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Doctorate of Business Administration

An exploratory study into the role of empowerment through relational leadership

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for
the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

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Dedication

Dedicated to my parents, family and friends, and all beloved people who have ever encouraged me to be a better person, in witness to their ever-present compassion, help and unconditional willingness to do good deeds.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my wife and my five children, who believed in me and looked up to me, which made me expand my ability to fulfil their expectations.

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Finally, to Zamil Group top management, who allowed me to pursue my studies and doctoral research.

Abstract

Purpose – In response to the emerging management change in my country and the need for a better work climate and better leadership, this study explores modern leadership approaches such as relational leadership. I used action research to test the potential of empowerment to produce actionable knowledge for improvement of leadership practice in my organization, and in order to propose a conceptual framework training model that emphasizes key areas of focus. The research is intended to shed light on new avenues of leadership to boost production efficiency and workforce effectiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative research design, the author collected data through interviews and also observation of six selected employees during interviews, in the workplace and in focus groups. We simply interacted more often and closely facilitated our emergent practice to develop a better work environment. I made a series of interventions using action research cycles to understand the work group's behaviour pattern and views when they were given more control and power to make their own judgements and take their own decisions.

Findings – The results show that relational leadership has a positive impact on work group morale, which creates a better work climate and boosts work group outputs and efficiency. Empowerment can have a positive effect on work engagement in highly challenging work cultures.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the relational literature by exploring analyses of the influence of relational leadership as an alternative leadership style to command and control, utilizing the action research study I conducted at my workplace.

Keywords Leadership, Relationality, Empowerment, Action Research, Organizational Complexity.

Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that this is my own work and I am the authorship owner, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text. This work is intended to obtain a DBA degree at the University of Liverpool and I have not previously submitted this work to obtain any other academic qualification.

Abdulwahid M. A. Aldoukhi

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

DBA: Doctor of Business Administration

CAS: complex adaptive system

LMX: leader–member exchange

MMX: member–member exchange

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The traditional conception of leadership was founded on the idea of an individual leader authorized with the power to establish, control and direct organizational structure. In this perspective, organizations are visualized as machines where the leader is the mechanic or operator and the individual employees are the cogs. This command-and-control-type organization does not fit the rapidly changing world (Gergen, 2016). As the business world has become more global, with greater diversity in race, gender and beliefs, the vast potential of embracing different interests, values and motives has become apparent. Also, the huge flows of information enabled by the rapid increase in the use of the Internet have revolutionized decision-making processes, and these information flows, combined with the dynamism introduced by globalization, have shortened the life cycles of products and services, threatening organizations' sustainability. All of these antecedent conditions force organizations to look for more adaptable, resilient and innovative forms of action (Raelin, 2012; Gergen, 2016). Hence, new perspectives on leadership have emerged that promise to reinvent our understanding of the kind of leadership that is suitable for this dynamic and diversified world where large organizations can genuinely span the globe and where even small ones can have global ambitions.

1.2 Workplace issues

Command and control leadership is traditionally popular in the Middle East, for example in Saudi Arabia, and this profoundly affects the style of management that businesses there normally adopt. This heritage and common environment have influenced me as well, and for two decades I have experienced a manufacturing management style at my workplace in which work improvement or an increase in production has been understood as being achieved mainly by two factors: either boosting machinery, in terms of getting more machines/more advanced technology (artefacts), or recruiting more people. Such approaches are essentially grounded in the theories developed by great scholars and industrialists such as Michael Eugene Porter, Henry Ford, W. Edwards Deming, Frederick W. Taylor, Douglas McGregor, etc. The above approaches to management have also been supplemented by concepts such as incentives, innovation, overtime, TQM, Six Sigma, etc., where the drivers are largely rewards or coercive actions. Although these management strategies were able to underpin the development and growth of organizations for a while, once they became the norm, and once global competition increased, their ability to continue to offer incremental improvements diminished over time. Assets and employees became an extra cost that had to be cut down to sustain equity, and generally inertia would reassert its grip on both employees and organizational systems, and my organization is no exception. Accordingly, I have been questioning what can be done differently to ensure that employees are really motivated, maintain focus and feel ownership of their work, and are therefore able and willing to step up their efforts when required to keep the organization on track.

Organizations today do not provide secure lifetime employment, and this can put employees' loyalty and commitment at risk. The negative psychological impact on employees potentially results in the loss of work purpose, reduces engagement with work, deflates motivation and ultimately reduces performance, and that really matters to manufacturing leaders. Hence, successful leadership is the

process that enables a person to influence group members and lead them to achieve certain goals through better work performance.

We in the workplace have been negating the dynamic impact of human nature, but we are in fact dealing with human and social dynamic identity (Jenlink, 2006). Our ability to control whether that identity works innovatively and efficiently, or how it gets influenced, is limited. So, with appreciation of the dynamic nature of human practice and how the idea of facilitatory and dialogical leadership fits with it, this research study was intended to find out the powerful connection between environmental working conditions, leadership and worker behaviour and the elements that influence them. Therefore, the objective of this research has been to introduce an alternative perspective on people leadership based on the relational concept (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012; Hersted and Gergen, 2013), which is triggered by an epistemology urging a renewed emphasis on the humanitarian and feminine sides of employees as human beings (Komives et al., 1998; Maturana and Varela, 1987; Raelin, 2011). I used action research to test the potential for empowerment through the alternative of relational leadership practices to gain the interest of focus group employees and boost their productivity and effectiveness.

Traditionally, the feminine leadership perspective has been undermined, underappreciated, disrespected or, rather politely, I would say overlooked by managers in the Middle East, especially in the industrial and manufacturing sectors, since it contradicts common Middle Eastern beliefs in our understanding of leadership – both personally in families and professionally in organizations. However, since I have become aware of the potential of the relational leadership perspective, this has transformed how I see leaders, followers and myself. This knowledge has changed the way I interact and has helped me to develop more natural communication, more successful results and greater harmony on both the family level and the professional level. Thus, I wanted to see whether this concept, if extended across my organization, could trigger positive change in working relations and employees and result in new perceptions, a more productive work environment and improved efficacy at the professional level in the workplace, even in a Saudi organization, as an extreme example of the traditional attitudes to management in the Middle East.

1.3 Zamil Air Conditioners profile

Zamil Industrial's heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) sector is represented by Zamil Air Conditioners Holding Co. Ltd. Founded in 1974 as a pioneer in the Saudi Arabian air-conditioning industry, the company has expanded over the past four decades to become a leading international manufacturer of air-conditioning systems and is currently the number one producer of such systems in the Middle East. Zamil Air Conditioners designs, manufactures, tests, markets and services a comprehensive range of air-conditioning products, from compact room air conditioners and mini splits to large-scale central air conditioners, chillers and air-handling units for highly specialized commercial and industrial applications. Zamil Air Conditioners began operations in 1974 and today has grown to become the largest producer of consumer air conditioners in the Middle East, with a production capacity of more than 1 million units per year. Zamil Air Conditioners provides sustainable heating and air-conditioning solutions for commercial buildings, industrial establishments and power plants, as well as district cooling facilities. The company provides the complete range of products capable of catering to the HVAC requirements of global commercial and industrial clients' demands. The company offers professional air-conditioning services as well as complete preventive maintenance programmes and other related HVAC services, aimed at providing regular, scheduled check-ups to

keep air-conditioning systems in optimum operating condition. It operates a Service & Parts department and offers annual service and maintenance contracts for banks, industrial establishments, oil and gas companies, retail outlets and homes, in addition to handling regular customer service calls. Zamil Air Conditioners has also developed a state-of-the-art training centre, offering a complete range of training courses for the company's own technicians and engineers as well as for those employed by dealers and large corporate clients.

1.4 Managerial problem and challenges at the organisational level

Since I started working with Zamil Air Conditioners in 1998, the company's focus has been on assembly line output, because it is this that makes the final product count available for sales. Consequently, this research also focuses on this production line and its employees, so as to develop a better understanding of the issues influencing their outcomes and their administrative leadership and how this affects employee attitudes and performance. The study is based on research data from an action research study within my workplace. This study is part of a larger study exploring the role of leadership style based on relational leadership and the impact of preserving the organizational context as a complex system.

Currently, the work group may be instructed on how to do certain tasks through command and control leadership. This is not as efficient as if they were empowered to do things in their own way as per their own set of instructions. Empowering them to do tasks their own way allows an increase in their efficacy and efficiency.

1.5 My role as an insider researcher

Doing action research while being an insider and a manufacturing manager led me to expect three interlocking challenges: getting closely engaged while, at the same time, keeping the distance required to see things critically; balancing organizational requirements while managing politics; and enabling change to happen (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Insider action research, as an approach and a method for data collection, was used in this case to explore the role of empowerment through relational leadership and investigate the implications for implementing such changes and find out whether participants at my workplace would espouse such a leadership style. The aim in this thesis is to tell my story of being an expert employee and a novice researcher initiating collaborative action research in my own workplace to develop knowledge about the adaptation of the perspective of relational leadership in an actual working context.

Data were collected between 2018 and 2020 and included my log, with reflections on my managerial/industrial work, as well as interviews and observation of focus group participants. My long-standing industrial experience – over 20 years of observing employees and hearing their stories – helped me to construct rigorous, reflective and interpretative research findings.

I balanced my organizational role with the demands of inquiry and research (Kaplan, 1998). I realized that the new view of leadership I was adopting would influence the choices I made and how I perceived others while undertaking multiple roles. This would mean practising different forms of, or more, engagement, negotiation, dialogue, communication, self-reflection, tolerance, humility and generosity (Bell, 1998).

My role within the system focuses on organizational development activities, which enables me to access and expose various organizational dynamics that are not available to outside researchers, and

I made sure to apply relational leadership qualities to develop co-action relationships with employees to alleviate their anxiety about being open with me, with the reassurance that they would experience no negative consequences due to airing their views. I also balanced my role as an employee and researcher to avoid making interventions that caused disruption to work or participant distress. In fact, the intention was to get to know doers in real situations and increase awareness of their views, behaviours and obstacles.

In fact, undertaking an action research project at my workplace offered me a great opportunity to drive change and learning, and has involved planned interventions in real situations. This enabled me to combine my action research role with my regular organizational role to examine the findings on the implemented actions. This project caused me to engage in intervention processes with team members who developed personal and organizational learning, as well as contributing to knowledge (Coghlan, 2001).

This research study contributes to the relational literature and practice by exploring analyses of relational leadership as an alternative leadership style to command and control, utilizing my workplace action research on the issue at hand as a manufacturing manager and in my role as a researcher.

This research should help in answering research questions such as:

Are there other ways to handle periods of low demand, which is a complex problem at my organization, and improve leadership practice?

Is there an alternative avenue for resource optimization during the slow season, which uses predictive reasoning in solving complex problems, and which enables knowledge creation while exploring avenues for change, action, and decision-making, as well as empowering participants to increase their motivation, grow, do more, and innovate as a sign of satisfaction?

The research objectives were:

To explore what approaches offer an effective way to solve the complex problems we face in times of low demand and the negative influences they have that the command and control leadership approach cannot tackle efficiently and effectively.

To confront values and beliefs when looking into problems and issues and attempting to resolve them from another perspective.

To increase understanding of research problems and knowledge that refine thinking.

To introduce an alternative perspective on people leadership based on the relational concept of empowerment.

To solve targeted workplace problems by driving attention to the dynamic nature of human practice.

Therefore, my research study's aim is to use action research to test the potential for empowerment through the alternative approach of relational leadership practices, in order to gain the interest of focus group employees and boost their productivity and effectiveness, and to find out the powerful connections between work environmental conditions, leadership, and worker behaviour.

The methodology will be based mainly on observation, focus groups, and interviews following an action research trajectory. Due to the nature of the study, which requires in-depth analysis of perceptions of my workplace's complex problems, qualitative research is better suited to understanding the underlying reasons for the opinions of focus group employees. Also, on one hand, I need to use action research in order to address the problem and find possible solutions through interviews; on the other hand, I need to use the interpretive method to understand the underlying reasons for the opinions of focus group employees.

The thesis will explore modern leadership approaches such as relational leadership using recent literature review, and use action research to test the potential of empowerment to improve the work environment and leadership practice at my organization. This will lead to the proposal of a conceptual framework training model that emphasizes key areas of focus. Also, a qualitative research design will be used to collect data through interviews and observations of selected employees via focus groups. The thesis will include seven main chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, actionable knowledge, conclusion, and reflection.

The next chapter contains a literature review of the topic, including leadership approaches such as relational vs command and control leadership. It also examines the relational leadership perspective and its main distinct qualities with regard to response processes, cohesiveness, interaction, collectivity, collaboration, relationships, connectivity and co-action, and finally it addresses the challenges of adopting relational leadership.

Chapter II: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

At my workplace, the command and control leadership style no longer offers any added value, whether through boosting machinery, getting more machines and artefacts, or recruiting more people. The ability to continue to offer incremental improvements has diminished over time, as well as employees' morale. Hence, the question arises, what else can be done? Are there new, alternative avenues for change? Therefore, I have been questioning what can be done differently to ensure that employees are motivated, maintain focus and are willing to tackle challenges to keep the organization evolving.

Thus, with appreciation of the idea of a dynamic form of human practice, and how this idea of facilitatory and dialogical leadership in particular fits with it, my research study's aim is to find out the powerful connection between work environmental conditions, leadership and worker behaviour and the key elements of alternative leadership styles that may influence outcomes, productivity and morale.

Therefore, this exploratory study and literature review seek to introduce an alternative perspective on people leadership based on the relational concept (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Also, it is based on epistemology urging a renewed emphasis on a more humanitarian and feminine leadership perspective (Komives et al., 1998; Maturana and Varela, 1987; Raelin, 2011) in the attempt to trigger positive change in the workplace. Key areas to be reviewed, then, are leadership approaches such as relational vs control or command leadership, the relational leadership perspective and its main distinct qualities.

For my literature review, my search strategy was to utilize the University of Liverpool library engine, searching management and leadership academic/scholarly journals by keywords/key phrases such as leadership, relationality, empowerment, action research, actionable knowledge and exploratory study. Also, I looked for peer-reviewed papers, books and refereed journals. In addition, I utilized online content and reference papers provided by my academic supervisor. Luckily there was a lot of literature on the subject and I tried to use recent examples, as far as possible, from both academic and practitioner literature, which were useful during discussion and analysis.

2.2 Study framework

As civilization progresses, leadership notions and approaches are evolving towards a more democratic orientation, based on the relational perspective and through a host of theories such as leaderful, applied, leadership-as-practice, leader-member exchange, collective, connected, critical, distributed, integrative, responsible and shared leadership. These new ideas are typically based on seeing leaders as part of a social process and encompass concepts such as team leadership, co-active leadership (Gergen, 2016), collaborative leadership, shared leadership and distributed leadership, all of which are based on relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012).

The relational leadership perspective emerged in the 1970s, focusing on the reciprocal nature of the relationship between leaders and followers and with the explicit aim of exploring how this can be utilized to promote motivation, satisfaction, a sense of mission, and a synergy between organizational

vision and personal and organizational goals (Blake and Mouton, 1978). This kind of leadership was first exemplified in transformational and transactional leadership, since these concepts are closely related to relational leadership, as initially introduced by Komives, Lucas and McMahon (1998). Transformational leaders seek to leverage followers' morale, motivation, enthusiasm, satisfaction and performance by giving them autonomy. These leaders also extend care for employees, express empathy and give them intellectual catalysts. It is believed that there is a direct positive relationship between follower perceptions of a leader and the level of optimism within an organization (McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2002) and this encourages a definition of leadership as a relational process of individuals who together try to accomplish a common goal or positive change. Leadership, therefore, depends on context: it is not a linear or one-directional action but a set of interactive actions.

Seminal literature such as that of Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012b), Raelin (2011) and Komives et al. (2013) uses the term "relational leadership" differently; for instance, it views leadership and organization as human-social construction projects made up of rich connections and an interdependence between organizations and their individuals. The more traditional orientation presents leadership from an entity perspective, focusing on individual entities, and in this way is consistent with an objective epistemology that presumes that individuals have access to absolute knowledge. The leadership perspective that takes a relational orientation projects the organization's existence based on interdependent relationships and intersubjective meanings. In addition, the relational perspective does not focus on identifying the individual attributes of leaders but instead on social construction processes. Although entity and relational approaches view leadership as a social process, they differ in their epistemology and ontology, which results in different ways of operationalizing relational leadership. The distinct difference of the relational leadership perspective from the traditional one lies in its understanding that leadership is relational and cannot be attributed to individual entities, qualities or traits alone. Relational leadership is really about considering the reaction of followers or individuals. It is to be understood that the leaders do not know what is best for the organization, but that leaders and individuals in collaboration know what the best approach is. The goal should be creating usable knowledge (Argyris et al., 1985). The question of relational vs control or command leadership leads us to the realization of the existence of this entity perspective and relational ontology. The entity perspective assumes individual agency and views organizational life as being a result of individual action, where those individuals are seen as possessing the capacity to reason, learn, produce and manage, etc. In contrast, relationship-based approaches, such as leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, assume that leaders and followers develop an effective relationship and through this share incremental influence. Another example is Hollander's relational theory (Hollander, 1978). Hollander was one of the first scholars to see leadership as a relational process through the two-way influence and social exchange between leaders and followers. He also saw leadership as involving influence, with a leader being just one of the participants, and he recognized that leaders and followers exchange benefits through transactions. Charismatic leadership is another example of the entity perspective, whereas relationship-based leadership views charisma as a social relationship between leaders and followers, exploring the qualities of followers and the relationship that is fostered through a leader's charismatic influence. The relational self is another example of the entity perspective; this emphasizes the self-concept derived from connection with significant others at an interpersonal level, meaning that a leader's effect on the motivation and performance of followers differs from one leader to another. Hence, the impression leaders leave on followers, such as the reinforcement of self-worth, may motivate followers to be loyal to them and share the same interests, and this may increase

leadership effectiveness. Moreover, relational-self identities play a role in the dyadic leadership process, offering more than role-making or social exchange. The collective self is another example of the entity perspective. Collective self-identities do not require personal relationships among members, but rather come from a social category or identification. This implies a psychological merging of self and team, resulting in seeing oneself as similar to others, thereby reinforcing collective interest. Despite the argument made by some that collective self and relational self fall within the relational perspective, they are, as indicated above, really more fitted to the entity perspective because their processes are carried out in the minds of individuals rather than socially. In addition, social networks and the entity perspective presume relationship-based leadership to be more than merely a superficial exchange relationship between leaders and followers. They focus on the entity of individual perceptions of relational bonds. The principles of network theory underpin the relations between individuals, how individuals are seen in the social field, social network connections and the social field context. Hence, the relational approach focuses on interaction between individuals rather than merely their attributes, and is thus considered to be an entity perspective because it grounds cognition in the minds of leaders and focuses on the dynamics of interaction. Moreover, LMX–MMX (member–member exchange) sharing network theory presents an entity perspective that is based on integration of network and dyadic partnerships: the focus is not solely on the importance of formal influence between leaders and followers, but also considers both formal and informal influences on individuals that may occur outside reporting relationships. Last but not least, Rost's idea of post-industrial leadership is another entity perspective that sees leadership as relational-based, describing what leaders and followers do together, and not what leaders do. Hence, Rost (1995) viewed leadership as entailing multidirectional influences – i.e. they can be from any direction, not merely top-down, thus negating the idea of followers.

In summary, the ontology of the entity perspective assumes an objective reality in which individuals are seen as separate and independent bounded entities. The entity perspective approaches process as cognitivist and constructivist, where individuals performing internal cognitive operations are separable from external social influence. The entity perspective sees individual acts in a one-way causal relationship and feedback analysis. Hence, the entity perspective views leadership through emphasizing the importance of a leader or followers' interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, the ontology of the relational perspective assumes a social reality in which all knowledge of self, others and things is in the form of interdependent or co-dependent constructions that unfold only in relation to each other. The relational perspective approaches process as constructionist wherein the person and context are socially interrelated. Bradbury and Lichtenstein (2000) highlighted the fact that relational perspectives are dynamic approaches and difficult to generalize and that this requires new standards to express their validity, reliability and trustworthiness. Thus, entity perspectives approach relational leadership as a relationship within individual perception, mind, cognition and behaviours where leaders utilize the influence of relationships to make a change and thus to achieve the collective goals that they are interested in. Although different studies and scholars have introduced various descriptions and definitions of approaches that can be viewed as relational perspectives, we cannot ignore the diversity in what they mean by relational. Thus, different frameworks of relational perspective through interactive engagement can be inferred that lead to a deeper understanding of the theory purpose.

2.3 Relational leadership concept

Relational leadership can be described as a process of people attempting to accomplish change to achieve a common goal through a focus on the building and cultivation of mutual relationships (Komives et al., 1998, 2006, 2013).

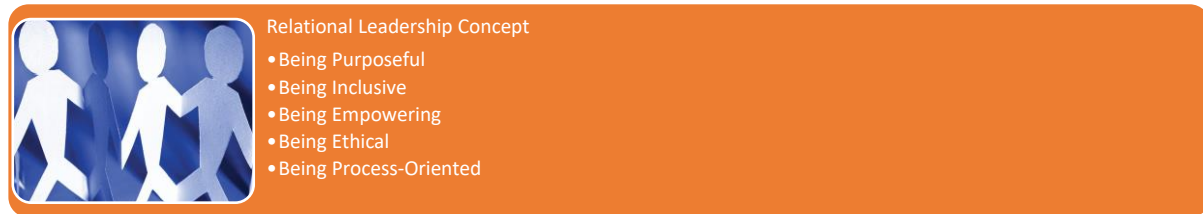


Figure 2.1 Relational leadership concept

Relational leadership contains five components (Cleary et al., 2018; Komives et al., 1998):

- **Being purposeful:** collaborating to find common ground with others to facilitate positive change. With purpose, being helpful, positive and optimistic. Commitment to a common goal.
- **Being inclusive:** understanding, valuing and actively engaging a diversity of views, approaches, styles and the best of individuality. Knowledge of self and others.
- **Being empowering:** self-empowerment to be involved and creating an empowering environment allowing the full involvement of participants. Encouraging and increasing self-esteem. Empowering those that are involved.
- **Being ethical:** respectful and respectable, trusting others, and being reliable and honest. As such, it is leadership that is driven by values, standards and good morals.
- **Being process-oriented:** being intentional and thoughtful. Giving and receiving feedback. Understanding how the group works together.

