreements with the Board of Directors related to executive compensation, and they did not approve the compensation increases he requested. Thus, his reaction was also influenced by his relational challenges in other circles of work.

In the second vignette, I explored a situation in which I was leading a change management project that was to be presented to the Board of Directors, yet the CEO asked my peer, the CFO, to present an overview of this project including the change management / people part. It was frustrating to be shut out of a group or process that was under my responsibility, where I was doing the work, yet not given the opportunity to represent my work and be visible as a leader in the company. After exploring this narrative, I came to realise that alongside the seeming 'misrecognition', there was also a gradual exposure of myself and my work to the board, amongst other reasons because this board was not easily inclined to trust existing executives on the team, and all the more so, new ones. Thus, I developed a multi-faceted view of the situation, that had begun as simple anger and frustration for being misrecognised.

In the third vignette, yet another exchange with the CEO in my first months as Head of HR, was about the need to be mathematical and accurate in my calculations of equity data that we were about to bring to the board for approval. In this exchange, I felt that I was being challenged for not being 'mathematical' enough when in fact, I was hired for other qualities which were certainly recognised in other domains of work. Again, as in the previous instance, after exploring the exchange from multiple aspects, including the impact on my own and the CEO's self-confidence, mutual recognition and trust, I came to realise that although the incident seemed to challenge me at the moment, in fact it also may have included an attempt on his

behalf to help and position myself (and him as CEO) with a very critical and criticising Board of Directors.

In these three vignettes from my first months as Head of HR, I was negotiating my position with the CEO and the other members of the executive team, and in parallel they were negotiating their own positions. In this complex and dynamic negotiation of positions and identities, our self-confidence was also negotiated.

4.4.2 Recognition, misrecognition, and influences on self-confidence

My literature exploration centered around the complex interaction between recognition and self-confidence.

According to the literature on recognition (for example Fraser 2001; Honneth 2001; Taylor 1994), 'to be recognised' means to be seen and to be acknowledged as an 'other' with our own identity, our own fundamental situation and circumstances, and our own right to have a symbolic cultural status and to be a full partner in society. Therefore, nonrecognition and misrecognition are considered a form of symbolic violence, resulting in the depreciation and deformation of group identity and social subordination (Taylor, 1994).

According to Taylor (ibid), the demand for recognition is given urgency by the supposed connections between recognition and identity, in which the latter designates a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. Taylor's thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, and often by the misrecognition of others.

In his work on the struggle for recognition, Axel Honneth (1995), a philosopher from the German critical tradition and a social theorist, builds the case for relations of mutual recognition as being a precondition for self-esteem and self-realisation. He stresses the importance of social relationships to the development and maintenance of a person's identity and claims that the very possibility of identity-formation depends crucially on the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself, which Honneth defines and elaborates on in a methodological manner, can only be acquired and maintained relationally, through being given recognition by others whom one respects.

Thus, self-realisation, according to Honneth, is not about individual achievement as conceptualised in much management and self-improvement literature or new age ideologies. but rather, a highly social process. Being recognised by others builds our self-confidence and enables healthy relations to other people, with the world and towards ourselves.

Yet, Honneth was criticised for simplifying recognition to a 'yes' or 'no' phenomena, thus - deemphasising the impact of power and power relations on recognition (Fraser, 2001). To Fraser (ibid), people with more established power (such as a CEO) can have a recognition dialogue that in effect strengthens their power position and a misrecognition dialogue that disciplines and influences others, much like I was disciplined as a new member on the team in the narratives that I described above.

Moreover, recognition may come in many forms. For example, pushing me out of a board meeting may feel like exclusion and misrecognition, yet may in fact be recognition of the fact that I am still new on the team and protecting my position in front of a critical Board of Directors.