Also, relational leadership can be described as a set of interpersonal processes associated with collaboration, empathy, trust and empowerment, while being non-hierarchical, distributed and embedded within interaction and conversation. In addition, under a relational leadership approach, power does not reside in managers or leaders but in a process of mutual influence and partnership between leaders and team members, through which is created a social order and co-constructed actions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Uhl-Bien (2006: 668) has presented a definition of relational leadership “as a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (e.g. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, and ideologies) are constructed and produced”. Uhl-Bien (2006) claimed that this description does not restrict leadership to a particular hierarchal position or role but views leadership as occurring in relational dynamics. Uhl-Bien (2006) tried to investigate relational leadership through two perspectives: an entity perspective to identify the attribute of engagement in interpersonal relationships, and a relational perspective that sees leadership as process of social construction. Ultimately, Uhl-Bien (2006) presented a theory in which relational leadership is a process of social influence through emergent coordination and change.

2.4 Relational leadership levels

In so far as the relational perspective is at the forefront of emerging trends in leadership theory, it can be said that scholarship has moved beyond the old concepts of leadership as either unidirectional or as a reciprocal leader–follower relationship. Among these recent trends are relational leadership models, authentic leadership, emotionally intelligent leadership, servant leadership, leadership practices inventory and transformational leadership. Relational leadership is characterized by being intentional (Warden, 2009), as leaders show followers that they care about the issues affecting them and care for them, and that this is not merely incidental behavior as seen in classical leadership. This process can be expressed through the exchange of knowledge, and through being aware of oneself and others and thus acting with care in co-action (Conway, 2015). As has been pointed out by Renshaw (2017), relational leadership works by creating a space (both contextual and applied) in which to mediate between leaders and followers, so it is not simply based on the decisions of one person. It builds on the strengths of each individual so that the sum of all the strengths that trigger passion, inspiration and transformation in individuals become more than the individual parts. To achieve this, relational leadership emphasizes engagement to increase trust and trustworthiness, and this exchange of trust between leaders and followers is important for the positive and proactive interaction needed to achieve added value. Relational leadership also emphasizes the need for coaching and mentoring, in contrast to the control and monitoring of more traditional leadership approaches (Gauthier, 2015). Whereas control and monitoring serve to break down individuals' spirits, coaching and mentoring encourage their engagement, pushing them towards greater productivity by taking into consideration the extent to which morale and self-esteem play a role in motivation.

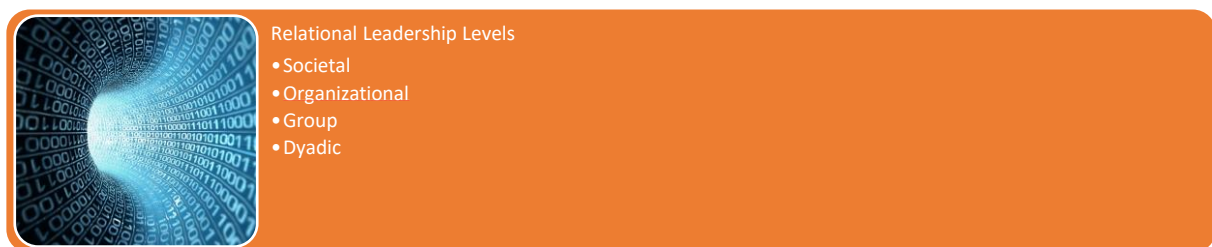


Figure 2.2 Relational leadership levels

Relational leadership consists of four levels (Nicholson, 2013):

1. Societal, presented in a positive stakeholder relationship (caring) (Cunliffe, 2016, 2018; Cunliffe and Pavlovich, 2021)
2. Organizational, presented in the institutionalization of caring practice
3. Group, presented in positive emotions, again a perspective of caring
4. Dyadic, which employs the experience of relational leadership to express emotion in reciprocal care between leaders and followers

As we can see from these levels, relational leadership tends to reflect the leadership practised more often by women and considered to be feminine (Cunliffe, 2016, 2018; Cunliffe and Pavlovich, 2021) in the sense that it involves socializing with individuals and groups. Typically, males tend to be more

aggressive, dominant, and emotionally stable in the workplace, while females tend to be more apprehensive, sensitive, and caring (show more empathy to others).

2.5 Relational response process

The process of relational leadership urges leaders to practise behaviours that create positive relationships with all levels of employees. Such leaders can be led as often as they are followed, and are ready to enter into relationships with others that are intended to influence behaviour, values or attitudes. The relational leadership process is also about managing oneself by enhancing self-awareness, in tandem with fostering the skills needed to work collaboratively and interdependently. Moreover, leaders encourage learning and growth among followers through coaching and mentoring, energize commitment and are advocates for change. Thus, relational leadership is characterized by learning, reflexivity, mentoring, coaching, enabling of relationships, commitment, the need to work together, and achievement of an agreed purpose that enhances performance. Relational leadership is fostered by collaborative reflective work (collaboration) and focuses on common values such as trust and relationships, and team cohesion. Cleary et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of relationship processes and values or qualities such as paying attention to members through listening, respect and expression of interest, as well as reinforcing a respectful culture, treating individuals equally regardless of rank and hierarchy, and expressing appreciation by offering acknowledgements that increase motivation. Practising relationship processes is important, for instance in triggering innovation, promoting understanding and encouraging diversity, all of which prioritize divergent thinking and new ideas by removing the assumptions that limit creative thinking (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Other scholars offer similar summaries. Komives et al. (1998, 2006, 2013), for example, credited relational leadership with being inclusive, empowering, purposeful, ethical and process-oriented, while Regan and Brooks (1995) attributed to it values of collaboration, caring, courage, intuition and vision. Hence, to craft relational leadership one requires the “3Gs”:

1. Be genuine (true to yourself)
2. Be generous
3. Be generative

To be genuine, leaders should express certain values or qualities such as authenticity, transparency, sincerity, humility, etc. To be generous requires leaders to present trust and engagement with passion and energy, dedication, etc. To be generative, leaders should build sense, transform opportunities, generate the future with innovation and be open for collaboration. Leaders should also understand that they cannot really empower other people, such as followers or subordinates; they can only create the conditions that facilitate self-empowerment.

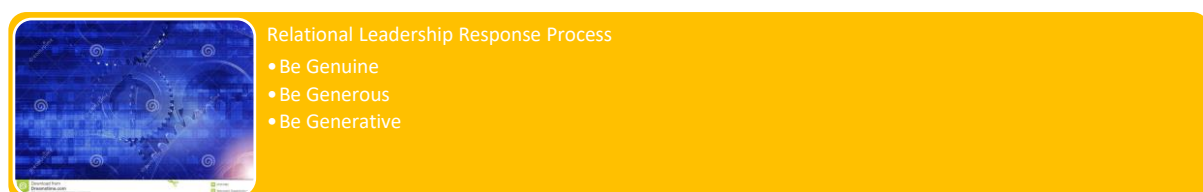


Figure 2.3 Relational leadership response process

This alternative perspective on leadership also focuses on high-quality exchange between leaders and members, which emerges through the development of vertical dyad linkage as exemplified in LMX theory (Dansereau et al., 1975).

Another feature of relational leadership is the explicit desire to replace bureaucratic leadership, which is embedded in complex dynamics between power relations, and complex social norms, with deepened trust and enhanced cooperation among actors, as argued by Frank et al. (2018) in a study of public service governance. The excessive bureaucracy entailed in bureaucratic leadership leads to low levels of motivation and satisfaction, resulting in poor performance or outcomes (Jacobsen and Andersen, 2015).

Fundamental to this new definition of leadership is the idea that leadership is a relational and ethical process of people attempting to accomplish a positive change together (Komives, Lucas and McMahon, 2007). In the next section, I will review the main distinct qualities of relational leadership.

2.6 Relational leadership practice

The book *Developing Relational Leadership* (Carsten et al., 2012) provides a deeper understanding of the evolution of leadership perspectives towards the realization of relational leadership. It is a double-loop and triple-loop perspective, which sees leadership neither as a closed system nor as an autopoietic process (Carsten et al., 2012), nor just as an open system. Double-loop learning focuses on the frame within which our actions take place, and triple-loop learning gets to the core of things: our purpose, and the values that guide us. Rather, it can be considered more as an open communication system. This perspective on leadership negates the idea of leaders thinking of themselves as elite people and perceiving workers as a barrier to change because they are against change and always resist it; the role and decisions of a leader, here, are based on position and power. Relational leadership theory replaces this with an emphasis on relationships, and replaces singular acts with collaboration. This way of thinking urges leaders to stop isolating themselves from observation and instead observe the world, as they are part of it. Leaders should facilitate understanding, and there can be as many understandings as there are people in the group, with the leader's role then being to try to construct a link between management context and followers' contexts, a process that really requires constructive intervention. This relational bond through constructive intervention will help in collecting and conveying information in a vital manner to facilitate a common language and enable followers to easily comprehend and become competent in dealing with different situations and understand what the real story is behind reactions. The leaders must then facilitate understanding in different contexts, facilitate a process of dialogue, and at the same time facilitate the work process and the tools necessary to achieve a co-created relationship. This approach encourages decisions that followers can understand, adapt within their immediate systems, and take forwards proactively and productively.

A related theory here is Maturana's domain theory, which argues that three domains affect the organizational context: autopoiesis, self-referring closed systems and open communicating systems. (Maturana and Varela, 1987). Maturana's domain theory examines how all human collaboration and communication can be seen from these three co-existing domains, each affecting different areas of organizational life. A constructive link between leaders and followers can be strong if both are actively engaged to co-create and co-interact in respect to the purpose of action, working to avoid any source of misunderstanding or resistance, while realizing that there are tens of valid descriptions and views.

Recognizing that the human nervous system does not depict a truly real world but just our own senses' construct of reality (Maturana and Varela, 1987), we should transform our mindset from the idea of one universe to that of multi-universes. We should therefore start to appreciate the fact that individuals behave according to how they perceive reality and their own perspective inside their context and therefore see this as the basis from which to influence them. This means that our leadership identity is developed due to the influence and information we choose to receive. In other words, we are shaped in collaboration with the system or context we are part of. Thus, we tend to behave, think and feel in particular ways depending on whom we are dealing with and our own creation of purpose. This emphasizes the importance of self-reflection (Maturana and Varela, 1987) and a communicative approach in which we see ourselves as merely a part of the system or the world we observe.

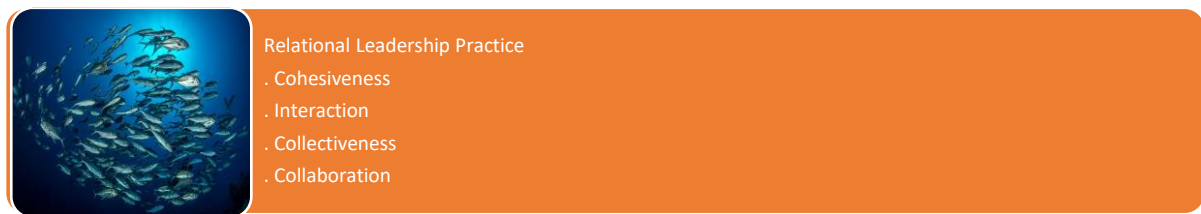


Figure 2.4 Relational leadership practice

2.6.1 Cohesiveness between people and how they interact

To create a relational culture (Raelin, 2016), we need to develop a team that exhibits more positive behaviours, attitudes, values and beliefs. Encouraging interactive relational and cohesive communication is the basis of a methodology for engagement that emerges through action learning processes that enable individuals to deepen their understanding of themselves and their relationships. This also serves to develop a coherent understanding of the individual and a collective sense of roles and passion about what they do. The literature has provided some insight into the challenges organizations experience when implementing a change from traditional to relational leadership, such as prioritizing tasks and overcoming anxiety about change, as well as anxiety among lower-ranked employees about meetings with more senior colleagues and the need to feel comfortable about expressing themselves and making decisions in such a context. This is where I think organizations resist a fully fledged transformation from the traditional leadership approach and/or baulk at the vast array of knowledge and methods required to apply the new relational approach. Thus, there can be difficulties in developing a thinking environment, learning together, distributing power to weaker individuals in the group and increasing the feeling of belonging.

2.6.2 Collectivity and collaboration

Collectivity and collaboration are essential qualities of the relational leadership perspective. Relational leadership moves on from leadership that focuses on understanding the motives and behaviours that influence others to the adoption of communicative acts that develop the collective consciousness of the community (Raelin, 2011, 2016; Maturana and Varela, 1987). Such applied leadership attempts to integrate theory and practice to fill the gap of relevance between individuals and their leaders, a process that is not based centrally on superficial influence and motivation. Its decisions are, rather, derived from mutual and collective interactions among individuals. Also, this modern leadership relies on social interaction or agentic collaboration that leads to pragmatic outcomes.

Thus, relational leadership urges an intersubjective and collaborative process that can reproduce organizational realities to improve outcomes (Raelin, 2011). It also serves to negate the classical bureaucracy of leadership that constrains the roles of leaders and followers with rules and a rigid hierarchical structure. Instead, it gives leaders and followers a space in which to adapt roles, tasks and rules to respond better to any given situation. Followers, therefore, become more self-managed and are trusted to possess the knowledge required to take decisions so that singular control becomes mutual control. On the other hand, leaders switch between the roles of consultant, facilitator, coach and coordinator, etc. For example, in LMX the testing of assumptions is encouraged so as to validate our own and others' inferences and behaviours (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). This kind of leadership does not tend to focus on the leadership of the group as a whole but on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers (Raelin, 2011). Overall, it is time to perceive leadership as a process and practice that is self-correcting (Raelin, 2011), reflecting on our own and others' actions, reconstructing activities with mutual interest, listening and talking to each other, and engaging and thinking together so that the group as a whole does the work. Hence, relational leadership and leaderful practice represent a kind of leadership where the focus is on practice rather than on leaders' influence on followers.

2.7 Relational leadership influence

Relational leadership requires leaders who see their role as improving team relationships. Northouse (2016), for example, suggested six actions that relational leaders can take to improve team relationships: first, coaching, where the leader gets involved interpersonally to bring about knowledge and learning; second, collaborating, where the leader intervenes to add value; third, managing conflict and power issues, where the leader ensures a balance of power, harmony and cohesiveness, and avoids confrontational questioning; fourth, energizing and building commitment through socializing and recognizing the efforts of everyone in the group; fifth, satisfying individuals, not merely through material incentives and in a physical context, but by trusting, supporting and advocating; and lastly, through modelling ethical behaviour, where the leader must be fair, consistent and trustworthy.



Figure 2.5 Relational leadership influence

2.7.1 Relationships and connectivity

Hence, replacing authority, superiority and power with better relationships can create a more effective form of leadership. Despite the fact that a focus on relationships has been used to introduce different emergent leadership perspectives, such as LMX, servant, distributed, distributive, collaborative, shared, reciprocal (Conway, 2015), post-heroic, complexity, leaderful, etc., the relational dynamic of leadership as a process of organizing has been overlooked, as Uhl-Bien (2006) and Branson and Marra (2019) have argued. Thus, presenting an action research study to address change in organizational relational dynamics within a real practical research venue may shed light on the validity of certain relational leadership frameworks. This kind of research can shed light on

processes beyond relationship quality and type and cover how the social dynamics comprising relational leadership work in an organization in practice. For example, one of the dynamics relational leadership calls for is that which shapes a leader's identity, such as being an agent of change and creating meaning in an organization. Sayles (1964) described an organization as a system where leaders' actions are embedded in an organizational and environmental context, while leaders have a dynamic role that is bounded by interpersonal relationships. described leadership not as personal dominance, as has traditionally been argued, but as a process of relational dialogue (Gergen, 2016) where leaders and followers interact and make knowledge systems together. Responsibility in employees is produced by leaders who see leadership as a shared responsibility. Relational leadership, therefore, produces relationships other than those constructed based on authority and hierarchy by depending instead on a system of influence where the process of social change happens by means other than the common assumption of command and control. So, relational perspectives see leadership as processes constructed and changed by social order. Leadership, in the relational perspective, exists in the co-evolving processes between actors. Hence, the relational perspective does not look for individual characteristics or behaviours in leaders but focuses instead on the communication processes that allow relational realities and real meaning to emerge.

This perspective of relational leadership, therefore, focuses on how leaders and followers live in a relational world. This means that leaders and followers are linked in an interconnected relationship and practice in a richly interactive context. Their relevance to the world is demonstrated in their working together in meaningful ways where communication is a key element. Hence, relational leadership goes beyond the individualistic domain and emphasizes an interactional working process that requires certain characteristics and behaviours of the individual.

Relational leadership also focuses on developing a co-created relational interactive link between individuals that is dynamic and promotes change over time. So, relational leadership is a relational process co-created by leaders and followers in a dyadic context such that participants behave collectively to present deeper meaning. Also, this kind of leadership reflects how we use power positively rather than negatively and repressively, developing wise or double-loop meanings for analysis that lead to collective decisions. This generates individual and collective empowerment rather than autocratic power. It depends, therefore, on reflexivity for a better understanding of people and their different views and stances in different system contexts. In fact, the reflexivity meant here is deeper than reflection because reflexivity here should question our relationship with the social world and the way we account for our experience.

2.7.2 Communication

So, communication is a key factor here: it is not just a message one conveys but an opportunity to develop a meaningful link between people. For this, we should consider exformation (information in a vital manner) (Maturana and Varela, 1987), which includes written, spoken and nonverbal knowledge, and thought, motives and actions, or rather the sum of all aspects that can exert an influence to transform a given context. It is important to consider exformation so we do not fall into employees' common ways of thinking that can easily lead to negative results, such as thinking that a given problem is the management's fault and that employees are not being given sufficient information to solve it. Pre-understandings often disconnect or stop our curiosity or the process of learning that is undertaken in our own autopoietic world (Maturana and Varela, 1987).

Linear and circular understandings are both important for incorporating exformation, since linear understanding helps in gathering knowledge related to the acquired task while circular understanding (Maturana and Varela, 1987) helps in promoting relations, thought formation and curiosity. Leaders should therefore create a healthy context in which to exchange views and ideas freely and openly. This leads us to perceive a leader as an active helper who facilitates avenues for understanding. In this way, we can come to understand the shortfalls in ourselves, such as a lack of knowledge or prejudice, etc., that influence how we see situations, creating a fixed but potentially erroneous understanding of what the correct story or context is, and causing blindness to alternative understandings. On the other hand, irreverence (Maturana and Varela, 1987) enables the creation of new understandings, as do options using paradox and grand narrative (powerful universal stories on truths).

Information should therefore be considered to be an asset, and the leader's most important task as being to make the necessary information available. In this way, we might perceive leaders as informers. This process of information provision (informing) also encompasses how leaders understand an act of experience and how they can make the context of the act clear to everyone involved, as well as how they facilitate contexts of communication, meaning and action to be able to collaborate and coordinate team actions for different contexts. Here leaders should play the role of coordinator and actively engage in a dialogue process such as by sharing their and others' stories. So, the relational context is not a closed system or an open system: it is an action process encompassing both. It is not a linear process or a circular one, but both. It is not dependent on leaders' roles and positions, but on their relationship positioning. It is not autopoietic action, it is collaboration. We should therefore promote the link between management and employees to encourage interventions that convey the context, story and language the organization wishes to have. Leaders should facilitate understanding, different contexts, and dialogue processes in co-created relationships as well as facilitating physical work requirements. Thus, the relational perspective focuses on communication as a medium that continuously creates and changes leadership's social constructions, and views leadership as a process of organizing through relatedness.

2.7.3 Joint action and co-action

Relational leadership brings leaders and followers into co-action relationships and drives them moment by moment to develop a social bond, generating meaningful action through this process of collaboration. Over time, participants may develop patterns of behaviour that, through dyadic interaction, become the group norm (Conway, 2015), though they are free to develop any other reaction. This is also transferred to newcomers to the group, who will adopt what the group conveys to them as a norm, directly and indirectly. This is an area of leadership that classical leadership ignores and relates to humans' tacit language. This means that co-action tends to create a norm within the organizational context and that although this group behaviour may not be spoken or written it can be perceived by newcomers. Indeed, this tacit understanding affects how individuals within a team react to surrounding events (Ford and Seers, 2006). Hence, it is very important how a context is perceived as a norm by others. Co-action and joint action play a role in creating a purpose and meaningful work that will create a strong shared sense of participants' collective endeavours. So, even when participants experience a sense of chaos, relational leadership can develop a shared sense of collective endeavour through joint action. Joint action occurs when multiple people coordinate their actions to complete a task together, for instance a leader and participants, or a group of participants, while co-

action means the process of two people working together to achieve one aim, such as a leader and a participant, or two participants.

Needless to say, relational leadership as meaningful co-action or meaning-making is not the only relevant framework when exploring relational leadership, as it can be accomplished within several contexts. We cannot understand the evolution of relational leadership while ignoring alternative philosophies of knowledge. Without keeping an open mind on such alternative philosophies, therefore, relational leadership can seem chaotic, especially for traditional leaders (Conway, 2015), since it requires leaders to confront their common beliefs and thinking to derive new thoughts. Thus, compared to traditional psychological approaches of leadership, such as transformational, charismatic, etc., the social constructionist perspective (Conway, 2015) represents a more complex view of leadership, urging complex thinking. In this regard, Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012a: 227) argued that relational leadership makes it possible to produce insights into participants' common interests and co-action. Also, they argue that relational leadership works by presenting a dialectic challenge to rigidity of thinking, encouraging dialogue between perspectives and joint action. Thus, I see relational leadership as an approach that is complementary to social constructionist and entity approaches, rather than a rejection of the subject–object duality, because we need to recognize the logic and purpose of leadership and then start leading.

2.7.4 Relational leadership style, the quality of relationship and organizational outcomes

Frank et al. (2018) looked at the effect of leadership style, and specifically the quality of relationships between leaders and followers, on followers' performance, finding that various leadership styles can improve the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers and employee outcomes. They found that among the three investigated leadership styles, transactional leadership has a greater impact on performance due to the nature of this leadership with regard to task orientation. I would argue here, however, that this result is deceiving because the finding was due to the level of the development of employees and their organizational context or may result from short-term goals and dealing with simple problems. Complex problems require different heterodox leadership styles to influence employees' perception of and behaviour in their work and to increase their performance and commitment. Also, the task of improving leadership efficiency is complex and can only be done by replacing an organization's conventional forms and functions with leadership that emphasizes social networks and relationships, as in relational leadership. Frank et al. (2018) also examined LMX theory to address the cultural influences of relationships and the quality of exchange between leaders and followers from transformational, transactional and laissez-faire perspectives, considering whether leadership style changes employees' behaviour and the subsequent effect on performance (positive or negative). They assumed that an acceptable leadership style would promote employees' inspiration, motivation and empowerment, leading to a willingness to do more and resulting in better productivity. This leadership style lies in the sum of leaders' traits, skills and behaviour employed in relations with followers (Wart, 2013) and is very well able to achieve organizational efficiency. The wider literature, too, has mainly focused on three leadership styles. First, transformational leadership (Frank et al., 2018) is a style where the leader elevates the interests of employees beyond their self-interest to serve the shared goals of their organization (Bass, 1990). Second, the transactional leadership style is where the leader ensures things get done (Bass, 1990), or ensures the compliance of followers, through rewards and punishments. Third, laissez-faire leadership, also known as delegative leadership, is where the leader hangs back and allows delegated employees to make

decisions in the absence of leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Yang, 2015), unlike the transformational leadership style, which motivates employees to fall in line with the organization's vision and increases their engagement. Thus, different perspectives on leadership or leadership style affect employees' behaviour and performance positively or negatively. Guo et al. (2016) investigated the actions required for leaders to deal with the new perspectives of leadership, such as relational and task behaviour, which encourage a boundary-less career attitude, organizational mobility preference, and self-directed and value-drive teams, to trigger appropriate behaviours that improve performance and avoid work alienation. Regression analyses show an insignificant relationship between 1) leadership task behaviour, relational behaviour and job performance, and 2) work alienation or monotony. The transformational leadership style was found to be associated with lower work alienation while the transactional leadership style was associated with higher work alienation (Sarros et al., 2002), where alienation and job performance are negatively correlated (Guo et al., 2016). In addition, Frank et al. (2018) found transformational and transactional leadership styles to result in a positive impact on relationships, while the laissez-faire leadership style had a negative impact. Guo et al.'s (2016) analysis also found that some demographic variables such as sex, education, position and the nature of the organization's business had significant effects on work alienation and performance. Although there was a negative correlation between leaders' task behaviour and job performance, there was a positive correlation between relational behaviour and job performance. This implies the importance of relational leadership in increasing employees' performance outcomes.

2.8 Relational leadership adaptation

Unlike other studies on the relational perspective, which mainly focus on the study of leadership effectiveness, Uhl-Bien's (2006) study focused on the relational processes that enable leadership (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). She considered leadership outside the managerial position, breaking down the distinction between who is leading and who is following (Rost, 1995) and arguing that leadership can occur in any direction. Thus, relational process is leadership in which the social relationship influences the contribution of the emergent social order and where the leadership perspective is an outcome that is generated within social dynamics and beyond the formal roles and positions that drive organizational processes. Uhl-Bien (2006) presented an approach that unifies most of the preceding descriptions of relational leadership to come up with a general definition of relational leadership: "a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced". Although there is no definite answer to the question of the best way to approach the study of relational leadership, Uhl-Bien (2006) has claimed that this perspective is applicable to both entity and relational perspectives, since relating is a dynamic social process. This implies that leadership relationships are not restricted to formal position or entity but act throughout organizational communication and the interactions of all employees, contributing collectively to the direction of social order, and all relationships occur in a dynamic context.



Relational Leadership Adaptation

- Implications (Outcomes)
- Challenges
- Reflection

Figure 2.6 Relational leadership adaptation

2.8.1 The implications of adapting relational leadership

The relational approach emphasizes the relationship process through which individuals work together to achieve actions and where the significant qualities of individuals lie within their coordinated action rather than their personal traits. This relational communication enables the assignation of meaning to their actions, better practice in decision-making, the evolution of the work environment and values, the encouragement of innovation and the reduction of conflict through dialogue, interaction and collaboration. Hence, the organizational context is presented more as a conversation drawing from culture and social construction where social negotiation plays a vital role in giving a meaning to what people do. It is a relational process through dialogue (Gergen, 2016) and co-created effort that shapes the organizational purpose, value, interest and direction. In a relational context, individuals, including leaders, engage closely to generate a common understanding of their role and outcomes in organizations, trusting that their leader's guidance will not be applied unless everyone agrees to it. Therefore, the influence in the interactive relationship is that of the boss, not the boss's authority. So, the power of leadership shifts from the individual and individual traits to relational processes such as collaboration, sharing, networking, negotiation, flat decision-making, connectivity and continuous learning. The relational perspective, therefore, enables an organization's members to move forwards efficiently in a constructive relationship. Hence, leadership becomes the process of how people engage with each other instead of simply a process of enforcing tasks. The intention here is not to undermine the individual, but to emphasize how their activity fits into the process of engagement. It shifts the focus from generating the organizational structure, in the traditional leadership perspective, to fostering a relational process. The relational leader will therefore pay more attention to ongoing processes than to structure setting, and conversely less attention to sticking to strict rules and authority and more to encouraging employees to nourish the relationship process. This will also shift the idea of a culture of adaptation, in the traditional leadership perspective, to one of a culture of innovation. So, the fundamental requirement here is to be able to establish and facilitate this through a context in which all the necessary materials, tools, information, encouragement and rewards are present to allow employees to work together openly and collaboratively, negotiating their goals and tasks in a more productive way. This conception shifts the understanding of working within groups from the traditional leadership perspective of task setting to one of establishing the right conditions or context for relational activities. It shifts the understanding of the use of power from one of directing people to one of enlisting options and alternatives. It shifts the understanding of the use of power as control through means such as maintaining performance, progress reports and follow-up, to one in which power is applied to enable co-creation to flourish by embedding mutual respect, care, guidance and conversation. This requires intensive face-to-face contact, but not in the traditional sense of using the power of rank to impose action – rather, to establish a good rapport. It shifts the focus from the dictatorial power of position to the practice of listening and negotiation. It replaces an attitude of correction with one of appreciation, respect and curiosity (Maturana and Varela, 1987).

2.8.2 The challenges of adopting relational leadership

The challenges that need to be addressed to enable such emergent leadership may vary by leadership role, such as intervention, coaching, mentoring, reflection, etc., and it will also be necessary to understand how to tailor the local context by testing emerging insights through intervention and applying rigorous analysis, such as through observation, in-depth interviews, constructive conversations and reflective discussions (Cleary et al., 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Also, although one of the goals of relational leadership is to enable employees to share a single vision, organizations may suffer

from a failure to create one vision due to their existing rigid culture. In addition, although relational leadership has great potential and advantages, it is considered relatively new, and tiresome and vague for management to try, and it may be perceived as costly and time-consuming for some organizations. Moreover, leaders must not only be competent (Cleary et al., 2018) in traditional skills such as goal setting, conflict management and motivation but must also be able to give information to group members and adapt their leadership styles to fit the needs of followers. Hence, leaders should stick to the guidelines required for relational leadership (Cleary et al., 2018):

- Treat all who are decision-makers as equals
- Keep lines of communication open
- Uphold the ideas of the organization even when working with others
- Demonstrate the value of collaborators to the organization

Leaders in relational leadership are expected to act in service to others and to have the ability to deal with difficult times. Such leaders are perceived as servants, and it takes a lot of courage for human beings to be humble, sensitive and caring, as well as paying attention to details and weak signals of trouble or distress that people try to keep hidden. It is not easy to receive weak signals and translate them into an understanding of what people need and want.

2.9 Conclusion

Leadership is vital and the evolving concept of relational leadership is an example of a kind of leadership where everyone starts to acknowledge their qualities, strengths and weaknesses, fostering points of strength and exploring them with the people they work with. This develops trust within the team, nourishing it and encouraging the team to work with engagement and passion, paying attention to opportunities that they identify through involvement and interaction, and taking these opportunities in order to excel at what they like to do. Getting closer to the team through intervention, showing confidence and respect in them and showing them directly by words and indirectly by gestures that they are trustworthy, thereby building followers' self-esteem and morale, will increase support for intended tasks.

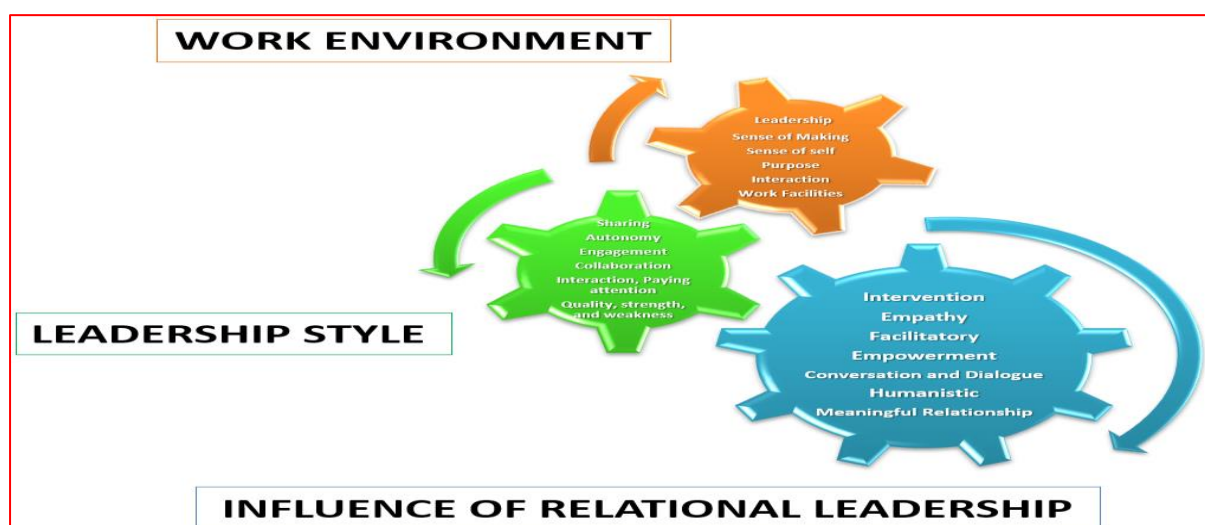


Figure 2.7 Study framework

The lessons learned from the literature are that the leader's beliefs, strategies, skills and other leadership processes used in business should align with relational leadership components, such as shifting the focus from products and firm assets to people, creating an environment that fosters autonomy and extending trust, respect and commitment. These components will enhance a firm's competitive advantage by improving activities and creating knowledge across the value chain. A true relational leader is more than merely an entrepreneur, who would focus on business start-up and doing things right (efficiency); the true leader is a facilitator who builds the team and their interactions to do the right things. This entails shifting the focus to building meaningful relationships between and among the leader and the employees, which is significant since the leader intends to improve employees' effectiveness as well as organizational outcomes (Hunt and Dodge, 2001). It is really about passion, vision, dynamic processes, and creating and implementing new ideas together with employees in order to accomplish shared goals or change without neglecting the task of sustaining and growing the organization. Appropriate behaviour from a leader is part of their role of delivering an effective organizational context. In addition, leaders have to exercise different techniques (such as technology, tools and complex adaptive systems (CAS)) and styles (such as relational and transformational leadership) to accomplish organizational goals. Relational leadership may use values such as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, emotional connection, and respect for people and their understandings and situations, and learn from them. Also, leaders need to encourage learning environments that help organizations achieve their goals by encouraging deeper understanding, active engagement, diversity, alternative approaches and styles, a sense of self, involvement, sharing of information, commitment to a goal, a team with one purpose, cooperation and collaboration, reflection, ethics, morale and morality (Komives et al., 1998). One good step many leaders start with is that of saying they do not know everything but they encourage employees to learn, and encouraging a learning context to the extent that they construct forums to share information and knowledge among employees and customers. They can go on from this to recognize employees' abilities and provide opportunities for employees' talents to grow. They should promote employees' unity and ownership of business tasks by involving them in collective decisions within a flexible and meaningful environment, and should pay attention to customer complaints, with the desire to learn from mistakes and organized feedback. Finally, they should foster a caring and socially responsible working atmosphere, accepting that leadership is a social process that requires the development of creativity, passion, care, paradox, innovation, etc., across the matrix of relationships within the organization. This all requires the encouragement of decentralization, since this enhances autonomy and fosters accountability, responsiveness and learning, which results in innovation (Goddard and Mannion, 2006).

To do this, my research methodology used an action research approach to explore how employees in a focus group perceive relational leadership, the ideal engaging set-up for operating, and how this affects their performance. Hence, I observed and studied the link between relational leadership and employee reaction and how the relational co-exchange link can be a source of motivation, utilizing my own behaviour as a part of the organizational context to help me understand the response to relational leadership. This required close observation, interaction and attention and the careful documentation of outcomes so as to enable an understanding of how employees at my workplace become motivated, proactive and willing to foster their organization's outcomes. Through this, I was able to highlight reflective insights relevant to my workplace employees, context and social environment. In the next chapter, I will discuss the research methodology, philosophy and design.

Chapter III: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology of this study, setting out the research question, aim and objectives; the research philosophy and research design; the particular case study of Zamil Air Conditioners; the data collection strategy, which is based mainly on observation, focus groups and interviews following an action research trajectory; and the data analysis, documentation plan, use of participants and ethical considerations.

After reviewing the metaphorical terminology of relational leadership in the previous chapter, in this chapter I am moving on to describe the development of an appropriate methodology that responds best to the relational leadership perspective. The focus is on researching this alternative leadership by investigating a suitable ontology and epistemology from the modern approaches. This process enabled a participatory study using multiple data collection methods that were validated by the triangulation of different forms of data collection and abide by the University of Liverpool's code of ethics.

This chapter presents methods of data collection and data analysis and discusses their pros and cons as well as other considerations. In this chapter, I also discuss the method used in the action research, sharing the perceptions developed through experience, reflection and interaction. The research framework was in general the four main pillars of action research cycles presented by Skerrett (1992, 2000a, 2000b): planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

The research methodology also enabled the exploration of relational leadership and examination of the characteristics of leaders who practise relational leadership. The study method provided rich materials to enable understanding of how to apply the relational framework in organizational settings. The study included the examination of relevant documentation, historical events, social conditions, various discourses and emergent factors as they appeared during the research process. Therefore, the research approach aimed to make the targeted work group more efficient by enabling them to attain more control and power to follow their own judgements and decisions. This triggered a change in the work group's ways of thinking, boosting production efficiency and efficacy as well as prompting the group to interact more often and closely facilitate our emergent practice to develop a better work environment, exploring the self-directed team theory by sharing authority among all members of the team to enable a collective view of action. This led us to improve the relational response processes, connectivity, relationships and communication required for better efficiency and effectiveness. The research indicates that we can produce better if we are all involved in decisions, rather than the authority to make decisions being reserved only for managers.

The purpose of the study, then, was to look at the implications of the adoption of a relational leadership style conceptualized using a complex adaptive system (CAS) framework in a Middle Eastern context.

Seeing the group as a CAS meant the study explored three main components:

1. The idea of empowerment, or facilitation of leadership, advocated by relational leadership

2. How employees perceive leadership
3. The influence of relational leadership on employees' morale and output

Thus, the methodology served the purpose of the study, which was to gain some enlightenment on the social forces that impact and influence leadership attribution and employees' perceptions through the relational context perspective at my workplace.

3.2 Research strategy

Due to the need for in-depth analysis of perceptions of my workplace's wicked problem which is considered unique and difficult to solve because of its complex and interconnected nature, and also has multiple actors and conflicting values (Churchman, 1967), I needed qualitative research to understand the underlying reasons for the opinions of focus group employees on certain facts. This required a method of observation suitable for collecting such non-numerical data. Therefore, I needed to use action research in order to address the problem and find possible solutions through interviews on one. Also, I needed to support that with the interpretive method to understand the underlying reasons for the opinions of focus group employees on certain facts, using my experience in order to understand better workplace problems. Finally, I utilized the exploratory method to gain insights into adopting relational leadership and addressing key gears.

3.3 Research paradigm

Before we move on to research, and how to research, we need to know *why* we research (Remenyi et al., 1998). The answer lies in the philosophical perspective we adopt through our perceptions of 1) the nature of society, for example viewing society as regulatory and evolving rationally, becoming unified and cohesive as people struggle to free themselves from the domination of the societal set-up, and 2) the nature of science (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Thus, the rational view of society can be seen in the domain of modernism.

Entity ontology assumes that leaders and followers are independent of one another and separate from their surroundings in separate units, while constructionists view ontology via leaders' and followers' relationships or their relating, written in paradigms of ethnography, critical theory, phenomenology, narrative, feminisms, hermeneutics, social theory, historical analysis, participatory action and so on (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012a, 2012b).

The entity perspective is considered a modernist outlook with a positivist research orientation. Research is conducted based on theoretical hypotheses, and usually deductively. It is done through quantitative analysis and abstract writing. The constructionist perspective, on the other hand, is considered an outlook with an interpretivist research orientation that is based on social theory. It tends to be inductive in approach, and humanitarian and critical. Research is done through qualitative analysis and narrative writing, which requires a rigorous methodological research agenda.

Moreover, the two major philosophical approaches are considered objective or subjective based on how they adopt ontology that deals with reality, and adopt epistemology that deals with how to obtain knowledge. Therefore, how ontology is viewed affects which form of epistemology is used and the relevant understanding of human nature, which in the end affects the choice of methodology. These various approaches can be seen in common traditional quantitative methods such as the use of survey and questionnaires, qualitative methods such as observation and focus groups, or a combination of

both. The choice of what to research depends mainly on researchers' interests – for instance, in our case, we are researching our workplace leadership style – and researchers also differ in their philosophical methodology, in terms of how to research and which methodology enables deeper investigation and reflection.

My research methodology has been derived from the development of ontology and epistemology. My methodology is concerned with conducting research into moral aspects, particularly those involving human beings. It focuses on the topic of relational leadership and on a research question that is fundamentally inherent in the proposed research problem to find answers via observation, focus groups and interviews (Koshy, 2010).

Social constructionism is an interpretivist that sees reality as meaning produced by a “you and I” relationship that makes sense of our social world. Social constructionism emerged from the Western tradition's troubled assumptions and the same applies to how the Middle East sees self, truth and rationality, and this affects how we capture the situation and the central role of language. Hence, social constructionists assume that how the world appears to us is derived from our relationships with others, where sense-making, or the meaning of the world, is not created in the individual mind as constructivists assume, but in our relationships. Therefore, history is not destiny: through their relationships, people generate meaning or new histories. This leads us to the practice of reflexivity, where together we enable a deep revisiting of our cultural traditions and assumptions to generate better reasoning and values from scrutiny, rejecting the Cartesian notion of the individual bounded by mind and body, subject and object, self and other (Gergen, 2009). Hence, relational leadership is a central idea to social constructionism that negates the notion of the self-contained or isolated individual that Hollywood and the press try to present as heroic, through stories and films about the “self-made man” or the “person who saves the day” (McNamee, 2010). Leadership is presented here as being disconnected from reality. Hence, when it comes to research and solving difficult world problems, particularly when real solutions are hampered by cultural tradition, social constructionism offers an avenue that urges us to find a rapport together to trigger new ways of understanding and solving such complex issues. So, we are born into an existence of interaction and relationships with the social world, and we manage through them to be ourselves and would have no self without the other.

People do not act in relation to others as self-contained individuals, and their acts are embedded in context. Therefore, organizations cannot achieve their goals through a single member or a single leader. Hence, relational leadership involves examining the interaction and quality of relationships among individuals as seen through a social constructionist lens (Endres and Weibler, 2017). Relational leadership considers co-relationship under the metaphor of leadership as friendship. In our case, ontology deals with the researcher and participants, while epistemology observes the relationship between the researcher and participants. Also, the interpretivist research orientation enabled me to examine the structure and daily interaction at our workplace and the increasing depth of engagement.