In parallel, I started to extract how being part of a minority group influences self-confidence. For example, I started noticing that the social struggle for recognition manifests itself strongly when a person is part of a minority group and has to fit in with a dominant power coalition from an underprivileged point. In my narratives and exploration, I focused on being a new member on the team (a process that many times tends to give rise to questions of self-confidence), and on the fact that I am in the social and human sciences domain in a highly mathematical engineering organisation. Additional aspects of the exploration referred to my gender as a female in a male dominated environment, and how my starting point and ongoing ability to influence my standing as a female in the recognition struggle may be weaker than that of my male colleagues at work by definition (Syna & Palgi, 2014).

By reflexively exploring my own self-confidence, I realised that everyone around me is also influenced and influencing each other's self-confidence in the same vein, in a conversation of gestures that develops in our relations and day-to-day conversations at work.

Paradoxically, once I more clearly noticed the mutual influences of everyone involved, I experienced a sense of increased calmness, a broader perspective of my own influence on others and consequently a sense of increasing self-confidence at work overtime.

I believe that this feeling of security and confidence has much to do with the process of reflexivity and de-centring of myself, in which on the one hand I developed awareness of my personal involvement and stakes in the conversations and relational dynamics at work (the swimmer view), and on the other hand, a gradual de-centring of myself and the understanding that everyone is caught up, just like me, in a negotiation of their own self-worth, recognition and ultimately confidence at work (the airman view).

This process, which developed gradually throughout the research programme and manifested itself strongly while I was writing project 4, enabled more empathy towards my peers, a broader understanding of their own constraints while they oppose or support me in my

opinions and initiatives, and a gradual personal calmness and composure in the face of the flux of day-to-day organisational life.

Mowles (2015) argues that:

'Because it is impossible not to be affected emotionally by one's involvement in work, then paying attention to what we and others are feeling is crucial in order better to understand and to deal with the contradictions of working life '

(Mowles, 2015: p. 130)

I concluded the project with a revised definition of relational self-confidence, accounting for our personal social sensitivities, and for the positive and negative influences of recognition, in the sense of power influences.

Relational Self-Confidence at work – revised definition:

The continually changing sense of self-esteem based on a person's own relational history (origin, gender, talents, national history, organisational history, etc.) and recognition or lack of recognition by meaningful peers and power circles at work; the sense of being listened to and reciprocated in relevant forums, whether positively or negatively.

5. Key Arguments

In my key arguments below, I make the case that self-confidence is a relational phenomenon that arises from gestures of recognition within a web of relations we form in our shared projects at work. The relational power structure that we are all part of influences the feeling of self-confidence when people with less informal and relational power (such as women in a male dominated workplaces or new members to a team) take recognition gestures (both positive and negative) as personal indications that point to their worth. Being reflexive and acknowledging the relational web of mutual dependencies enables self de-centring and thus can contribute to lower levels of stress and self-doubt, and ultimately to increased self-confidence.

5.1 Self-confidence, the feeling of being meaningful and valued, is a complex and fluctuating phenomenon that arises in the web of human relationships, rather than being an individual characteristic, yet is highly influenced by the personal histories and experiences of all involved

I argue that self-confidence is a relational process, constantly fluctuating in response to day-to-day relations and conversations of gestures and responses between people in their joint projects at work. Our implicit assumption is that feelings of self-confidence or lack of self-confidence are part of our unique individual personality structure. Cognitive Psychological literature affirms this assumption by treating it as a relatively stable personality characteristic that can be measured (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965; Korman, 1976; Pierce & Gardner, 2004), manipulated and even influenced by certain psychological activities (Compte & Postlewaite, 2004).

Yet our unique personality structure is a relational process in itself that becomes embodied over time. Following Elias (1970; 2001), Stacey (2011); Mowles (2015) and other scholars who see humans as social through and through, my research has led me to the conclusion that self-confidence is indeed influenced by our personal histories, social backgrounds, and relational experiences, yet it is a fluctuating process with every interaction that we have with others in the complex relational web at work. In one instance we can feel highly self-confident, and in yet another instance we can feel insecure. It is influenced by a multiplicity of factors, reflecting the richness and complexity of people and our interdependencies.