3.4 Research philosophy

Social constructionism is an approach to research and the generation of knowledge. The constructionist ontological orientation was the best fit for my qualitative research approach to the study. The historical idea within social sciences is that there is an external reality in entities such as individuals' traits or roles, and that capturing an understanding of this reality objectively provides a

basis for improving how things are done. During the last four decades, however, this assumption has been challenged by different disciplines, anthropology and philosophy – for instance, the challenge that social reality is not separate from us but interwoven through our everyday interactions. This understanding changes the way we make sense of the world, how we research and how we approach things, as, for example, in the relationally responsive social constructionism orientation model presented by Cunliffe (2008). This theoretical development over the last 30 years, in particular the understanding that society exists as both a subjective entity understood in a dialectical process of externalization and as an internalized objective reality, has affected ways of thinking about social reality, forming the basis for social constructionism and enhancing the focus on how our experiences are shaped by social interactions and the context in which those interactions take place (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). So, society is a human product and humans are a social product in so far as they socialize, interact, experience, learn and interpret the meaning of events and things (a process of interpretation that is also linguistically influenced). Therefore, social constructionist research can adopt methods that include narrative, discourse, conversation and ethnography. Thus, it is important when adopting a social constructionist approach to research to consider the underlying assumptions about how reality is socially constructed and their impact on our understanding. We need to develop consistency between our assumptions and how we conceptualize the focus of our research and its method, which leads to the knowledge we generate and how we respond and engage during the process of conducting that research. Specifically, such research aims to develop insights into how we negotiate the meaning of our experience through dialogue and conversation in order to obtain more thoughtful and careful reflexivity.

3.5 Research method, Method in terms of interpretivism

Interpretivism fits better with qualitative research that is based on an epistemological orientation that uses a constructionist ontological orientation, phenomenology (Alfred Schutz 1899–1959) Qualitative data analysis gives value to findings and their interpretation through the storylines constructed through the words and experiences of the participants. This conclusion is inferred from the two differing research stances of entity and constructionist scholars, whose philosophical investigations differ regarding the roots and implications of their research choices in how to contribute to advancing knowledge and rationality in leadership. The philosophical distinction revolving around how to view and obtain truth is between modernists, who assume the possibility of approximating the truth and consider that one's view of reality is objective, consistent and independent of human cognition, and those who assume that there are multiple truths and view reality as humanly constructed and existing subjectively through the interpretation of human relations. The two stances are illustrated by the following metaphors: for modernists, there is a window, and the purpose is just to see things through the window, which means researching from the outside; and for postmodernists, a lantern, where one's purpose is extended to shedding light into dark corners in order to understand complexity, make meaning and obtain a holistic picture, developing research from the inside (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The argument over the various valid approaches to research methods encourages a transformative view, which projects reality as being neither objective, as presented by positivism, nor subjective, as presented by interpretivism; instead, it is a complex mix or a balance of objectivity and subjectivity. Hence, I believe that research methods should lean more towards a qualitative action methodology, which can be feasible for non-quantified nature of data, whereas that is not the case for the quantitative approach alone. Complex life situations, human interaction, emotions and social

behaviour are some examples of critical aspects for research that cannot be quantified, and which I believe are underestimated when researched merely through quantitative approaches.

Thus, the study method was that of qualitative action research, comprising data collection through formal and informal interviews and observation. Participants were selected for conversational interviews to allow deeper analysis to address effective leadership and to examine the dynamic interplay of variables, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the situation, based on the interpretive constructionist philosophy and entailing critical dialogue and a practical approach. The purpose of the study was to gain some enlightenment on the social forces that affect and influence leadership attribution and employees' perceptions within the relational context at my workplace. To accomplish this, constructionism and a qualitative research paradigm based on action research were utilized.

3.5.1 Method in terms of action research

Learning more about different ontological and epistemological approaches helped me to find a methodology that fitted my research aim better: an actionable methodology that developed new thoughts and reflection. The purpose of the study was to gain some enlightenment on the social forces that impact and influence leadership attribution and employees' perceptions through the relational context perspective at my workplace. To accomplish this, a constructionist and qualitative research paradigm based on action research was required.

The following offers my justification for selecting participatory action as an appropriate methodology for this topic (Rose, Spinks and Canhoto, 2015; Lewin, 1946):

- Action research is “research in action rather than research about action” (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). Therefore, research in action was undertaken at my workplace. The intention of action is to improve practice, while research aims to generate new knowledge about developed improvements, which is actionable knowledge that is useful both for practitioners, for improving workplaces or achieving promotion, and for academic communities, such as in the form of dissertations or theses. This was the reason for conducting my research.
- Action research is conducted collaboratively between the researcher and participants. This is why I recruited a small group of participants to work with anonymously and confidentially, to collect data through observation, interviews and focus groups.
- Action research is done in a cycle of joint planning (diagnosing), action, observation and reflection (evaluating), where the reflection phase paves the way for a further cycle of planning (diagnosing), action, observation and reflection (evaluating). This is the crux of action research and gives it an advantage over many other approaches by enabling better interpretation of the findings.

Moreover, the applications of action research allow investigation in action (why and how) that focus on solving problems encountered in practice or promoting organizational development and change, which is achieved through its emphasis on the collaborative and democratic paradigm; for example, participatory action research encourages emancipatory practice (Rose, Spinks and Canhoto, 2015).

Thus, since my research topic deals with the essentially human and social interactions inherent in leadership style, motivation, innovation and organizational systems, a qualitative approach was the best research method for my research topic. A qualitative method using action research was a good approach for challenging existing organizational facts and examining my organization's existing norms (Shah and Corley, 2006).

3.5.2 Methodology: my action research focus

Through deep involvement with practice and data to unveil the lived experiences of the participants with leadership style, to investigate their perceptions and themes that recognized leadership as relational, I explored the topic through focused dialogue and conversation (Schwandt, 2000). The following paragraph offers my justification for using participatory action as an appropriate methodology for this topic (Fredericks, 2009).

Whereas ontology deals with the nature of reality, which in my case is the researcher and participants, epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge and justification (Schwandt, 2001) with regard to values, norms, practices and views that reside in the depth of understanding of the relationship between leaders, followers and objects; this and the idea that they are all socially related made the qualitative approach the best fit for my quest. Knowledge emerges from new experience, shared understanding, language and practice, as well as being impacted by prior experience, cognition, attitude and personal drivers. Therefore, such research acquires deeper consciousness developed through connection and bonds in the workplace context, tradition and habit to achieve a sense of understanding. This urges the researcher to recognize potential biases and put them aside, and make phenomena or themes as visible as possible, with the distinct awareness of the difference between judgement and bias (Schwandt, 2001). In addition, pre-understanding and a person's culture all inhibit recognition of themes. Such understanding enabled me and the participants to focus on finding the connection between themes and participants' interpretations of proper leadership and how that differs from the leadership they commonly experience (Fredericks, 2009). Hence, this was an exploratory study that required data to be collected under the supervision of the University of Liverpool and its code of ethics.

Therefore, I explained to participants the purpose of the research and how they and their participation were important for the research and how their feedback was useful and important, both for their own learning growth and their organization. I emphasized benefits, interests and appreciation, showed positive regard and empathy, built trust, said thank you and supported their values. I also emphasized opportunities to make things better and was very considerate in my invitation, to make them feel special, fuel distinctions that trigger new thoughts, and reinforce privacy and confidentiality.

3.5.3 Research design

The sources of qualitative data included the following:

- 1) introductory, conversational and in-depth interviews with a selection of key employees including new employees, juniors, seniors and supervisors in the targeted production line in the workplace, plus examination and study of specific organizational ramifications that emerged while the research process was in progress; introductory interviews were used to start dialogical conversations and to set up the framework for in-depth interviews (Imbens and Rubin, 2015)

- 2) researcher observations generated during the study based on interviews
- 3) focus groups based on interviews and observations

Thus, my data collection was done mainly through observation to get primary data from the group, and observation and interviews to get detailed and deep information from doers, employees and decision-makers, while using all the secondary data reports to challenge my own observations for better analysis.

The study began with the gathering of data, not merely on the assembly line but from all areas in the organizational environment so as to understand the production system better. The data collection was done through a mix of participants of different ranks and posts, taking advantage of their permanent presence and authority, which enable them to participate and take decisions to improve the product and processes. Through action research, various selected staff and myself intervened in production on the spot, since we were physically located in the factory near the shop floor and acted as a team to solve problems as they popped up and noted observations. Assumptions were analysed and tested using a piloting process – for instance, integration of sharing machines, supervisors, workforce and supply materials, and the introduction of multi-tasks by developing multi-skills. Also, an ad hoc approach was developed based on the intervention process by the team, with the main focus on an action research process in which the team learned from direct contact with the real workings of the sociotechnical system. This allowed information to be gathered that described the subjects and helped in developing real solutions.

As the research followed a constructionism paradigm using a qualitative research design, the data collection methods were interviews, observation and focus groups. The data collection followed a cyclical pattern, repeating for two action research cycles (instead of the planned three cycles, because of pandemic-related restrictions – see section 4.18.1). Daily and monthly reports were generated to observe changes in production achievement, efficiency and effectiveness, along with downtime and incidents, which were reported by departmental heads. In addition, daily and monthly observations were made of notes and a reflexive diary that listed causes and effects influencing doers' performance and also difficulties that challenged them. Action research urges researchers to engage in range of activities such as planning and diagnosing, applying actions, testing new theories, observing, evaluating and reflecting. Also, the team was interviewed and new deep reflections considered, before collective decisions were taken to implement new findings that potentially represented distinct change.

3.5.4 Interviews

In-depth interviews can be individual or group interviews, and data can be recorded in different ways. The purpose of interviews is to probe interviewees' thoughts and ideas about phenomena. Data collection through interview produces a great amount of information, involving a face-to-face question and answer technique fundamentally based on structured or unstructured/semi-structured conversational dialogue between individuals discussing specific topics, to get relevant information (Robson, 2002). Thus, the interview is an important tool of action research, enabling the practitioner to investigate in depth to solve problems or enrich the information available on certain subjects (Patton, 2002). Structured interviews are highly formalized: the researcher sets a list of questions relevant to the research subject, and the same questions are posed in the same order to every

participant. Semi-structured interviews are guided interviews where the researcher poses highlighted questions that cover certain areas of focus in the research, which gives interviewees more freedom to express themselves and respond. The advantage of structured interviews is that they are easy to manage and analyse, but the downside is that they neglect significant underlying aspects and information that the interviewee has but is hampered in expressing by strictly structured interview questions. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews encourage interviewees to respond in their own way without restriction.

In-depth interviews have the advantage of providing information at a level of depth not possible in questionnaires (Nelson and Ratliff, 2005). Qualitative researchers rely heavily on in-depth interviews, which are “a conversation with purpose” (Kahn and Cannell, 1957). The purpose of interviews is to help researchers explore a general topic to unveil participants’ views, and that is why this method suited my purpose of uncovering participants’ views and attitudes towards relational leadership and shared decision-making power. This required my honest cooperation and personal interaction with participants.

Conducting interviews serves three main purposes: exploring and collecting narratives of lived experiences, allowing participants to share their stories and developing a conversational relationship (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2007). Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted, with each interview intended to last up to 90 minutes, with the focus of each interview revolving around the following:

- How the work climate and collaborative relationships influence participants’ achievement of goals
- Participants’ experience with leadership: perceptions and views
- The impact of participatory leadership on working relationships
- The true significance of relational leadership style for participants’ satisfaction, motivation and effectiveness

The initial interviews were one-to-one for around 60 to 90 minutes, with additional interviews being conducted as needed. All participants who were interviewed and observed first signed a University of Liverpool participant consent form. In the informed consent content, all participants were explicitly informed of the purpose and the nature of the research study. They were also informed that all information to be discussed would remain confidential and anonymous, with the option of withdrawal at any point during the study period, including the option to withdraw their contribution. In addition, participants were informed that no financial remuneration was offered for their participation.

Interviews were conducted either in the participant’s workplace/office or my private office. After the study introduction and consent signing, the interviews were conducted and documented. The interviews started with a brief introduction and questions asking the participant to share their background, feedback on their historical employment relationship with the workplace, job responsibilities, tenure, work environment, management, and other employment issues and data related to workplace relationships. The structure and focus of the interview would change depending on participant responses.

3.5.5 Observation

Observation is one of the best ways to collect data. It can be done directly or indirectly, with participants' knowledge or without it, continuously or for a set time period. Observation can be descriptive, with researchers writing down what they observe; inferential, where researchers write down their inferences about what they observe; or evaluative, where researchers write a judgement based on their inference. Observation is fundamental in all qualitative research and done through notes, such as field notes, and recording of events, behaviours and artefacts in the social setting for enquiry, where the researcher does not disturb the existing set-up. This method is used to uncover complex interactions in social contexts. It assumes that behaviour is purposeful and reflects words, body language, values and beliefs, and it serves my inquiry to interpret the workforce's actions and reactions as they interact with their leaders. Observation covers broad areas of interest; hence, I restricted my observational checklists to address relational leadership questions and recurring patterns of behaviour and relationship between leader and participants so that the analytic themes explain such behaviour and relationship. Comments collected from observation are a great source of analytic insights and propose useful questions for subsequent interviews.

Field observations, both planned and unplanned, were conducted during the research. These observations were conducted during interviews or at the manufacturing site where employees and their leaders are engaged in their day-to-day actions, both in delivering physical work and in respect to their relationships. I documented these field observations by being physically present with participants on the spot, and used the observations to bring context to the interviews.

Participants were told to expect a series of engagements over a period of three to six months. These engagements were accompanied by regular reflective intervention meetings, discussions, observations and constructive conversations among team members to draw new insights to enhance the rigour of our analysis. This was all done while ensuring their privacy and the confidentiality of their data on the basis of ethics of equality, ease, appreciation, feelings, diversity and dignity.

Participant observation is an essential element of all qualitative research. It involves the researcher's immersion in a work setting so that they begin really to see, hear and experience the reality as participants do. Hence, I spent a considerable amount of time learning about the daily life of the participants' workplace. This enabled me to reflect on such intensive experiences and become familiar with what participants struggle with.

The observations followed the protocol below:

- Initial observation: Spend five days seeing what these people do on the spot
- Regular observation: Spend two days a week in observation (notes and reflexive diary) with the participants' team

3.5.6 Focus groups

The focus group is one of the specialized forms of qualitative research that come from marketing research and are widely adopted, including in the social sciences and applied research. In this method, the researcher creates a supportive environment and asks focused questions to encourage discussion and trigger a variety of views and trends; using this method helped me to construct innovative research and find new ideas for solutions. This supportive environment allowed me to observe and

collect data on participants because they behave in a more relaxed way than in one-to-one interviews, giving me the flexibility to explore unpredictable issues as they arise. In my case, I used a specific area of assembly line 1 that is relevant to my selected participants/focus group members, as it is where they actually perform their tasks.

3.6 Triangulation

Triangulation means studying the research question on the basis of at least three separate forms of data, from three viewpoints. Sometimes, to achieve triangulation, a researcher uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Hence, triangulation refers to the use of more than one method, approach or data source as a strategy undertaken by qualitative researchers to ensure the validity of the investigation and comprehension of phenomena. Triangulation is viewed as a device for research constructionists to increase the credibility and persuasiveness of interpretive inquiries. Triangulation is divided into four types: 1) methodological triangulation, which refers to using more than one method to collect data – this represents my approach, that of using a combination of methods to gather data, by interviews, observation and focus groups; 2) investigator triangulation, which refers to using more than one researcher; 3) theory triangulation, which refers to using more than one theoretical position for interpreting data; and 4) data triangulation, where data gathering involves several sampling processes or data slicing at different times or in different social situations. Data triangulation is also represented in my approach to triangulating my data collection and analysis, as I used two research cycles for my social situation, at different periods but for the same individuals (Patton, 1999; Denzin, 1978).

3.7 Participants

I started by introducing myself and the nature of the study and took each potential participant through the participation information sheet in order to inform them of the rights they would have if they were to participate in the study. I followed that up with a second email, or asked them face to face if they were willing to participate, and if they fully understood the consent, etc. After the follow-up email or face-to-face discussion, if a participant agreed to participate, I sent or handed them the participant information sheet for sign-off. Only after that were processes such as interviews conducted.

Only participants complying with the selection criteria were allowed to participate. I chose my selection criteria in order to identify the most suitable candidates for my research and then to enlist them. Next, I approached them by sending them emails or handing them formal participation invitation sheets.

During the introductory phase of recruiting the participants, I did not emphasize the academic description of relational leadership, leaving this to be discussed during interviews. I met all participants in person and handed them a cover letter on the purpose of the project, its aim and timeline. Following this, I asked the selected participants if they would sign the consent form as a sign of their agreement to participate. I was interested only in those participants whom I could interview face to face to make sure of getting better information from them and about them, including from their body language, as well as their work environment. Participants could be leaders or followers.

3.8 Ethical issues

To enable in-depth examination of my workplace processes and the interactions of participants that shape their views through qualitative inquiry, triangulation of a combination of observation,

interviews and focus groups was used to test everyday actions and interactions in a complex social context and in a natural and interactive setting. This made me reflect better, as I became immersed in the lived activities with participants, on the complex relationship between the workforce, relational leadership theory, and the impact of this on relationships and decisions. I believe these were the most practical, efficient and ethical methods for collecting data for my research inquiry.

After the introductory phase of recruiting the participants, the phase of data gathering through interviews, observation and focus groups took place, starting with the first action cycle. I tried to make my own sense of the data gathering process through my own observations in the field, taking advantage of my notes there. I reminded myself of the research ethical codes while conducting interviews and observations, considering the type of questions to be raised and ways to express them, which may switch on or off participants' appetite for speaking up and elaborating on their beliefs, thoughts and perspectives. Thus, I was keen to be pleasant to interviewees and a good listener, even sometimes to details of irrelevant subjects shared by participants, just to get their stories and lived experiences (van Manen, 1990).

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings, such as the research setting, my role as an insider researcher, action research, problem identification, action learning sets, data collection strategy, planning of the action research cycle, implementation of the action research cycle, questions about the research action cycle, the interview venue, interviews and observation transcripts, the thematic approach, the template approach, template codes, evaluation of the action research cycle, data collection and analysis, and final findings.

Chapter IV: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The goal in this chapter is to present the rational framework for developing the research action cycle data set and processes for collecting data and then analysing them, and develop a foundation for the following discussion and interpretation chapter. It presents the findings of this study, the research setting, the action cycle framework, the methods of data collection and actions taken to address the research question. The research approach was designed to investigate the potential for adopting more relational leadership at Zamil Air Conditioners, in particular on assembly line 1 in the Consumer Business Unit.

This chapter therefore presents approaches to data collection and data analysis, insightfully discussing their pros and cons. The chapter discusses how the use of data was developed in action research, sharing the development as perceived through experience, reflection and interaction and utilizing the framework of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (as presented by Skerritt, 1992, 2000a, 2000b), the main processes of action research cycles, to contribute to research findings. Thus, the planned action research cycles were intended to explore and enable more relational leadership while examining the characteristics of leaders who are keen to practise relational leadership. This research method enabled rich information and understanding of how to apply the relational leadership framework in my particular organizational setting. The findings include the relevant data, historical key incidents, social climate and emergent themes as they appear during the research process. Hence, the research's chosen method aimed to find the gaps and deficiencies preventing the targeted work group from being more efficient and empowered. Moreover, it aimed to address the key qualities of relational leadership that triggered a change in the work group's ways of thinking, so as to boost production efficiency and efficacy. This made me keen to interact more often with employees, and participants in particular, and make the interventions required to enable such changes. This led me to work closely with participants to investigate the work environment and facilities as well as exploring the self-directed team theory by sharing authority among all members of the team and enabling a collective view of doing things. This led me also to investigate our relational response processes, our working relationships and the leadership style influences that triggered better efficiency and effectiveness.

4.2 My role as an insider researcher

My role as a manufacturing manager and an insider researcher is to tackle organizational issues such as deteriorating morale, efficiency and employees' productivity using action research and to explore the role of empowerment through relational leadership and hence investigate the implications of implementing such changes and find out whether participants at my workplace would espouse such a leadership style. The aim is to tell my story of being an expert employee and a novice researcher initiating collaborative action research in my own workplace to develop knowledge about the adaptation of the perspective of command and control or relational leadership in an actual working context.

Data were collected between 2018 and 2020 and included my log, with reflections on my managerial/industrial work, as well as interviews and observation of focus group participants.

Over 20 years of observing employees and hearing their stories provided the long-standing industrial experience that helped me to construct rigorous, reflective and interpretative research findings.

Therefore, I balanced my organizational role with the demands of inquiry and research (Kaplan, 1998). I realized that the new view of leadership I was adopting would influence the choices I made and how I perceived others while undertaking multiple roles. This would mean practising different forms of, or more, engagement, negotiation, dialogue, communication, self-reflection, tolerance, humility and generosity (Bell, 1998). Hence, doing action research while being an insider and a manufacturing manager made me expect three interlocking challenges: getting closely engaged while, at the same time, keeping the distance required to see things critically; balancing organizational requirements while managing politics; and enabling change to happen (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

In fact, undertaking an action research project at my workplace offered me a great opportunity to drive change and learning, and has involved planned interventions. This enabled me to combine my action research role with my regular organizational role to examine the findings on the implemented actions. This project caused me to get involved in intervention processes, engaging with individuals and team members who developed personal and organizational learning, as well as contributing to knowledge (Coghlan, 2001).

Hence, as this research was conducted in the workplace system I have been employed in for the past 20 years, I conducted action research with insider knowledge of the actual situation of the system, with regard to context and leadership. My role within the system focuses on organizational development activities, which enables me to access and expose various organizational dynamics that are not available to outside researchers, and I made sure to apply relational leadership qualities to develop co-action relationships with employees to alleviate their anxiety about being open with me, with the reassurance that they would experience no negative consequences due to airing their views. I also balanced my role as an employee and researcher to avoid making interventions that caused disruption to work or participant distress. In fact, the intention was to get to know doers in real situations and increase awareness of their views, behaviours and obstacles.