In my research, I explored a few examples of personal intricacies and social power influences that impact self-confidence such as: being new on a team; coming from a specific cultural history of sensitivity to exclusion (such as being Israeli); being in the minor profession of Human Resources in a largely engineering environment; being the only woman amongst a majority of men on an executive team. These and many other personal sensitivities and social power groupings influence each person's sense of self-confidence in the ongoing negotiation with others.

All of us in the relevant network are part of the negotiation, and everyone is impacted, as an ongoing process of communication, regardless of formal (hierarchical) power position, although formal power introduces further complexity in shaping others.

Handling our own self-confidence is therefore a combination of an individual endeavour, in which each of us responds to triggers from others in our own way, through our unique experiences, developing our own strategies of interpreting others in ways that are meaningful to us. But it is equally a quality of a relationship of a web of people who are negotiating their own identities, making meaning of interactions and interpreting conversational gestures as increasing or decreasing of their own self-confidence.

5.2 Self-confidence can be influenced by power relations through gestures of recognition and misrecognition. Awareness of this process can contribute to increased self-confidence

Self-confidence is impacted by feelings of recognition or misrecognition as described by Honneth (1995, 2001), where recognition can play a significant part in our feelings of self-worth at work. I argue, following Fraser (2001) and Connolly (2010), that if recognition and power are intertwined in the formation of subjects (such that the dominant culture or authority impact people's identity via recognition or misrecognition), then recognition is also part of the process by which certain forms of subjectivity are denied or undermined, and therefore 'negative' recognition (being unseen, disinvited, challenged) is also a form of recognition that can impact self-confidence both negatively and positively.

Thus, the potential for fluctuations in self-confidence in the context of the struggle for recognition is quite significant, and the perspective and interpretations that we bring to our relationships at work are a crucial part of the experience and overall feelings of confidence.

For example, in the meeting with the CEO in project 4, when he questioned my mathematical skills, he may have been disciplining me into the companies' cultural habitus of mathematical proficiency. In fact, although my initial reaction was of dismay and a reduced sense of confidence, after some soul searching, I came to see that his gesture was one of recognition, caring for my success with the Board of Directors in a particular company culture that emphasised mathematical skills. In other words, coming from a power position of the CEO and of the one who has been in the company for multiple years and knows the Board of Directors intimately, he was using recognition gestures to push me in the 'right' direction.

As a result of these power group influences that often go unnoticed or unaccounted for at work, being part of a minority group has the increased potential for reduced self-confidence, stemming from mis-interpreting the dominant habitus or discourse and reading power gestures in a personal manner.

For example, in my conversation with the CEO in project 3, he was suggesting that I should 'continue smiling with my beautiful smile' precisely at a point when I was trying to challenge his behaviour. This gesture can be interpreted as a disciplining act that supported him in his need to remain dominant, suggesting women may be nice and smile (Sullivan, 2000), and less challenging in the workplace. Before noticing this power differential, I attributed his behaviour to something I did or said, placing my own individuality in the centre and thus immediately losing self-confidence in this exchange.

As gender relations are not the focus of my research, I will not go into great detail. Suffice to mention that in my research, I came to realise the complex and nuanced influence of gender at

work. On the one hand, there is a distinct habitus of us as female for ourselves, which is part of our identity as humans and our lived presence in the world. Habitual female gestures (for example, wearing make-up or high heels, expressing feelings, smiling, mediating conflict) are part of our identity that we do not necessarily want to give up, yet in the workplace serve to separate us from the dominant power coalition of males. See Sullivan (2000) for an elaborate account of the complexity of gender influences in male dominated environments.

I argue that in male environments, women in senior leadership positions may feel side-stepped and misrecognised, simply because they are a less powerful social group than men in the workforce. Our social conditioning prompts us to translate that engrained misrecognition into self-doubt, and ultimately, reduced self-confidence. When in fact, the conversation of gestures is sometimes an indication of the power structure at play that is more oriented towards and comfortable for men, rather than a personal message of inadequacy.

In other words, recognition, or the withholding of it, is used as a disciplinary process to affirm the assumed status quo within power relations, one that still mostly favors men. Being attuned to the complexity at play, and cognisant of this foundational power structure that may not relate to our own personal conduct, may help women feel more like equal players in the game, contributing to increased self-confidence and longevity in the organisation.

During the time of my research and the broader my relational perspective became, and my awareness of these power differentials increased, the more liberated I felt, enabling a less negative impact on my self-confidence and more empathy to other minority's self-confidence struggles. In other words, awareness of the power structure, how it is interwoven with recognition and how it influences people's self-confidence, paradoxically, contributes to increased self-confidence at work.

5.3 De-centring of the self in relational situations at work through rigorous reflexivity may contribute to reduced levels of stress and increased self-confidence at work

As I was deepening my inquiry into relations, power structures and the complex nature of self-confidence at work, I started noticing that my perspective on what I do at work changes. In the past, approaching my work from the individualistic point of view of the 'heroic' leader, my interpretation of other's gestures towards me was very personal, impacting my self-image and ultimately contributing to constant fluctuations in my self-confidence. However, during my

research, I gradually started noticing that expanding my perspective to the broader power structures in play and being empathetic to others' needs and interests started a process of de-centring myself and becoming more aware of the network of relationships that influences all of us at work. I started noticing the enabling and constraining nature of my relationship with my peers on the executive team, which enabled me to attribute gestures less negatively towards myself. This process, over time, strengthened my sense of self-confidence.

Cunliffe & Jun (2005) explore reflexivity, asserting that through the radical process of critiquing our beliefs and ideologies, we become responsive to others and open to the possibilities for new ways of thinking and acting. They claim that if we are willing to exist as transforming selves, we recognise the need for change within relationships, in organisational cultures and practices.

In addition, reflexivity serves as a means of enhancing a sense of personal responsibility in relation to others and helps an individual to move beyond the routine and habitual act, to see how to act with intention, will, and moral responsibility.

Reflexivity is directed not only at one's own presuppositions and actions, but also towards one's place in the wider context: of social and organisational concerns and the ethical responsibilities of his or her professional life and work situation. It extends our ability to make new and different choices by expanding our interpretive possibilities in given situations at work.

Thus, I argue that rigorous reflexivity enables de-centring of the self, perceiving the broader relational picture and in turn can increase self-confidence.

6. Contributions to knowledge and practice, limitations, and future research

6.1 Contributions to knowledge

The prevalent theoretical perspective in organisations today is rooted in systems thinking, a theoretical lens on organisations that comes from cybernetic systems managed cognitively and rationally, emphasising measurement, and fed back by external stimuli that enable self-correction (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). From the systems perspectives, what happens between people that enables organisational results is not the focus because it is messy, complex, and unmeasurable, and therefore considered a 'black box' that cannot really be 'scientifically' researched.

Exploring self-confidence from the vantage point of the perspective of Complex Responsive Processes of relating within a qualitative narrative methodology enabled opening this 'black box' of relationships among people in organisations. By this I mean that rather than measuring antecedents and influences on self-confidence following some empirical intervention, as in

many of the research studies in this domain, my research offers a qualitative inquiry into what people experience that impacts their self-confidence and how to engage with this topic in real life organisational situations.

With this research approach, I have conducted a deep investigation into the process of self-confidence, situating it in the dynamic and complex web of relationships between people at work, and distancing it from the individualistic psychological approaches that tend to see it as individual, almost like a steady trait. In doing so, my research sheds light on self-confidence at work from a few perspectives:

- (a) **Self-confidence can be seen as a relational process.** Following Elias' (2001) view on people as social through and through, self-confidence resides in the dynamic relationships and ties between people, although it is influenced by the personal and social backgrounds and intricacies of each person. Far from being a stable personality or individual character trait, it is interwoven in complex ways in our relationships such that we seek to evolve our identities and our meaning in the world of work by a constant negotiation of our position relative to others, influencing our sense of confidence or lack of, at any given moment.