4.3 Action research

Action research aims in its strategy to combine research with action and participation. This method goes back to just after the Second World War and has become popular in recent decades. Action research has become popular along with qualitative methods in the attempt to find a rich data approach that presents an applied research method to trigger changes. Action research uses a cyclical process and alternates between action and critical reflection, which leads to a more refined method and interpretation from using the earlier cycle findings. It is an emergent process that leads to better understanding of what is actually happening. It is a participative method as it is easier to make a change with the involvement of those impacted by the intended change (Dick, 1999). While all research types are concerned with data gathering, action research utilizes a shared process of reflection between researchers and participants to address the research question better by generating better feedback that serves the research purpose while gathering data. Thus, the concept of action research normally suits investigation of complex organizational issues.

The action research concept was argued intensively by German psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), who sought to develop contemporary ideas of change by focusing on team members and challenging their norms to create a change. Action research is very effective, practical, participative, collaborative, emancipatory, interpretive and critical, and enables more interaction with participants, which yields deeper understanding, and enables them to infer creative solutions as well as enabling action learning. Action research is an avenue for managers who are seeking to integrate their studies with workplace issues or are seeking consultancy services.

Using participatory action research allows participant experiences and interpretations to be presented in greater depth, combining lived practice and the theory of relational leadership to uncover the consequences (Fredericks, 2009). It is an invitation to combine forces to enable a democratic social order (Raelin, 2009). Thus, through participatory action research I recruited a small number of participants to discover themes. This process included collecting data about participants' experiences of relational leadership through in-depth interviews and observation to obtain deep understanding (van Manen, 1990) and experiencing existing leadership to find out what conditions caused participants to be in favour of relational leadership, and how relational leadership can function in a work culture prone to command and control leadership. Also, I personally tested whether relational leadership helps in achieving goals and increasing efficiency in such a rigid workplace environment (Fredericks, 2009).

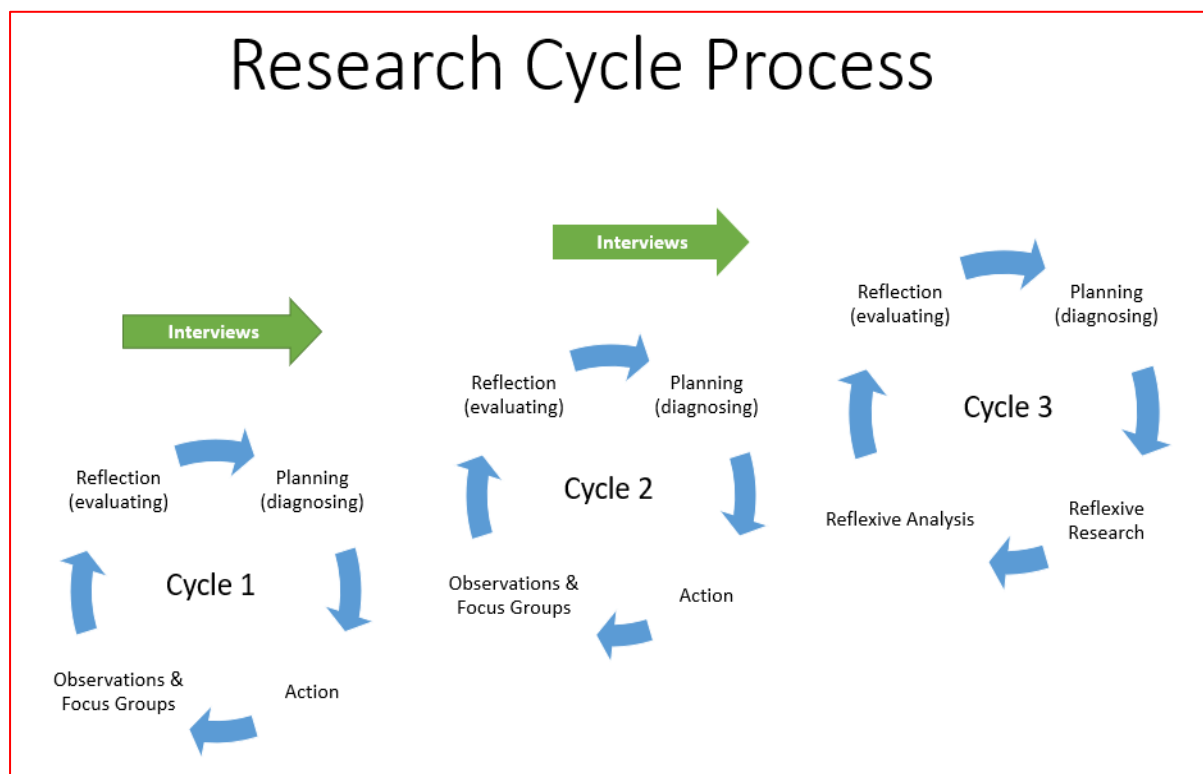


Figure 4.1 Research cycle process

The research started capturing assumptions of important themes of belief, biases and knowledge, reflecting my own and participants' experience of leadership styles, work environment and relationships. Through deep involvement with context, participants and data, I unveiled the lived experience of the participants with regard to leadership to address key themes that recognize

leadership as relational. Therefore, collecting data through interviews and observation increased my depth of engagement with practice and the written transcript and this led to the production of deeper understanding through the process of interpreting the action research findings (Laverty, 2003). This understanding enabled me to focus on finding the connection between themes and participants' interpretations of proper leadership. Conceptually, this research implemented a relational style of leadership as an avenue to empower targeted employees to do their tasks their way, to promote efficiency and emphasize to leaders how important it is to facilitate them to do what they need to do to perform more efficiently and effectively according to their collective judgement.

Action research inherently requires the recruitment of participants. I targeted a very specific number of people at assembly line 1 to gain deeper meaning from the findings. A large number of participants was not necessary because I was not seeking to generalize any of the findings but looking to gain new insights. Also, I recruited a small number of people because of the intimate nature of the investigation, which involved me working only with people from my workplace team who had already shown an interest in the work I was researching, allowing for better interpretation.

I found that my research applied most of Lincoln and Guba's techniques to evaluate its worth regarding credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability – techniques such as, but not limited to, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, description, inquiry audit and reflexivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4.4 Action learning set

Interpretive-epistemological qualitative research does not require the researcher to interview or observe a large number of participants to document a phenomenon; a small number of participants will ensure the development of a common bond among individuals that fosters relational leadership and ends up creating a human-social constructive approach. This enables a rapport between researcher and participants that provides the basis for understanding based on value expectations. Thus, participants are selected who have the breadth of experience and insight needed to provide rich description and who are willing to reflect on their experiences. Participants in the team should represent different professional backgrounds, levels and experiences and should include leaders and followers.

Participants in my research were employees within my workplace team who had already shown interest in the work I was intending to do. I developed a selection of employee criteria to get an adequate range of data:

- One line manager (leader) or supervisor
- Three senior employees who have ten or more years' work experience
- Three junior employees who have four to eight years' work experience
- Three new employees who have one year or less of work experience

The exclusion criteria were:

- Individuals under 21 years old
- Adults who are not able to consent for themselves

- Individuals who fall into any vulnerable category, such as those with any physical or mental disabilities such as learning disabilities or dementia, and prisoners
- Individuals who could not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information given in English or Arabic

Only participants complying with these selection criteria were accepted.

Because of the intimate nature of the qualitative investigation, only a small and very specific number of people needed to be recruited. Hence, ten employees maximum were needed after screening, while a few additional ones were kept as back-up participants in case any of those who participated in the study chose to stop at any time during the project.

4.5 Learning-set formation and dynamics

I found six suitable participants, two of whom were currently leaders and four currently followers. The ages of participants ranged from 36 to 44, with work experience tenure of 10 to 22 years. They were all males, as hiring women in this field had only recently become acceptable. Five of them were local (Saudi Arabian) and one was of a different nationality but also Arabic. At the beginning I listed 60 questions, whereas later on I refined this list and selected nine of them to be the subject of the first action cycle, which revolved around participants' backgrounds, work roles, work environments and reflections on working relationships.

4.6 Timeline cycle plan

I intended to conduct around 18 interviews starting in December 2019. The first cycle of interviews was conducted at my office, as per participants' wishes, with the interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, and in the next cycle they lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. The time set aside for interviews was 90 minutes; however, most of the participants felt they were receiving care and attention because of the one-to-one interview context and they got carried away with sharing their feelings and their stories. I was really happy, though, when I felt the interviewees had used more time than was set aside because they felt at ease and were more willing to speak openly. I also felt positive as I wrote down my observations on the interviews and interviewees, as well as any emerging reflections.

The first set of questions mainly addressed participants' background, work roles, work environments and working relationships, to help me to understand participants' work climate and get a glimpse of what they face and feel daily in the workplace.

The questions for the second interview cycle emerged from the first, and addressed in depth participants' perceptions and impressions of leadership, relational leadership and leader characteristics to find out how they felt, positively or negatively, towards existing leadership styles and to spot any opportunity for change, utilizing the method of template coding and thematic analysis to develop interventions to foster relational leadership.

The cyclical process of action research, which is fundamentally about change and social change on a large scale, starts with planning, action, observation, reflection, evaluation and review, and planning for further action. As every end is a new beginning (McNiff, 2002), it lays the groundwork for innovation and improvement in practices, while acting and learning concurrently for a dual aim that involves a qualitative approach and holistic understanding.

The cyclical process of data collection methods used for the research is summarized in the following timeline cycle.

4.6.1 Timeline cycle

- Six interviews with at least 90 minutes allocated to each
- Two days of observation (notes and reflexive diary)
- One or two focus groups per cycle (half or full day)
- The same processes are repeated for all the action research cycles with the same participants, with a span of one month minimum per cycle.

The cyclical process of action research lays the groundwork for innovation and improvement in practices through concurrent action and learning. Thus, action research is divided into two main cycles: first, planning, action and evaluation; and second, reflection, which generates new knowledge and insights in response to the research question and solves the problems identified (Skerritt and Perry, 2002). Hence, action research is an invitation for interactive research through co-existing relationships between leaders and participants who collaborate in making positive change out of reflection validated by them.

4.7 Constructing the problem

The study began with gathering data – not merely from the assembly line but from all areas in the organizational environment, so as to understand the production system better. The data collection was done through a mix of participants covering different work tasks, taking advantage of their permanent presence and direct participation, which enabled them to take decisions to improve work processes. Through action research, selected staff participants and myself could intervene in production on the spot, since we were physically located in the factory near the shop floor, and act as a team to solve problems as they arose, and note down observations. Participant feedback was analysed and tested ahead of the further action cycle. For instance, supervisors fostered a relational leadership style and facilitated workforce empowerment, as well as introducing multi-tasks by developing multi-skills. Also, an ad hoc approach was developed based on the team's intervention process, with the main focus being on an action research process in which the team learned from direct contact through proactive interaction with leaders to develop real solutions.

4.7.1 Planning action research cycle 1

To enable in-depth examination of my workplace processes and the interactions of participants that shape their views through qualitative inquiry, triangulation of a combination of observation, interviews and focus groups was used to test everyday actions and interactions in a complex social context and in a natural and interactive setting. This made me reflect better, as I became immersed in the lived activities with participants, on the complex relationship between workforce, relational leadership theory, and the impact of this on relationships and decisions. I believe these were the most practical, efficient and ethical methods for collecting data for my research inquiry.

4.7.2 Implementing action research cycle 1

The first action cycle questions were triggered by the literature on relational leadership's main components and levels, and helped in answering the research question, which revolves around participants' perceptions of work leadership, relational leadership and leader characteristics.

	Interview Question	Relevant Literature Reference
First research action cycle	How do you like your current job?	Collins, 2001, Sarros et al., 2002 & Jacobsen and Andersen, 2015
	What are your struggles, difficulties, challenges and obstacles?	Akram et al, 2016
	What are your career ambitions?	Guo et al., 2016
	What do you think of the engagement, interaction, collaboration and involvement of your leaders and what is the impact of leadership styles and attitudes on the work environment and on you?	Ospina, 2012, Conway, 2015 & Ohemeng, 2018
	Are you being listening to? What do you feel about that?	Hersted and Gergen, 2013 & Hicks et al., 2008
	Do you express your feelings, thoughts and views through conversation and dialogue with your leaders?	Marcketti and Kozar, 2007
	Have you ever received empathy or advocacy in your workplace?	McArdle and Reason, 2008
	Do you get access to equal opportunities (are individuals treated with equality)?	Mendenhall and Marsh, 2010
	How willing are you to come to work, to do your work, or to do more than your set tasks?	Nelson and Ratliff, 2005
Second research action cycle	What is your view of leadership and leaders?	Bass, 1990
	What is your view on relational leadership, based on friendship, participation, empowerment, shared responsibility and decision-making?	Raelin, 2003, Perreault, 2005, Fredericks, 2009 & Cunliffe, 2016
	What makes leaders trustworthy, do you think?	Komives, Lucas, and McMahon, 2013 & Warden, 2009
	Do you get the chance at work to find or use alternative ways to do your work better or solve problems?	Brower, Schoorman and Tan, 2000
	Do you receive appreciation, and how often do you get this?	Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012

	Do you feel your leader is a servant, humble, sensitive and caring, who pays attention to details and weak signals?	Wildman, 2006 & Raelin, 2016
Third (reflexive) research cycle	Is social and relational experience better than individual and cognitive experience?	McNamee, 2010 & Uhl-Bien, 2006
	What is your understanding of reality, and is that the same for your workmates?	Ford and Seers, 2006
	Do you have a sense of motivation, and if so do your organizational systems offer that to you?	Cunliffe, and Pavlovich, 2021
	Are you being taken care of by your leader and organization, and do you feel you are in a caring environment?	Burnier, 2003 & Noddings, 2013
	Are you being empowered?	Chrislip and Larson, 1994 & Vecchio, Justin and Pearce, 2010
	Do you feel you are in a generous work culture that considers emotions?	Cleary et al., 2018
	Do you feel workplace satisfaction and a sense of mission?	Noddings, 2013 & Guo et al., 2016
	How well do you feel your leader does in communicating with you and others?	Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995, Ohemeng, 2018 & Ospina, S., and Uhl-Bien, 2012a & b

Table 4.1 Showing interview questions and how they are linked to literature.

4.8 Action interview venue

Almost all interviews took place at my office, where the participants and I were seated face to face with the desk between us; however, some interviews were unplanned and happened at the participants' workplace.

4.8.1 Action interview transcripts for two rounds part1

Interviewee 1 has 17 years of experience at Zamil and is now assembly line supervisor; his ambition is taking a degree at college and rising in his career in the same field. Interviewee 1 likes his job, he joined Zamil young as a helper, became a repairman, QC inspector, lead worker and then supervisor: he likes this kind of job as he is talented at problem-solving. Interviewee 1 shared with me that one regular demand of employees, especially in Saudi Arabia, is for permits to leave for periods of time on different occasions. Thus, employees like or dislike their leader depending on whether they are given those permits. Interviewee 1 has found that leading a mix of nationalities is better for his leadership role than leading only Saudi workers: he has found that the aggregate qualities of mixed nationalities set a better example for all in relation to participation and performance.

I was able during the first few minutes to gain an impression of Interviewee 1 as being determined and direct, showing real confidence that he is in charge and can deliver whatever it takes to get the job done. We spent a few minutes getting to know more about each other, mentioning people we

both know and our impressions of them and their role qualities. Interviewee 1 informed me that he read my summary of the project purpose and formed an expectation of questions he might encounter, which provided evidence that he likes to be informed and be ready. As soon as we had a chat about the interview, we felt at ease with each other. Our first interview mainly delved into how Interviewee 1 started work with the organization, his progress in life and career development, his work environment and working relationships – how they were and how they are now – as well as his role.

Interviewee 1 informed me that he manages the execution of all the processes in the main assembly line, where he needs to meet a daily production target with a workforce whose number is calculated by the industrial engineering department and staffing power allocated by the operation manager. Interviewee 1 shared that management trust his leadership competency, and that is why he was promoted to his position at a younger age, and they seldom interfere with his decisions. Interviewee 1 is not very aware of every detail in the organization; however, he is focused on his area of responsibility and being involved with what is going on at his workplace, and being close to employees, which represents a great leadership strength. Interviewee 1 listens to his followers' pain and needs, and defends them against management, although he shared that he likes to maintain a hierarchy to control access to senior management. He also shared that his life experiences, such as from practical tasks, influence his decisions at work. Interviewee 1 does not feel pride at learning from and listening to his workforce: improvement requires openness to learning, he says, and sometimes he looks for their advice to synthesize his thoughts to develop better decisions. This enables the collaboration required to make collective decisions and outputs, so it is very important for leadership style. Interviewee 1 explained how working relationships are important, which falls in line with what relational leadership is. It is important that everyone feels that they are important, and that is why Interviewee 1 chooses to reach people at their workplace instead of calling them to his office.

I have observed that although Interviewee 1 is the supervisor or the leader of the whole assembly line, he often takes the place of any of his operators or followers to cover their on-line tasks while they take a break for any reason, such as going to the toilet. While he is doing such work, as you observe him you find out that he is really in charge. Interviewee 1 knows everyone by name and when he calls someone he calls them respectfully. He is proactive and has a positive energy that makes him clear in his mind on what to do and what is required on the spot and quickly. Interviewee 1 moves around the work arena in order to make sure no one has an issue that causes him to slip off the line, and he gently touches people's shoulders just to say hello or to get their attention. Interviewee 1 feels that showing the team you are involved and available is really important for getting their output. He has a special aura of charisma, confidence and composure.

Also, Interviewee 1 sees that leaders should be powerful in conveying employees' requirements to top management and getting their support to fulfil those requirements. Moreover, Interviewee 1 finds that when a leader supports and cares for employees and gets involved in solving their work issues it leads to an increase in employees' enthusiasm and inspiration, which translates into innovative ideas and increased production and efficiency. Interviewee 1 has noticed he gets more flexibility, with the employees performing more, as a result of small material incentives, encouraging verbal feedback, or appreciation certificates, and this recognition boosts their positive morale. I have noticed that these introductory questions about leadership and leaders triggered interviewees' concern and it was not easy or clear for them to respond, and Interviewee 1 was hesitant too. Then, Interviewee 1 said that the qualities of a leader reside in being disciplined, calm, clear and firm, speaking calmly and not

raising their voice. It is important that a leader does not hurt employees' feelings, and listens to them, but not to the extent of empowering them to take decisions themselves. Interviewee 1 is in favour of somewhat authoritative leadership, where orders are conveyed to followers indirectly, with some selective employees' views and opinions surveyed, but with the final decision still being his.

Interviewee 1 related a learning incident as a leadership lesson and example in action. He said that he asked one of his team of employees to do an assembly task in a certain way that Interviewee 1 sees as the right way to do it; however, the employee argued that this way would not work and offered an alternative. Interviewee 1, being the supervisor, used his power and forced the employee to do it the way he had said, as a leader knows better. Hence, the employee had no other option than to blindly obey, which later caused problems on the assembly line and showed the supervisor (Interviewee 1) that he was wrong. In fact, the employee was genuinely right. Then Interviewee 1 told the employee to do it his (the employee's) way, and production on the assembly line went better and more smoothly. Interviewee 1 said that this was one of his leadership lessons: he learned in action to listen to his followers and accept them airing their views. The story did not end there, however; Interviewee 1 started feeling uneasy and too proud to say directly to the employee that he was right or to say sorry. He discussed this feeling with one of his colleagues and was advised not to speak up in this way, because he was the boss and should not show any mercy or weakness. However, Interviewee 1 did not listen to this advice and was open with the employee: he thanked him and said the employee was right, and that he (Interviewee 1) was sorry. After that, Interviewee 1 felt a sense of ease and relief, and he noticed how happy and inspired the employee was to have been given such empowerment and credit, and to have been enabled to follow his own initiative, which has paved the way to a participatory relationship that has been used to overcome obstacles and challenges since then. This was a lesson for him in how to lead, Interviewee 1 said. I think this is an example of relational leadership and what it can accomplish in action.

In the second interview we discussed in greater depth perceptions of relational leadership and its meaning, and leader characteristics. Interviewee 1 expressed that it is hard to answer questions easily regarding relational leadership and leader characteristics. Interviewee 1's workforce work on the assembly line where they all need to work together as one team. Hence, it is essential to treat everyone the same, and they respect that. They need to have a clear vision and mission, and it is necessary to take extra care to treat them equally so they then reflexively support one another. Interviewee 1 explained that the best leader characteristics are being calm, considerate, involved, helpful and clear about what is acceptable and what is not. He also likes to be kept instantly informed of what goes on at the line. Interviewee 1 said he has not been an expert in all the issues he has encountered during his career, but he has learned a lot from various incidents, learning best when it hurts. Interviewee 1 also likes to approach leadership through positive reinforcement and greeting all the workforce, and he also expects respect in return, which is important to him. Interviewee 1 feels all right being compassionate and listening to people; however, too much of this can lead to loss of control so it is modestly used or in the right balance, which really has to be taken into consideration. Interviewee 1 therefore practises leadership through power mixed with distanced friendly relationships, which triggers the approach of leading relationally.

Interviewee 2 has 21 years of experience as an assembly line assembler at Zamil. He said his ambition was once to learn more varied tasks, but now he thinks it is too late, and he no longer wants this. He does not like to take responsibility, does not like his current job, and does not recognize the

importance of working as a team. He feels he is being watched and people treat each other with suspicion, not as one team. Interviewee 2 feels the work environment is better when the leader is more understanding and generous, treats people with empathy and gets involved with employees' daily issues.