- (b) **Recognition and power interplay and impact self-confidence.** In my research I have taken a fresh look at Honneth's (1995) recognition theory from the perspective of the influence of recognition on self-confidence and built my arguments on Fraser's (2001) criticism of Honneth. I apply Fraser's view of recognition as representative of social power structures at play, such that recognition of minorities resides within a political power context that limits changes of the status quo due to the need of more powerful groups to preserve the status quo. Thus, recognition can come in many forms, not only in a positive form. It may, in fact, serve to cement the existing power hierarchies and thus potentially detrimentally affect self-confidence of people in minority groups such as female in male dominated environments. Understanding that the social power structure may manifest itself in personal and complex recognition patterns is key to retaining high confidence levels if you are in a minority group.

Tying it all together, my research offers a revised definition of self-confidence that considers the relational complexity I described:

Relational Self-Confidence at work – revised definition:

The fluctuating sense of being meaningful and valued at work that stems from our mutual negotiation of gestures of recognition and misrecognition, mediated through relationships of power in the workplace

6.2 Contributions to practice

As can be expected in deep academic study and especially practice based research, my personal journey during the research period of almost four years was transformational in introducing more perspectives to my practice and broadening my approach to my work.

This transformation is evident while re-reading my projects and re-thinking my developmental path during the years of my study. As mentioned in the introduction, I have not gone back to re-write and polish my earlier projects because I was interested in enabling readers to get a sense of the movement of my thinking. For example, in P1 and P2 it is evident that I was paying more attention to how events at work influences the individual rather than how relational aspects were influencing my experience. I was sharing less about my own experience in the beginning of the journey and had lower awareness to the fluctuations in my own self-confidence. In P3 and P4 I was ready to expose more of my own assumptions, feelings and personal experience, expressing more openness to a rather critical view on my own approach and perspective. Applying an increasingly critical lens on my own work and involvement with others enabled more awareness to the relational influences and ultimately enabled me to notice and to develop my thesis on relational aspects related to self-confidence.

Likewise, upon commencing the programme, I was deeply influenced by dominant organisational theoretical views such as the leader as a hero singlehandedly 'driving' strategy, as expressed in strategic choice theory. I was influenced by a constant need to drive for future visions and goals, and to subdue conflict at work and drive for 'harmony'. I was also deeply entangled emotionally in the ebb and flow of organisational life, highly focused on concrete projects and plans, and at the same time, unwilling to explore the underlying relational complexity at play, treating it as almost invisible. In other words, I was quite invested in the idea of the 'black box', highly focused on results and measurement and unwilling to explore too deeply the relational aspects which I perceived as messy and uncontrollable. This is very evident in my P1 where I share, for example, my enthusiasm for the profession of organisational development and almost cherish an approach that frames human behaviour in scientific terms. By P2 I already have more sense of the limitations of this approach in leading change in organisations, and by P4 I already operate under different assumptions related to organisations, in which mutual recognition is a key influencer towards our projects at work.

By spending considerable time and effort exploring work narratives from the relational and emotional standpoint, engaging with rich descriptions, and more importantly by opening and enabling a critical lens on my work from my colleagues in the research community, this gradual transformation of my practice emerged, that enabled a broader approach to my work, continuing to work with leadership and to apply models and tools, yet to add the relational perspective to my work. The program enabled a way I could start opening the "black box" and

noticing how personal relations influence projects at work. I feel that I can approach conflict more directly rather than shying away from it and driving for harmony. For example, when during my research period I resigned from a previous position and started in a new position as VP of Human Resources, my stepping in, in the first few months, felt entirely different than my previous onboarding processes in my professional past. In such a key role such as Head of Human Resources, it can be distressing and destabilising in the first months. During this period, I was equally worried about fitting in and quickly making an impact, yet I was able to engage with my emotional responses to the new situation with a greater degree of reflexivity. I applied a broad lens on the political landscape, and I noticed the fluctuation of my self-confidence in the wider political context rather than automatically attributing them to myself.