Interviewee 2 was nervous at the beginning of the interview; however, when I tamed his anxiety it was difficult to control his dialogue and the flow of his many stories. His main struggles are not being listened to, low material compensation, personal life challenges with sick children and his need to take regular leave to take care of them, and physical difficulty in his daily work as he gets older. Interviewee 2 has children who are seriously ill with diabetes and hearing problems, which causes him to lose money and means he has to spend time taking care of them, and this is destroying his ambition.

Interviewee 2 is someone who likes to make friendly chat. He was easy to be with. Interviewee 2 missed the fun in the workplace, small pleasant gestures, bringing small treats, cups of coffee, or feeling comfortable with other employees around. He believes that in the workplace social friendship is essential for a healthy work environment that lessens the struggle employees face in work and life. He wants to feel that employees care for each other. Interviewee 2 wishes for a peaceful work environment.

He dislikes leaders who treat employees aggressively, verbally or physically – those who ignore the simple needs of employees because they think they are foolish or unnecessary, instead of being a facilitator. He dislikes leaders who prejudice, accuse and assume wrongdoing, and he thinks that most employees do not air their views and needs honestly. He likes leaders who truly interact with employees and truly see their struggles, even simple ones.

Interviewee 2 thinks leadership should be somewhat based on friendship and friendly conduct. Interviewee 2 considers that leaders should be neither soft nor harsh but achieve a balance so followers do not take them for a ride. He would like leaders to be supportive, and generous in interaction. Interviewee 2 is in favour of relational leadership, based on friendship, participation and empowerment, but without sharing responsibility and decision-making.

Interviewee 2 wishes for more relational leadership, and to have an encouraging and joyful leader who is compassionate, thoughtful and more understanding and aware of what employees experience in life and work as ordinary people. He said that being compassionate and joyful does not mean not being firm and respectful, but we need the opportunity to express ourselves, which may sometimes appear silly, but it really does touch our souls.

Interviewee 3 has 24 years of experience at Zamil and started as a sub-assembly line assembler and then became an assembly line assembler (repair worker in the packing area). His ambition is to advance in his existing career. Interviewee 3 still likes his current job, although he has been there for 24 years. Despite the fact that he has been through ups and down in the work environment depending on who the leader is, Interviewee 3 does not object to doing more work when the work environment is supportive. He becomes really overwhelmed when given some attention or freedom, or is trusted when asking for a break. He complained about group biases (regarding groups of expatriates), bullying, and unequal treatment that makes him feel oppressed. I felt that his attitude was positive: he would move his shoulder or rub his nose when he intended to speak honestly of his feelings. From incidents

he shared with me, I find him a confrontational person. His struggle is mainly biases, and unequal treatment.

Interviewee 3 demonstrated a positive energy and he is passionate about life. He prefers to work in a nurturing workplace where the leader listens to employees, to empathize with their pain, struggles and basic needs. He respects his boss because he has never seen him abuse his power, and his boss presents himself as a brother to the employees and often feels for them, although he is also firm.

Interviewee 3's background experience with leadership is that no matter whether the follower is right in their actions and views, the leader is always right. Interviewee 3 views leadership as based on friendship, social interaction, help and the offer of freedom, where the leader practises equal treatment, interacts and makes people learn different tasks: a leader who leads indirectly. Interviewee 3 is in favour of relational leadership, based on friendship, empowerment and readiness to take on responsibility, but likes the leader to monitor indirectly. He wants to feel peace of mind and feel free when performing tasks. Interviewee 3 likes exploring the self-directed team theory, where authority is shared among every member of the team to enable a collective view of doing things where the leader facilitates. He thinks that he and the team can recognize when things are wrong or right.

4.9 Reflections while conducting the first action research cycle

It was not easy for me to start the first research cycle. I felt so much anxiety about intimately interacting with shop floor employees with the intention of communicating as an equal or a peer. I guess it was not easy for the employees either: they felt the same anxiety, or even fear. Thus, it was not easy to approach them in a normal manner. This can easily be attributed to the heritage of Middle Eastern or Asian culture or the way people are brought up, with too much conservative thinking and preserved heritage, and strict roles and behaviour as a way to show worthiness. It was not easy for me either, as I come from that heritage and background, with workplace stress on paying attention almost solely to machines and order. This meant that before my research study, what I thought was important during production revolved around quality improvement and increased production efficiency. In this culture, we naturally target machines, technologies and systems and tackle related issues. Less attention has been given to employees and embedded incentives, their cultures, work environments, feelings, stories, social lives, what makes them keep going, why they come to work each day, their motives, and what creates their ups and downs. Thus, lots and lots of questions came to my mind as I started interviewing the first participants, and more still as unstructured questions popped up while I was interviewing. I gained many new insights and thoughts, which made me feel sorry that I had not paid attention to these employees' struggles before. As soon as I empathized with them they started feeling at ease and shared with me not merely their struggles but their life stories, needs and wishes for work and for their personal lives. Many times I felt pity for them, having to keep their work needs merely as wishes for 15 years, with less of this or that, when it is really simply their right to have their work needs met. The more time that participants spent with me, the more they felt encouraged to share information, to the extent of sharing secrets. I saw them, one by one, feeling at the end of the interview the power and higher self-esteem of someone who has had a weight taken off their shoulders. I was able to see that other employees wished to participate. I may not have removed all their problems or entirely substituted rewards for their fear of punishment in the aftermath of this project; however, the biggest wish is that we make positive change out of this project for all of us.

We say to ourselves, from ego, that our decisions will only ever be good and that it is silly to think they are not good decisions. But, learning relational leadership in action leads us to raise many key questions. Questions such as these: If a leader is more educated, older and more knowledgeable, and has more experience, etc., and simply knows better, then why should this leader bother to discuss issues or decisions with followers? Why should the leader engage in dialogue with them, why share thoughts and feelings, why empower them to speak up and air their views? Isn't that decision obvious – isn't it silly of the leader to do so? This is a lesson I learned when conducting in-action interviews with the participants. No matter how much we know, we tend to overlook important details and ramifications. We tend to shift our focus to what is important to us in the end, and then we fail as a team. This often leads us to say we do not really understand why we fail, we cannot explain why; though we intended to do good for our followers and for the work, it turns to be a disaster for them. This occurs just because we have ignored their feedback, or we cannot comprehend an unexpected piece of feedback, or a faint one. I learned this through the example of workers working five days instead of six days, with the same total working hours weekly. They basically hated this change in the end, but the leaders thought they had done some good for them. Simply because the leaders overlooked workers' sincere feedback, the leaders' honesty, transparency and humility fell short.

4.10 Analysing the interview data

After each interview, I reviewed the gathered data thoroughly and highlighted the most significant pieces of information for the research subject. This included information relating to the project's research question. I read all the transcripts thoroughly once again and highlighted template codes – words that related to the research question. Finally, I read the transcripts once again and listed the themes that emerged through the template codes of the collected text.

Thus, the participants' interview transcripts or stories were scrutinized and rendered into themes drawing from their narratives. I had to read and ponder the collected data from interview transcripts several times to develop a conclusion on the right themes to forge in order to reflect the real meanings of participants' viewpoints. At the beginning of developing the themes, I intentionally delayed going to the related literature until I really grasped some of these themes, and only then did I check the literature for any similarities, to ensure natural emergence of the found themes. Only then did I write up my findings, taking into consideration any overlap or repeated meanings of the words within the same themes that represented my interpretation of participants' views with regard to the relational leadership essence and nexus. Hence, I tried to be attuned to participants' meanings and expressions when referring to theme types, to describe relational leadership as it sounds for participants.

4.11 Thematic approach

Qualitative researchers tend not to use a guiding reference for analysis, or tend to use mixed methods of grounded theory and discourse analysis to rationalize thematic analysis, which until recently was poorly defined. Thematic analysis was developed in a systematic and sophisticated way by Braun and Clarke (2006) in relation to psychology. Thematic analysis has gained credibility, offering valuable accessibility and flexibility. The thematic analysis process is one avenue of research that demonstrates rigorous searching. It focuses on searching for important emerging themes that describe a phenomenon or recognize a pattern within data, in ways such as reading, listening and reflecting through careful observation (Da, Kellehear and Gliksman, 1997; Rice and Ezzy, 1999). It is a reflexive process that enables themes to emerge from data through indicative coding. The coding process observes or recognizes important patterns of data to allow for the encoding or interpreting of those

patterns to develop themes, as a process of analysis that captures the qualitative richness of phenomena (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis are types of qualitative descriptive design techniques used to analyse textual data and themes through systematic processes of coding and of examining the meaning (interpretation). Themes are the main product of data analysis and are generated as practical outcomes in the study field when using analytical interventions. Themes are attributed to organize repeating thoughts into groups to confine codes that have common points regarding the subject of inquiry and that help researchers to answer research questions. “Theme” and “category” are sometimes used interchangeably; however, categories are descriptors of themes. Interpretive categories are not directly related to the phenomenon being researched, but are related more to method of analysis. The purpose of a theme is to present the essence of participant experience. While developing the theme, a category promotes depth of meaning, and subthemes exist under the central theme. Interpretation and qualitative analysis require the researcher to return over and over again to data and code processes. This depends on the researcher’s ability to generate ideas and make sense of them through immersion, with careful reading of the text and with meaningful listening.

Thematic analysis is used heavily in interpretative phenomenological analysis and grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, there are multiple ways to do thematic analysis, such as matrix analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Nadin and Cassell, 2004), framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) and template analysis.

4.12 The template approach

Template (or coding) analysis is a related technique for thematically organizing and analysing textual data that is used by researchers to develop a list of codes or templates representing themes that are found in textual data. Those themes that may be defined as a priori at the outset need to be modified and emerge as refined versions; I needed these to help me interpret my collected texts. The template or coding is organized to represent the relationships between themes, such as a hierarchical structure, depending on a researcher’s approach. Template analysis can be used in an array of epistemological positions, such as in realist qualitative work that accepts the conventional positivistic positions of quantitative social science. In a sense, template analysis can be used to understand the causes of human actions objectively, which will ensure coding reliability. Also, it can be used in straightforward facilitation with a contextual constructionist position, assuming there are multiple interpretations for any phenomenon and less concern with coding reliability, placing more emphasis on researcher reflexivity; this suited my exploratory research project. Interactionist, phenomenological and some narrative approaches are examples of template approaches.

The data involved in template analysis are often interview transcripts and many other forms including focus group data (Goldschmidt et al., 2006; Thompson et al., 2010; Brooks and King, 2014). The main procedural steps of template analysis can be described as follows (King, 2012) & (Crabtree and Miller, 1999).

- Becoming familiar with all related data and context of the accounts to be researched, including transcripts and daily lived context

- Developing preliminary coding for data, addressing all possible texts that contribute to the purpose of the research
- Organizing the emerging themes into meaningful clusters, highlighting the relationships between the groupings
- Developing the initial coding template for a subset of the data rather than for all the accounts
- Applying the initial template for all the other data and modifying it whenever required to ensure the best fit with the themes

Thus, this analysis approach comprises six phases: 1) becoming familiar with the data by immersing oneself in the data source, such as by reading in depth, listening, interacting, intervening, etc., 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes (shifting from codes to themes where themes capture something important about the data with regard to the research questions) (Braun and Clarke, 2006), 4) reviewing potential themes for quality, 5) defining and naming themes in a few sentences, stating clearly their uniqueness and being specific about them to make sure themes are focused, do not overlap and directly address the research questions, and 6) finalizing the template to produce an explanatory report.

Template analysis does not describe a single method of analysis; it refers to various related groups of techniques for thematically organizing and analysing textual data. Thus, template analysis helped me to organize my action research work to develop a list of codes or templates representing themes identified in my textual data, which in my case were the transcripts of individual interviews and observations obtained during action cycles. In fact, coding is irrelevant without researcher reflexivity, which is necessary in order to approach the topic from different perspectives with rich description. This falls within the purpose of interpretivism and phenomenological research, which is required for this study.

4.13 Template codes

Unlike quantitative reporting, qualitative reporting requires writing and analysis to be thoroughly interwoven, and moves from descriptive writing to explanation, argument, interaction, involvement and criticism to answer the research questions. The essence of using such procedural steps to define themes within transcripts or data is to organize those themes into a structure that helps in interpretation. Template analysis is widely used in organizational research settings, including education and clinical psychology, and is used more often than framework analysis as it is more experimentally focused, reflecting the developed input of experimentally oriented psychologists to explore professional practices and relationships.

4.14 Evaluation of action research cycle 1

The first action cycle resulted in the following template codes:

#	Level	Theme/Code	Representative Text

1	I	Comfort	(...to get permits to leave for periods of time on different occasions. Thus, employees like or dislike their leader depending on whether they are given those permits...) L1 comfort
2			(...Interviewee 2 misses the fun in the workplace... small pleasant gestures... bringing small treats... cups of coffee... or feeling comfortable with other employees around...) L1 comfort L2 care
3			(...He believes that in the workplace, social friendship is essential...) L1 comfort L2 care
4			(...to have a healthy work environment that lessens the struggles employees face in work and life...) L1 comfort L2 understanding
5			(...Interviewee 2 wishes for a peaceful work environment...) L1 comfort
6			(...Interviewee 3 still likes his current job, although he has been there for 24 years...) L1 comfort
7			(...Interviewee 3 does not object to doing more work when the work environment is supportive...) L1 comfort L2 care
8			(...to empathize with their pain... struggles... and basic needs...) L1 comfort L2 care and understanding L3 respect and generosity
9			(...He feels when working over on the sub-assembly line he has some margin of freedom...) L1 comfort
10			(...good leadership is when a leader offers a comfortable work environment...) L1 comfort and role power
11			(...Interviewee 5 shared with me that the struggle he faces, besides the need for money... is the effect of working until late in the day, which takes most of his free time...) L1 comfort L2 understanding L3 generosity
12			(...the great impact on employees' health and well-being when they were deprived of the chance to live a healthy life on five days...) L1 comfort L2 understanding
13			(...they worry if they do not get enough rest and sleep they cannot go to work the next day...) L1 comfort
14			(Interviewee 6 mainly complained about the work environment: besides not receiving a pay increase for years now, he works long hours daily...) L1 comfort L2 care L3 generosity
15			(...need others things... such as places for rest breaks... better toilets... a better food service...) L1 comfort L2 care
16	I	Collaboration	(...he looks for their advice to synthesize his thoughts to develop better decisions) L1 collaboration
17			(...Interviewee 1 explains how working relationships are important...) L1 collaboration

18		(...a relationship that is used to overcome obstacles and challenges...) L1 collaboration
19		(...Interviewee 3 views leadership as based on friendship... social interaction... help... and the offer of freedom...) L1 collaboration L2 care L3 empowerment
20		(...Interviewee 3 is in favour of relational leadership... based on friendship... empowerment... and readiness to take on responsibility) L1 collaboration L3 empowerment
21		(...Interviewee 4 often helps others with their tasks if needed...) L1 collaboration
22		(...Interviewee 4 said if we manage our workload ourselves we feel more powerful and have better morale, and that makes us increase our production and efficiency...) L1 collaboration L3 empowerment
23		(...Interviewee 4 is in favour of relational leadership based on friendship, but with less responsibility and decision-making from followers...) L1 collaboration L3 empowerment
24		(...while he is in favour of enabling a collective view... he fears exploring self-directed team leadership by sharing authority...) L1 collaboration
25		(...He thinks that previously employees would ask for more gate passes and had more disputes... which disrupted production...) L1 collaboration
26		(...He said that relationships are good among employees... and supervisors...) L1 collaboration L2 engagement
27		(...Interviewee 6 said almost 80% of the employees work together as a team...) L1 collaboration (...how he has embraced the organization's mission... is willing to learn... share ideas... time to make it happen...) L1 collaboration L2 engagement
28		(...This creates a positive work environment... and positive relationships among them... which drives the collaboration needed to push ahead...) L1 comfort and collaboration
29		(...Interviewee 6 likes leadership that treats employees as equal...) L1 collaboration L3 empowerment
30		(...He is not in favour of leadership that gives too much freedom... and decision-making power to followers...) (...he thinks it is good that they share ideas and thoughts... but with the approval of a superior...) L1 collaboration L2 engagement
31		(...Interviewee 6 shares... getting rid of non-collaborative employees or troublemakers...) L1 collaboration
32		(...Interviewee 6 admits that the collective view of the team influences his decision-making...) L1 collaboration

			(...informing each other of faults or mistakes in the workplace... honesty...) L1 collaboration
33	I	Role Power	(...as you observe him, you find out that he is really in charge...) L1 role power
34			(...He is proactive and has a positive energy that makes him clear in his mind...) L1 role power
35			(...He has a special aura of charisma, confidence and composure...) L1 role power
36			(...Interviewee 1 sees that leaders should be powerful in conveying employees' requirements to top management and getting their support...) L1 role power and comfort
37			(...encouraging verbal feedback, or appreciation certificates, and this recognition boosts their morale...) L1 role power (...Interviewee 1 explains that the best leader characteristics are being calm, considerate, involved, helpful and clear...) L1 role power L3 involvement and L2 understanding and care
38			(...Interviewee 2 thinks leadership should be somewhat based on friendly conduct...) L1 role power
39			(...Interviewee 2 considers that leaders should be neither soft nor harsh...) L1 role power
40			(...the work environment depends on who is the leader...) L1 role power
41			(...Interviewee 4 said that whether he likes the work environment depends on leaders' behaviour with him...) L1 role power
42			(...has connected with supervisors who support his cause...) L1 role power L3 empowerment
43			(...leading through good deeds of facilitation...) L1 role power L2 care
44			(...is not afraid of taking a risk in making a decision... yet he really wants to know what is wrong before taking it...) L1 role power L2 engagement
45			(...Interviewee 6 likes being a disciplinary leader... and at the same time being courteous... and respectful...) L1 role power L2 care L3 respect
46			(...The leader needs to be tolerant... receptive... honest... and consistent over time in what they say and do...) L1 role power and collaboration L2 understanding and engagement L3 respect
47			(...leaders should be transparent... and treat everyone as equals...) L1 role power L3 respect and empowerment

Table B1 First action cycle template codes

4.15 Action research cycle 2, constructing action research cycle 2

The questions for the second interview cycle emerged from the first, and addressed in depth participants' perceptions and impressions of leadership, relational leadership and leader characteristics to find out how they felt, positively or negatively, towards existing leadership styles and spot any opportunity for change, utilizing the method of template coding and thematic analysis to develop interventions to foster relational leadership.

4.15.1 Action interview transcripts for two rounds part2

Interviewee 4 has 20 years of experience as an assembly line assembler at Zamil. He has been doing the same job for almost 20 years as a coil bender on the coil bending machine, moving from a manual one, to a semi-automatic, to a more advanced one. Meanwhile he often helps others with their tasks if needed. His ambition is to advance in his career to get more money. Interviewee 4 said that whether he likes the work environment depends on leaders' behaviour with him: he likes it when leaders consider the workload and give him some freedom to take a gate pass, and encourage employees by interacting with them and being close to them. Interviewee 4 said that when leaders become restrictive with employees and offer no rest breaks or freedom to change the normal work routine, it becomes stressful; however, the workplace climate becomes pleasant when the leader understands employees' need for breaks such as through gate passes or taking leave. Interviewee 4 said that if employees manage the workload themselves they feel more powerful and have better morale, which makes them increase production and efficiency. Interviewee 4 is very witty and interesting and can easily engage you in conversation. He did not think much about what to answer for each question. Interviewee 4 feels that his workplace lacks the passion and the structure that make people committed or really engaged, and this often makes people say they do not care. This is one gap Interviewee 4 believes leaders should fix. He said employees lack excitement in the workplace, there are no opportunities and they need change, as they have been working for a long time and things are the same.

I felt this participant was losing hope; his dream was different at an early age. He has personal issues and complains about debt, and his main struggles are material and also the issue of long working hours with a fear of being stuck working all the time on the main stream line, where the work requires him to be available all the time to work with the group. He feels that, by contrast, when working over on the sub-assembly line he has some margin of freedom.

Interviewee 4 shared with me his struggle of work shifts where he does physical work for almost ten hours with little help; then he goes home and attends to family responsibilities, and yet the workplace demands he perform the same the next day. He used to finish work at 2.30 pm and now it is 4.45 pm because Zamil used to have six working days and changed to five days, which makes it hard for him to find free time in the day to earn additional money. He also shared with me that although he went to high school, he applied for work with his elementary school certificate to secure a job to help his father. I was astonished when he mentioned that, with all of his struggles and financial difficulties, he gave help to his colleague who had a chronic disease, by giving him a lift for eight years until his colleague retired. So, all he needs is for management to understand his basic need to leave early and get some financial support and a bit of freedom.

His view of leadership is simple: good leadership is when a leader offers a comfortable work environment, understands employees' workplace needs and requirements, shares work with them and also shares their own views and listens to others, becomes a friend, is respectful and supportive, gets involved with physical work, helps, facilitates and interacts. For example, "I like it when the leader lends a hand instead of sitting idle and giving orders," Interviewee 4 said.

Interviewee 4 is in favour of relational leadership based on friendship, but with less responsibility and decision-making from followers. While he is in favour of enabling a collective view where the leader does the facilitating, he fears exploring self-directed team leadership by sharing authority.

Interviewee 5 has 23 years of experience as an assembly line assembler at Zamil, and his ambition is to advance in his existing career and learn more tasks such as repair role tasks. Interviewee 5 has done a great job by completing elementary and high school while working with Zamil, as he was hired with a primary school certificate only. Interviewee 5 likes his work environment and has a good relationship with the team; he likes it even more now because it has a mix of different nationalities, unlike before, when it had only one nationality. He thinks that previously employees would ask for more gate passes and had more disputes, which disrupted production. Production is now reduced, which means the pressure to produce more is reduced; however, his need for money means he asks for extra working hours and he does not mind if he works weekends. He does not take on big responsibilities. Interviewee 5 did not talk easily when we started the interview – he was not open, and I was really pulling answers from him at the beginning. Interviewee 5 shared with me that the struggle he faces, besides the need for money, is the effect of working until late in the day, which takes most of his free time. The impact of working five days instead of six days and leaving late, because the working hours of the sixth day have been distributed across the other five days, has been overlooked. The intention was good – to have a two-day weekend – and it is great; however, the great impact on employees' health and well-being was ignored when they were deprived of the chance to live a healthy life on those five days. During these five days, employees have to stop exercising, doing their hobbies or spending quality time with friends and family, because they do not have enough free time and are exhausted after working long hours. Also, they worry that if they do not get enough rest and sleep they cannot go to work the next day. In fact, their social lives and health have been severely affected.

Interviewee 5 appears to me to be a humble and agreeable person. My impression of him is that he lacks enthusiasm and energy, as well as passion for what he does. He does not like to speak about inner feelings, and is a very peaceful and undemanding person. Hence, it is difficult for him to reflect on himself, his workplace, and leaders or leadership, although he is a very collaborative worker. For him, empowerment does not mean much, and he is not aggressive about airing his needs.

It seems that working for five days rather than six days with the same total hours has become a cause of employees suffering from physical and psychological difficulties and has affected their opportunities for education, exercise, social lives and hobbies, as well for making extra money working on small business projects. Why do we ignore the need for change of employees at lower levels of the hierarchy, such as assemblers, who, through doing the same monotonous task over and over again, become devastated and lose interest in their work? Hence, I reflect, it is an organizational responsibility to make sure that assemblers do not serve on assembly lines for very long periods (many years), for the sake of salary range and the physical and psychological well-being of employees.

Why do employees who have served the organization over a long tenure have to go through a long list of hierarchal levels to reach the big boss? Or feel that that are committing a sin in approaching those higher in the hierarchy by bypassing those immediately in charge, because they feel that bosses higher in the hierarchy are less aggressive in saying no to them – something that irritates their immediate boss? Why would a boss in a more senior post refer a follower back to their immediate boss if the employee had already come to them?

Interviewee 6 has nine years of experience as an assembly line assembler and has been promoted to the role of lead worker at Zamil. His ambition is to advance in his career, learn more tasks and take on more responsibilities. Interviewee 6 likes his current job and wants to grow professionally. He is not

afraid of responsibilities and is willing to take decisions. I met Interviewee 6 in my office for 90 minutes and I got the impression that he is focused. He is someone you can depend on. Interviewee 6 is the assembly line lead worker, who reports to the supervisor. Unlike the other participants, Interviewee 6 is not a citizen but from another Arabic country, and has worked here for almost ten years now. Interviewee 6 discussed his development in the organization as well as the career transition from being a tailor in a small shop to working in industrial mass production and was willing to share his story. He was happy about this transition and has shown a great interest in learning and being in charge; he is a really proactive person. Interviewee 6 has shown his commitment to the organization and has connected with supervisors who support his cause and who have noticed how he has embraced the organization's mission and is willing to learn and share ideas and time to make it happen. Interviewee 6 is deeply committed to the work he does. He soon found that those supervisors came to depend on him and trust his guidance of other employees, and he was enabled to lead and hence promoted to the role of lead worker six years ago. Because of his ability and appetite for learning he has grown fast, by learning different tasks relating to assembly, the feeder-shop and repairs, which led him to become a lead worker within three years. Interviewee 6 mainly complained about the work environment: besides not having received a pay increase for years now, he works long hours daily. He feels they can finish their production quantity in less time if they are allowed to leave early. I asked him if they needed other things and he said yes, such as places for rest breaks, better toilets and a better food service, rather than recreational facilities. He said that relationships are good among employees and with their lead worker and supervisors, although there is an absence of involvement of top management. Interviewee 6 highlighted that employees are now less willing to grow by taking on responsibilities as they are offered no pay increase, which affects their morale. He also highlighted that if production increased to where it used to be nine years ago, this would require new people, who would need training to keep up with other employees. Interviewee 6 said that almost 80% of the employees work together as a team. Interviewee 6 was willing to take part in the interview, and he is confident, but he does not have many words to describe things or thoughts and he wanted me to suggest these to him. Interviewee 6 shared with me that the struggle he faces, besides the need for a raise (and it has been a while since anyone has had one), is the effect of working until late in the day, which takes most of his free time and causes a huge impact in his life.

Interviewee 6 likes to work with positive employees around him and approach work positively. This creates a positive work environment and positive relationships among employees, which drives the collaboration needed to push ahead: a "count on me and I count on you" climate to make it happen and support one another. He enjoys working as a lead worker, loves his work and loves helping his team.

Interviewee 6 likes leadership that treats employees as equal regardless of their nationalities, religions or backgrounds. He is not in favour of leadership that gives too much freedom and decision-making power to followers, although he thinks it is good that they share ideas and thoughts. If these ideas and thoughts are any good then they can be applied but with the approval of a superior (I believe this expresses the fear of loss of power for leaders). Interviewee 6 also likes leaders who take care of the needs of followers, facilitating them, treating them equally, comforting them, taking care of them and getting indirectly involved. Interviewee 6 is in favour of relational leadership based on friendship, but with less responsibility and decision-making from followers. Interviewee 6 likes and practises leadership with a facilitative approach, but in a strict, organized and very specific way, to ensure tasks are performed a certain way. Interviewee 6 shared with me that today's leadership context has been accomplished through years of getting rid of uncollaborative employees or troublemakers. He uses incentives and overtime to energize employees to work more efficiently and effectively, along with leading through good deeds of facilitation, care and good verbal feedback, and helping or covering

work for employees who take breaks or leave on permits, solving their problems, treating them well, and being kind but at the same time firm with them. Interviewee 6 stressed treating all employees equally, informing each other of faults or mistakes in the workplace, honesty, sincerity and dedication.

Interviewee 6 likes being a disciplinary leader and at the same time being courteous and calm. Hence, employees can trust him enough to come to him to ask for a hand or to get help if needed. Interviewee 6 admitted that the collective view of the team influences the decisions he makes. Although Interviewee 6 is not afraid of taking a risk in making a decision, he really wants to know what is wrong before taking it. Interviewee 6 likes leaders who are considerate, supportive, cooperative, respectful, giving and understanding, and who epitomize leading relationally.

Interviewee 6 likes leaders who show no favouritism to one worker over another. He believes that every employee has a quality to offer but you need to get close to them to get to know it. Leaders should create harmony in the workplace. Leaders need to be tolerant, receptive, honest and consistent over time in what they say and do. In other words, leaders should be transparent and treat everyone as equals.

4.15.2 Undertaking/implementing action research cycle 2

The research continued with capturing of assumptions regarding important themes of beliefs, biases and knowledge, reflecting on my own and participants' experiences of leadership styles, work environments and relationships. Through deep involvement with context, participants and data I unveiled the lived experience of the participants of leadership and relational leadership to address key themes that recognize leadership as relational. Therefore, collecting data through interviews and observation increased my depth of engagement within practice and my analysis was transcript led, producing deeper understanding and interpretation (Laverty, 2003). Such understanding enabled me to focus on finding the connection between themes and participants' interpretations of proper leadership. Conceptually, this research implemented a relational style of leadership as an avenue to empower targeted employees to do their tasks their way, to promote efficiency and emphasize to leaders how important it is to facilitate them to do what they need to do to perform more efficiently and effectively according to their collective judgement.

4.15.3 Evaluation of action research cycle 2

The second action cycle resulted in the following template codes:

II	Care	(...Interviewee 1 listens to his followers' pain and needs...) L2 care
		(...It is important that everyone feels that they are important...) L2 care
		(...gently touches people's shoulders just to say hello or get their attention...) L2 care
		(...Interviewee 1 finds leader support, care, involvement with employees' work issues...) L2 care L3 generosity and involvement
		(...Interviewee 1 feels all right being compassionate and listening to people...) L2 care and understanding

		(...A leader who is compassionate... thoughtful... understanding...) L2 care and understanding
		(...makes people say they do not care...) L2 care L3 respect and generosity
		(...Interviewee 6 highlights that employees are now less willing to grow by taking on responsibilities as they are offered no pay increase... which affects their morale...) L2 care L3 generosity
		(...Interviewee 6 shares with me that the effect of working until late in the day, which takes most of his free time and causes a huge impact in his life...) L1 comfort L2 care and understanding
		(...likes leaders who take care of the needs of followers... facilitating them...) L2 care L3 generosity
		(...treat them equally... comfort them... take care of them...) L2 care L3 generosity
		(...employees can trust they can come to him to ask for a hand or to get help if needed...) L2 care and understanding
		(...Interviewee 6 likes leaders who are considerate... supportive... cooperative... respectful... giving... understanding...) L2 care and understanding L3 respect and generosity
II	Understanding	(...He also shared that his life experiences, such as from practical tasks, influence his decisions at work...) L2 understanding
		(...Interviewee 1 said that the qualities of a leader reside in being disciplined, calm, clear and firm, speaking calmly and not raising their voice...) L2 understanding L3 respect
		(...Interviewee 1 says that this was one of his leadership lessons: he learned in action to listen...) L2 understanding
		(...A leader who does not hurt employees' feeling, listens to them...) L2 understanding L3 respect
		(...when leaders become restrictive with employees... offer no rest breaks... and no freedom to change the normal work routine... it becomes stressful...) L1 role power and comfort L2 understanding L3 empowerment
		(...unlike when the leader understands their need for breaks such as through gate passes or taking leave...) L2 understanding L3 generosity
		(...the guy is losing hope...) L2 care and understanding L3 respect and generosity
		(...fear of being stuck working all the time on the main stream line ...where the work requires him to be available all the time to work with the group...) L2 understanding

		(...Interviewee 4 shared with me his struggle of work shifts where he does physical work for almost ten hours...) L1 comfort L2 understanding
		(...then going home and attending to family responsibilities and yet the workplace demands he perform the same the next day...) L1 comfort L2 understanding and care L3 generosity
		(...all he needs is that management understand his basic need to leave early...)
		(...who understand employees' workplace needs and requirements...) L2 care, understanding and engagement
		(...During these five days, employees have to stop exercising, doing their hobbies or spending quality time with friends and family, because they do not have enough free time and are exhausted after working long hours...) L1 comfort L2 understanding L3 generosity and respect
		(...helping or covering work for employee who take breaks or leave...) L2 understanding and engagement
		(...be kind but firm with them...) L1 role power L2 understanding
		(...who epitomize leading relationally...) L2 understanding L3 empowerment
II	Engagement	(...he often takes the place of any of his operators or followers to cover them...) L2 engagement
		(...Interviewee 1 feels that showing the team you are involved and available is really important to get their output...) L2 engagement
		(...He likes leaders who truly interact with employees...) L2 engagement
		(...lack the structure that makes people committed... or really engaged...) L2 engagement and care L3 generosity and empowerment
		(...when the leader lends a hand instead of sitting idle and giving orders...) L1 role power L2 engagement
		(...Because of his ability and appetite for learning he has grown fast, by learning different tasks...) L2 engagement
		(...Interviewee 6 has shown his commitment to the organization...) L2 engagement
		(...Interviewee 6 is deeply committed to the work he does...) L2 engagement
		(...Interviewee 6 likes and practises leadership with a facilitative approach, but in a strict, organized and very specific way, to ensure tasks are performed a certain way...) L2 engagement and care

		(...you need to get close to get to know it...) L2 engagement
		(...absence of involvement of top management...) L2 engagement
		(...Interviewee 1 moves around the work arena in order to make sure no one has an issue...) L2 engagement
		(...When leaders encourage employees by interacting with them...) L2 engagement
		(...be close to them...) L2 engagement and understanding L1 role power

Table B2 Second action cycle template codes

4.16 Data collection and analysis

In qualitative template analysis, the intention is to run the text through the process of coding and refine the process as you go along. Template analysis starts with a few predefined codes, which helped guide my analysis, as did my extensive experience and knowledge gained from the literature review. However, I took into consideration my own biases in order to be as neutral as possible. This can be facilitated by addressing key questions and topics in the interviews, as well as those that may emerge out of each individual interview. This is a useful collaboration strategy to define codes. The initial templates consisted of three higher-order codes subdivided into two or more levels of lower-order codes inferred from the relational leadership literature's main components and levels. The higher-order codes covered the central issues of the study:

- First-level code (work environment and working relationships) indexes accounts of comfort, collaboration, role and power
- Second-level code (leadership) indexes accounts of care, understanding and engagement
- Third-level code (influence of relational leadership) indexes accounts of respect, generosity and empowerment

As the initial templates were constructed, I used them to work systematically through the full set of the interview and observation transcripts to identify sections of the text that were relevant to the research project aim, highlighting themes with one or more related codes from the initial templates, which were further modified to create the final one as some issues mentioned in the text that were relevant to the research question were not covered in the initial codes. For instance, a pleasant environment that leads to joy in the workplace was added as it was consistently stressed by interviewees but was not recognized as a code in the initial templates. There is no standard framework for templates; however, I aimed to achieve one that was comprehensive and clear for my analysis. The template coding is derived from the basic text without interpretation to help in producing richness of data. This can be analysed and interpreted to complete a list of codes occurring in each interview transcript and to indicate frequency. Studying the distribution of codes within and across transcripts helped me to pay attention to aspects of data for examination and look closely at the interview text

with openness to additional research questions, in order to consider or disregard each theme's relevance.

4.17 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on progress in conducting the third cycle of Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) interviews

The Saudi government enforced a lockdown starting the first week of March 2020. The intention was for it to last 14 days, but when situation with the COVID-19 pandemic became worse, the government extended the quarantine until the end of March. The government further enforced a curfew from the first week of April 2020 until the first week of June. The ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis have impacted our daily lives extensively: at work, in business, socially and economically. In fact, when the government forced us to stay at home, most of the time, besides panicking, we were taking care of family members' needs, either those close, face to face, or those at a distance, online. My weekly meetings with my supervisor have been impacted by the pandemic on both sides. Also, not being able to report to work affected the last part of the action research cycle and what came next. As a result, this has affected my DBA progress and also my thesis submission.

Hence, due to the pandemic restrictions, which resulted in the above consequences and ramifications, and the University of Liverpool's code of ethics and regulations, the face-to-face interviews and close observations were suspended after cycle 2. Moreover, due to the length of additional time needed and the uncertainty around the date when normal life would resume after the pandemic, an educated decision was made to gather and present data for the third cycle utilizing the rich information grasped from the written texts from the interviews conducted to date as a reflexive approach, and in addition utilizing online and telephone access and my experience as an insider researcher.

4.17.1 Reflexive approach

The reflexive approach is one of the qualitative research approaches and encapsulates mindful inquiry that attempts to capture the dynamic, developmental and complex nature of interactions with people (Nagata, 2005). Hence, this mindful inquiry is a learner-centred approach that enables researchers to develop personally meaningful but intellectually rigorous research that cultivates their research voice and self-reflexivity. This approach makes researchers more self-aware in the work context and aware of various standpoints. This requires courage and honesty from the researcher as it challenges biases and encourages transparency in self-examination. It also necessitates expression of the researcher's true feelings, mind and spirit to present the holistic meaning of the issue being researched, resulting from the researcher's lived experience in the workplace. The reflexive approach thus combines theory, practice and research to discover workplace issues in depth by allowing phenomenological description, hermeneutic interpretation and critical analysis that promote change (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998). The reflexive approach triggers mindful inquiry, starting with identifying important questions related to the problem, and with true engagement to confront and challenge common stereotypes, as a result of a higher level of immersion, reflection on expressive emotions, and sincerity. This all promotes clarity on the subject – externally, but mainly internally, resulting in learning, awareness of our assumptions and self-understanding.

In fact, inclining towards the reflexive research approach shifts the focus from an objectified research method to a more integral one, which constructs a fruitful relationship between development and reflexivity or between research and researcher (Attia and Edge, 2017). This requires real involvement from the researcher with the context under investigation, which increases awareness as part of

contextualized action. Thus, the reflexive approach urges researchers to articulate their understanding of the lived experiences (interaction and observation) they have derived from being part of the context or workplace physically, emotionally, socially and even spiritually, so as to pursue knowledge.

Therefore, various issues related to ethics and COVID-19 made me adopt a reflexive research approach for the third action cycle, as a slight adjustment of the design the research was intended to follow, in order to enrich my findings, secure fruitful discussion and interpretation, and answer my research question, leading to more awareness, proposals for change, new knowledge and distinct conclusions.

4.17.2 Reflection on delving into the third cycle

I believe that most followers are afraid to grow and take decisions, which can be alleviated if leaders are open with them in order to remove their fear of exercising this right. Relational leadership enables such an approach when we influence people by the way we act, behave, respond and interact, and the way we treat them. Leadership is not based on friendship, but it is all about relationships, which can range from professional relationships to closer relationships. When you lead many different people, basically you cannot make everyone your best friend. There are people who are great performers but like to keep their distance from the boss, in a positive way. Many people do not feel comfortable getting close to their bosses, just as children and parents sometimes do not want to get close. There are also those who do not like to mix business with friendship: they just do not want to worry about this balance. It is not easy to fire someone, and especially a friend or close friend, and sometimes keeping one's distance is a way to exercise equality among employees and avoid favouritism. In addition, the goal of creating one clear vision and a cheerful and fun work environment is to increase employees' sense of commitment.

While leaders are thinking about what followers should give or offer, we should also think about what we can do for them. If followers gain a sense of progress that gives them a sense of pride, this will lead to their self-motivation and satisfaction. Getting the right people for a team is essential as collaboration is vital to deliver highly efficient, high-quality work. Leadership power should emanate from knowledge, commitment, involvement and relational rapport. Employees should be encouraged to make suggestions and share their feelings and views on the organization and its direction. Small gestures from leaders who consider the human aspects can deflate the negative feelings of those employees who have worked for the organization for a long time. Small gestures can work like magic that boosts workers' energy in the workplace, and leaders should know how powerful that is. Yes, leaders may feel that through enabling and empowering followers they themselves become powerless, but the impact of such an approach in increasing followers' productivity is significant.

Rules and regulations intended to control the work environment do not work all the time, especially in the context of intense competition or tough times for an organization. However, in the real world a relational work environment makes rules and regulations work, because relational leaders ameliorate any inadequacy in regulations with positive relationships and a nurturing attitude by working with everyone in unity and for the same cause.

Remember how many times, with all your competence, you fell short, overlooked details, made silly mistakes, failed and said sorry, or ignored second opinions from people around you. How great a leader you are is not measured by the number of times your followers told you gave them a better

solution or a better idea; it is measured by how many times more you told them they had got it, that they had a better idea than yours, and that is how you start to become a better leader or mentor.

No leader or follower knows all the details of everything; we all learn from each other, and leaders should encourage followers to learn from one another and lend each other a hand. Collaboration, then, is the sum of all minds, and relational leadership acts make it a synergy. Empowerment may be forged by enabling fair discussion, which is done based on honesty and fearlessness towards power. Power or the power of a role can be a tool to do many great things if used justly, and otherwise it can be a devastating tool; a relational leader uses it responsibly. Relational leaders should sound energetic and confident in what they do, but not brutal.

Based on the themes that emerged from the first and second action cycles, I propose a particular change towards relational leadership at the assembly line workplace. This change is that leaders such as Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 6 exercise more care for followers by listening to them and to their needs. They should understand their followers' struggles so that they engage more with them and involve them more in what they are trying to do, to create a collaborative work mindset to evoke a unified understanding or purpose. Moreover, leaders should be involved in promoting working relationships and developing a pleasant as well as flexible work climate, such as by tackling the problem of long daily working hours. This can be done, I believe, by giving followers the power to do things differently, and by giving them more flexibility and freedom to utilize their insights and experience, which will hopefully affect their morale and stimulate their motivation so they like what they do. Doing this should eventually influence their willingness to come to work every day. Hence, leaders should notice better productivity when they encounter a need to increase production while having the same number of workers. Also, leaders should notice a smoother work flow, fewer work problems and fewer individual disputes while working under pressure. Thus, the level of success of interventions for change can be observed in production efficiency figures, and in the feelings of leaders and followers when such changes in leadership style are implemented.

Hence, the third-level code (influence of relational leadership) indexes accounts of respect, generosity and empowerment.

4.18 Implementing the final research cycle

Thus, the questions in the final action cycle revolved around the influence of leadership style or approach (relational leadership) on participants and on organizational outcomes, as a consequence of the first and second action cycles' output and reflection.