Engaging with the research on the DMan enabled a level of detachment that I can now feel is a healthy practice to maintain. In general terms, being engaged in more than one central community of practice helps maintain mental openness and a constant broad view on what it is that you do in any given community. By detaching and exploring the relational power field, I became less personally sensitive, more aware of and empathetic towards other people's struggles, and ultimately more confident in my own stride.

The contribution of this work to professionals in the human resources and consulting can be to point them to pay closer attention to the broader context of their work in driving change in organisations, and to the deep influences of relational and political aspects on our projects at work, both in the broader sense and in relation to people's need for recognition and the volatility of our self-confidence when working on shared projects. Rather than seeing self-confidence as a stable aspect of individuals, working under the assumption that self-confidence is a dynamic relational phenomenon highly influenced by recognition gestures, can help professionals notice the almost invisible layer of engagement between people, how it encompasses power and political dynamics and how sometimes these dynamics drive people's reaction to change efforts, rather than the concrete projects and tasks at hand.

A way to start building awareness of these types of influences is brining more reflexivity to our practice by sharing our experiences with others and being open to their critical lens on our work.

Maintaining a reflexive stance towards our work gradually enables a process of de-centring of the individualised self, of noticing a broader relational context at play and thus opening more access points to organisational change and movement.

Thus, the possibility of building such practices into the day-to-day of organisational life can be interesting to explore. Examples of practices that may develop reflexivity could be enabling group meetings for reflection about our work which do not have a set agenda, encouraging narrative writing and mutual reflection on these narratives, and reading of alternative literature

that challenges the assumptions of what we do. None of these practices are easy to apply in the fast paced, results driven world of work, yet when people in formal power positions become more aware and open minded, there is opportunity for the dialogue to change.

Although I continue doing what I need to do in my day-to-day work, including building models and future visions, attending to multiple tasks, etc., my altered perspective and sensitivity to the relational context is in itself contributing to a broader conversation with my colleagues at work.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

My research is a result of a deep inquiry into my own situations at work, a narrative that is a response to my own struggles, with the resultant conclusions emerging for me based on my own history, personal sensitivities, and the community of researchers that I engaged with over the years. As such, there is no claim for an 'objective' truth, but rather, a claim that my subjectivity and my conclusions may appeal to professionals who read the work and find it resonates with their own experience.

The stance I am taking is that my research contributions are an alternative interpretation of my experience, one of multiple optional interpretations that could have emerged. Additionally, my experience at work, as well as my confidence, constantly evolve and change, and conclusions that I reached may potentially continue changing if I were to have continued narrating and conducting my research.

My particular learning set and people involved in my work – my colleagues and my supervisors had a significant influence on my final thesis, and they too contributed to these conclusions by their constant involvement in my thinking. A different group of people may have taken different research avenues and potentially different conclusions.

Likewise, I acknowledge that the use of narratives, which are unique cases that are by nature not replicable, can be contested as unsuitable for drawing generalisable conclusions.

However, as described in the methodology section and as I attempted to persuade the reader throughout my work, the case for the generalisability of my findings lies in the premise that I am part of a larger web of relationships that comprise my social environment, and therefore my experience is shared with others in my community.

An intricate part of the research on the DMan program is the constant challenging of our own assumptions by our learning set. By way of staying with the challenging, sometimes disturbing, process of sharing my work and thus noticing my own biases, habits, norms and values through the eyes of others, I hope some of these limitations were somewhat offset.

I hope that my research has provoked new ways of thinking, that it is interesting and eye opening to the readers, and that it resonated with their own experience at work. This type of response would render the work as contributing to knowledge and practice.

While writing about self-confidence, the topic of gender came up numerous times as a theme that influenced my experience and relationships throughout my career. As such, I could not avoid adding the prism of gender into my narratives, reflections, and conclusions. However, I would like to point out that the topic of gender has a broad and deep body of research and inquiring more deeply into self-confidence from the point of view of gender may require a full research on its own. Thus, I feel that my conclusions in relation to gender may be preliminary.

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