4.18.1 Evaluation of action research cycle 3

The third cycle resulted in the following template codes:

III	Respect	(...Interviewee 1 feels all right being compassionate and listening to people...) L2 care and understanding
		(...power mixed with distanced friendly relationships...) L1 power or role
		(...He dislikes leaders who treat employees aggressively, verbally or physically...) L1 role power L3 respect

		(...who ignore the simple needs of employees because they think they are foolish...) L1 role power L3 respect L2 care
		(...He respects his boss because he has never seen him abuse his power...) L3 respect L1 role power
		(...Interviewee 1 does not feel pride at learning from and listening to his workforce...) L3 respect
		(...Interviewee 1 chooses to reach people at their workplace...) L3 respect
		(...Interviewee 1 knows everyone by name and when he calls someone he calls them respectfully...) L3 respect
		(...it is essential to treat everyone the same...) L1 role power L3 respect
		(...he also expects respect in return, which is important to him...) L3 respect
		(...Interviewee 6 stressed treating all employees equally...) L3 respect and empowerment
		(...treating them well...) L3 respect and generosity
		(...who becomes a friend... is respectful...) L3 respect and empowerment
III	Generosity	(...he gets more flexibility with the employee performing more through small material incentives...) L3 generosity
		(...the environment is better when the leader is more understanding... generous.... treats people with empathy... and gets involved with employees' daily issues...) L2 understanding L3 generosity L2 care and engagement
		(...likes leaders to be supportive... and generous in interaction...) L2 care and engagement L3 generosity
		(...He really becomes overwhelmed when given some attention... or freedom... or is trusted...) L2 care L3 generosity and empowerment
		(...When leaders consider the workload and give him some freedom to take a gate pass...) L3 generosity
		(...his main struggles are material... and also long working hours...) L2 care L3 generosity
		(...Interviewee 5 has done a great job by completing elementary and high school when working with Zamil...) L3 generosity
		(...He uses incentives and overtime to energize employees to work more efficiently and effectively...) L3 generosity

		(...some financial support...) L3 generosity
III	Empowerment/Involvement	(...he is focused on his area of responsibility and being involved with what is going on at his workplace...) L3 involvement
		(...being close to employees represents a great leadership strength...) L3 involvement
		(...to increase employees' enthusiasm and inspiration...) L3 empowerment
		(...accept my followers airing their views...) L3 empowerment
		(...he thanked him, said you were right, and I am sorry...) L3 empowerment and respect
		(...he noticed how the employee was so happy and inspired to have been given him such empowerment...) L3 empowerment
		(...enables their thoughts, and gives them credit...) L3 empowerment L1 role power
		(...Interviewee 2 thinks it is too late...) L3 empowerment (...does not like to take responsibility...) L3 empowerment
		(...destroying his ambition...) L3 empowerment
		(...he thinks that most employees do not air their honest views and needs...) L3 empowerment
		(...Interviewee 2 is in favour of relational leadership... based on friendship... participatory... empowerment... but without sharing responsibility...) L3 empowerment
		(...Interviewee 2 wishes for... encouraging and joyful leader...) L1 role power L3 empowerment
		(...we need the opportunity to express ourselves, which may sometimes appear silly, but it really does touch our souls...) L3 empowerment
		(...Interviewee 4 feels that his workplace lacks the passion...) L1 comfort L3 generosity and empowerment
		(...no opportunities...) L3 empowerment L2 engagement (...we need change...) L1 role power L3 empowerment
		(...He does not take big responsibilities...) L3 empowerment
		(...Interviewee 5 appears to me... lacks enthusiasm... and energy... as well as passion for what he does...) L2 care and understanding L3 empowerment

		(For him, empowerment does not mean much...) L3 empowerment
		(...Interviewee 6 likes his current job... and wants to grow...) L1 comfort L3 empowerment
		(...He is not afraid of responsibilities... and is willing to take decisions...) L3 empowerment
		(...He feels they can finish their production quantity in less time if they are allowed to leave early...) L2 understanding L3 empowerment
		(...trust his guidance of other employees...) L3 empowerment (...he was enabled to lead...) L3 empowerment

Table B3 Third action cycle template codes

I conducted data saturation checks during collection and analysis as this trajectory claims widespread acceptance as a methodological principle in qualitative research. This is used as an indicator that the data collected and analysed are sufficient. Failure to reach data saturation would impact on the quality and validity of the research. When saturation is reached mainly depends on the number and complexity of the data, the investigator's experience, and the number of analysts reviewing the data (Ryan and Bernard, 2004; Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the more similar the experiences of the participants interviewed, with respect to the research domain, the sooner I expected to reach saturation of data. This was the case as I interviewed similar workplace participants. Also, considering the span of my study, I expected to reach saturation fairly quickly. Referring to Guest et al.'s (2006) steps, I found, based on 18 interviews, that eight or more was an acceptable sample size in qualitative research. This constituted one of the milestones, as the point at which data became saturated. After ten interviews I started to see similar information over and over again, and I became empirically confident that the data were saturated or I would have to use a new group of participants. Over 75% of the codes were identified within the first six interviews, and 50% of the codes were addressed over and over again in the following interviews. Hence, based on this consensus, I attained data saturation for the most part by the time I had conducted and analysed 12 interviews. Code definitions were fairly stable after the second round of interviews and fairly fully represented the emerged themes. Therefore, after 12 interviews new themes emerged infrequently, meaning that the rate of variation had diminished over time.

4.19 Conclusions

After developing, in the previous chapter, an appropriate methodology that responds best to the relational leadership perspective, the focus of this chapter was to present the rationale for inferring the investigating questions and how the action research data were analysed and also how these data contribute to exploring the alternative leadership of relational leadership. This in fact prompted me to utilize the opportunity for insider research to conduct the participatory action study using multiple data collection methods validated by the triangulation of different forms of data collection: interviews, observation and focus groups.

In this chapter, I also retold the story of how I gathered data from interviewing and observing six participant employees as well as exploring the influence of relational leadership on those who exercise

it, those who perceive it and those who receive it, including my own reflections, experience and observations of this throughout my career. Therefore, I have obtained participants' understanding and assessment of the work environment and working relationships, leadership and the relational leadership style, as well as the perceived influence of relational leadership. Participants are not sophisticated enough to describe what relational leadership means and how it is different from any other form of leadership style. However, they sense the influence of particular leaders and what makes them love working with one leader over another. They can recognize the significance of relational leadership and they have experienced similar approaches. Thus, I have reported these stories as I experienced them during the action cycles. Also, I have reported the themes that emerged through the action research cycles, as well as through a reflexive approach, that provide context for understanding relational leadership.

The participants offered me the opportunity to glimpse the meaning of relational leadership from the angles of both leaders and followers. They were anxious at the beginning but soon felt at ease and generously shared their experiences with regard to leadership in general and relational leadership in particular. They shared with me their experiences and wonderful work stories.

In the next chapter I will present the discussion of the outcomes of introducing a new, alternative leadership approach to my workplace, i.e relational leadership. Also, I will discuss the process of interpretation, the theme matrix, emerged themes and reflexive inference.

Chapter V: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the discussion of my research project findings. It discusses the exploration of a new, alternative leadership approach to my workplace that embodies relational leadership. It also presents the process of interpretation, emerged themes based on their frequency, and reflexive inference. Moreover, it presents discussion of the data collected from interviews, focus groups, observation, organizational documents and personal reflection.

This participatory or more feminine alternative perspective on leadership appeared new to me as a manager, and made me recall experiences with different leaders I have worked with and those who have influenced my leadership style. It has made me rethink my approach to leadership. It is a whole new perspective that I started to recognize the existence of, and it contradicts the style of leadership dominating at my workplace, in my country and even across the Middle East. I also learned about leadership-as-practice and leaderful practice that embodies the “four Cs”: collectiveness, concurrency, collaboration and compassion (Raelin, 2003). Collectiveness means that every participant can serve as a leader. Concurrency considers that all participants are serving as leaders at the same time. Collaboration refers to participants co-creating their outcomes. Compassion means committing to preserving the dignity of every participant regardless of status, background or view.

This alternative perspective on leadership advocates a managerial role that creates collaborative work engagement (Raelin, 2013). The role of a leader situates them as a facilitator of emancipatory dialogue among all stakeholders, and my research findings indicate that this leads to a constructive discourse encouraged by free expression and inquiry, resulting in collaborative consciousness, learning and action. In fact, this alternative leadership approach considers leadership to occur as a practice and not as behaviour traits of particular individuals. The leadership-as-practice then becomes a cooperative effort from all participants, who develop the engagement necessary to achieve an outstanding outcome. The focus here is not about one person's thinking or mindset: it is more about what all participants might accomplish together with more focus on emotions, morale, rationality, technology and relational aspects (Chia and Holt, 2004). Hence, this new approach to leadership lies in participants' interaction and their shared understanding of the source of leadership, and not the influence of the leader's authority. While conventional leadership depicts leaders as individuals in positions of authority, who tend to overplay their influence and the fact that they are in charge, the focus of the alternative leadership perspective is on leadership as it emerges from the dynamics of consultative leadership (Hodgson, Levinson and Zaleznik, 1965), such as leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2014), leaderful practice (Raelin, 2003; 2011) or empowering leadership (Vecchio, Justin and Pearce, 2010).

5.2 Process of interpretation

Participatory organizational change, which is based on democratic leadership and equality of participants, depends mostly on dialogue, deliberation and leaderful practice. Dialogue is the DNA of democracy; it is the conversational basis whereby employees can create mutual constructive exchange. Leaderful practice is service in action or practice that employees observe before experimenting with their own collective tacit processes in action, and it negates autocracy and the

command ideology (Raelin, 2012). It assumes inclusive change and development of participants' affinity, instigated through the expression of all their feelings and views during multi-party reflective conversations, and where leaders behave as facilitators and servants for such social and humanistic drivers instead of merely complying with micro instructions that come top-down from organizational authority. Leaders can demonstrate this model of change by modelling changeability or creating a psychologically safe environment for employees while facing fears of vulnerability or of losing power or control and of the waning of the role of middle management (Raelin, 2012).

Thus, through deep involvement with workplace practice and data, I aimed to unveil participants' lived experience of leadership styles while I investigated their perceptions and presented the emerged themes that recognized leadership as relational. Therefore, I utilized data collection and reflection cycles to increase depth of engagement with practice and texts, which helped in producing deeper and new understanding through the process and consequences of interpretation (Laverty, 2003); I also used the practice of keen observation of how participants talk, behave and make conversation with one another, and measuring reality against the wishes they conveyed to me during interviews and weighing up the relational care shown to them versus their own diligence.

I was keen to take into consideration my deepest biases and assumptions and therefore tried to be as neutral as possible. This was helped by my addressing the key questions and topics that guided the interviews, as well as others that emerged out of each individual interview. This was a useful collaboration strategy to define codes. The initial templates consisted of the three higher-order codes subdivided into two or more levels of lower-order codes. The higher-order codes cover the central issues of the study:

- First-level code (work environment and working relationships) indexes accounts of comfort, collaboration, role and power
- Second-level code (leadership) indexes accounts of care, understanding and engagement
- Third-level code (influence of relational leadership) indexes accounts of respect, generosity and empowerment



Figure 5.1 Action research levels

5.3 Cycles 1 and 2: Emerged themes of actionable inference

The theme matrix table for cycles 1 and 2 presents the frequency of every theme throughout the interview texts.

Theme Matrix Table For Cycle 1 & 2			
Level 1 Work Environment	Comfort	Collaboration	Power or Role
	44	41	44
Level 2 Leadership Style	Care	Understanding	Engagement
	51	42	34

Table 5.1 Theme matrix for cycles 1 and 2

5.3.1 Cycle 1 discussion

Participants mentioned various important themes that conveyed overlapping characteristics of relational leadership. Some of these were perhaps less vivid, yet they constituted an important thematic sphere or relational leadership approach. Several themes raised were not highlighted, even though they are interesting, because they are out of this research's scope: the emerged themes I highlighted are those that incorporate this study's purpose. The emerged themes for the work environment and working relationships construct comprise comfort, collaboration, role and power.

5.3.2 Comfort

Comfort emerged as one of the important themes regarding the work environment and working relationships construct. All participants recognized the need for comfort and its value for the workplace and for the people they work with or for. All participants shared how important it is to have a leader who provides them with a proper work context.

Also, all participants said many times that they like to work when there is a positive relationship with peers and leaders, where they are enabled to socialize to diffuse daily stresses. This satisfies their passion and even helps them commit to the organizational mission and pursue their personal goals. Leaders who approve this simple positive relationship show that they feel really for human needs as well as work needs. The relational leader, then, is responsible for creating a pleasant and even fun work environment where employees perform their work and anywhere else in the organization. This theme fits into the relational leadership literature, such as that covering the work environment, which refers to the need for workplace comfort, for instance avoiding work alienation. Sarros et al. (2002), Cummings et al. (2010) and Guo et al. (2016) emphasized how important it is to encourage appropriate behaviours to improve performance and avoid work alienation. The nature of an organization's business and environment had significant effects on work alienation (Sarros et al., 2002) and performance: although there was a negative correlation between leaders' task behaviour and job performance, there was a positive correlation between relational behaviour and job performance (Guo et al., 2016). This implies the importance of relational leadership in increasing employees' performance outcomes. For instance, I have observed what I might call "a screaming cheer", where

suddenly, several times during working hours, one of the employees will emit a loud scream and the others will follow just to cheer themselves up, like sports fans. I reasoned that they did this because they needed to break the ice, increase their bodily alertness, wake up, stay tuned, become energized or find a way to lessen alienation and monotony.

A pleasant work climate (Raelin, 2012), a term that indicates the need for comfort at work, was something wished for by all the participants I interviewed. They considered this a sign of nurturing and an incentive for them to come to work each day. This is one of the characteristics of the relational leadership attitude set overlooked by the literature, and officials feel embarrassed to discuss it. Participants all agreed that having a caring workplace culture, such as one that makes them laugh and dispels stress, makes the workplace enjoyable. Hence, relational leaders ought to facilitate such a climate by having a sense of humour. This helps in the development of a positive work climate to keep people going and doing more. Sometimes, small things like a friendly chat and a symbolic gesture are all it takes to accomplish this. A leader will also come across as perceptive when offering funny chat. A pleasant workplace is a subject that may not be spoken of generally, but relational leadership facilitates it, whereas it is even considered an irrelevant subject from the traditional mindset or control leadership perspective. I agree that flexibility and seriousness should be counterbalanced, but a pleasant work context is a necessity for taking followers forwards; it is something they want, and I believe they deserve it.

Relational communication enables the evolution of the work environment and values. It develops meaning in employees' actions, promotes better practice in decision-making and helps reduce conflict through dialogue, interaction and collaboration. The organizational context is presented more as a conversation where social negotiation plays a vital role in giving meaning to what people do. The relational process, through dialogue (Gergen, 2016) and co-created effort, shapes the organizational purpose, value, interest and direction. In fact, positive relational communication through dialogue enables meaning to be assigned to participants' actions to develop a better work environment and values that encourage innovation and the reduction of conflict as well as better decision-making.

5.3.3 Collaboration/dialogue

The second theme that emerged under the work environment and working relationships construct was collaboration, which is a fundamental element in the relational leadership literature. Relational leadership can be described as a set of interpersonal processes associated with collaboration, empathy, trust and empowerment, distributed and embedded within interaction and conversation (Cummings et al., 2010). The relational leadership process is also about managing oneself by enhancing self-awareness, in tandem with fostering the skills needed to work collaboratively and interdependently. Collaboration is one of the most important aspects that forge the climate of workplace context. Collaboration is an important indicator representing how relationships among employees are nurtured and how the leader makes the workplace a constructive setting. Raelin (2011) and Maturana and Varela (1987) argued that through the adoption of communicative acts leaders and leadership can develop the collective consciousness of the community. Maturana's domain theory argues that three domains affect the organizational context: autopoietic systems, self-referring closed systems and open communicating systems (Maturana and Varela, 1987). The theory asserts that all human collaboration and communication can be seen from these three co-existing domains, each affecting different areas of organizational life, where constructive links between leaders and followers can be strong if both groups actively engage in co-creation and co-interaction, working towards the

same purpose and working to avoid any source of misunderstanding or resistance, realizing that there are tens of valid descriptions and views. Recognizing that the human nervous system does not truly depict the real world, but just depicts our own senses' construct of reality (Maturana and Varela, 1987), we should transform our mindset from the idea of one universe to that of multi-universes. We should therefore start to appreciate the fact that individuals behave according to how they perceive reality and their own perspective inside their context, which is therefore the basis from which to influence them. This means that our leadership identity is developed through the influence and information we choose to receive. In other words, we are shaped in collaboration with the system or context we are part of.

5.3.4 Role and power role

The debate on the role of management has long been in progress. Uhl-Bien (2006) and Sayles (1964) argued that leadership is not restricted to a particular hierarchal position or role but occurs in relational dynamics. The alternative to the traditional management role of self-imposed leadership or command and control leadership is to be a facilitator of emancipatory dialogue that can lead to inquiry, employees' self-direction or empowerment, and the free expression of multiple and contradictory points of view that traditionally are not counted or heard. Therefore, a leader can use their role to catalyse discourse among employees to construct mutual learning, understanding, a collective stance and collaborative action. This approach of leadership affirms employees' dignity and empathy through dialogical engagement, constructive conversation and deliberation to develop employees' collective wisdom and trigger creativity and change. This can be empowered by leaders' discretion and personal qualities as well as by organizational culture, although that is governed by institutional norms and targets. However, leaders taking such an approach may end up with horizontal control and lose the power to intimidate others into doing the work when the force of authority is replaced with dialogue and where deliberation among employees replaces managers' decision-making. This requires a safe environment, and space or permission for deliberation or participatory outcomes. Hence, power or role power was the third theme that emerged under the work environment and working relationships construct. It is a focal point for being responsible. It means that you intend, as a leader or a follower, to be responsive and proactive in tackling your mission efficiently and effectively. It requires the leader to know clearly what every follower's role is and make everyone understand how important their role is for the organization and the team. It simply recognizes that every member of the work group is important, no less than anyone else in the workplace.

Power or role power is an important attribute of the relational leadership perspective, complementary to power sharing and collective decision-making. Such power has to be invisible and simply let the influence take place. Power will be in the hands of followers as much as it is in the hands of leaders. Everyone's voice must be expressed and heard. No one should experience fear of or repression by their superior. Everyone is a boss in what they do well.

In fact, the relational approach to leadership instigates the positive use of power, rather than it being used negatively and repressively, developing wise or double-loop meanings for analysis that lead to collective decisions. This generates individual and collective empowerment, rather than an autocratic power experience. It rejects the traditional management language of structure and identities and instead sees organizations as relational networks of changing individuals acting in a complex interplay of effects between them. In other words, authority or power is not concentrated in the hands of some

individuals, but is shared or distributed throughout the social field of the organization. The relational perspective changes the focus from one leader to the collective dynamic, where the leader is seen as just one of the voices in a coordinated social process. This notion shifts the understanding of the use of power from one of directing people to one of facilitating options and alternatives. This perspective encourages the switching of power from control through means such as maintaining performance, progress reports and follow-up, to power that is applied to enable a co-creative climate to flourish by embedding mutual respect, care, guidance and dialogue. It encourages a shift from the power of position or authority to the practice of listening and negotiation, where an attitude of correction is replaced with one of appreciation, respect and curiosity (Maturana and Varela, 1987).

5.4 Cycle 2 discussion, Care

Care was the most important theme that emerged within the leadership construct – in the interviews, whether by theme frequency count or the degree to which it was stressed by interviewees, and in the literature. It is the avenue to building trust with followers, as people tend to trust those who take care of them. The care theme fits into most relational leadership literature, and care can be described as being inclusive (Cleary et al., 2018; Komives et al., 1998). This process can be expressed through the exchange of knowledge, and through being aware of oneself and others and thus acting with care in co-action (Conway, 2015). Care is one of the characteristics that all participants were in agreement on. It is vital in relational leadership: it is a fundamental characteristic that relational leaders must extend to followers at all levels and in numerous ways. Make them believe and feel you really care.

In LMX theory, Brower, Schoorman and Tan (2000) argued that care can be built through the interpersonal exchange of trust, where the parties in relationship evaluate each other's abilities, benevolence and integrity, all of which influence the predicted behaviours of individuals. Werbel and Henriques (2009) argued that there is a difference in the trust perceived by supervisors from that perceived by subordinates: their findings suggest that supervisors are concerned about trust in relation to supervisory delegation, while subordinates are concerned about trust based on interactional justice. It is important for leaders to understand this difference in order to build up mutual trust. Relational leadership encourages people to foster all the strengths that trigger passion, inspiration and transformation in individuals, which become more than the sum of their individual parts, by emphasizing care and engagement to increase trust and trustworthiness, and this exchange of trust between leaders and followers is important for the positive and proactive interaction needed to achieve added value (Brower, Schoorman and Tan, 2000). For instance, show followers you are there for them, offer help, and spend time on their personal problems as well as their work problems. Remind them to take care of themselves and their dependents. Know them by name, recognize their accomplishments and surprise them with treats. Above all, treat them with dignity, respect and gratitude. Care is a focal quality of relational leadership that is characterized by being intentional (Warden, 2009), where leaders show followers that they care about the issues affecting them and care for them. Hence, care is not merely incidental behaviour (Warden, 2009) but involves attentiveness to their concerns, ideas and thoughts. However, being such a kind and caring leader does not imply being weak. Care is meant to energize the batteries of those who fall behind in accomplishing their mission, not to make excuses for falling behind. It is care in the sense that support from leaders translates into loyal followers. It is really a matter of exchanged value.

Thus, leaders should extend care to employees, express empathy and give them intellectual catalysts, as relational leadership depends on context: it is not a linear or one-directional action but a set of

interactive actions that necessitate care. Therefore, leaders are expected to be in service to followers and to have the ability to deal with their diversity of views. Such leaders are perceived as servants, and it takes a lot of courage for human beings to be humble, sensitive and caring, as well as paying attention to details and weak signals of trouble or distress that people try to keep hidden.

5.4.1 Understanding

Understanding is another an important theme from participants' experience of their work journey, within the leadership construct. Understanding enables them to perform their tasks, no matter how difficult they are. Understanding enables them to be themselves and become more honest and transparent, showing who they are and what they are really doing. They are then visible to themselves and to others. This is how relational leaders should understand and encourage the work environment and their followers to be.

Increasing the value of understanding means fewer obstacles and problems. Understanding can be fostered by being keen to learn about one's own and others' viewpoints, by interacting with others and walking in their shoes, so to speak. Try to discover as much as you can, and increase your opportunity to evolve. The theme of understanding fits into the relational leadership literature as it relates to inclusiveness (Cleary et al., 2018; Komives et al., 1998). Practising relationship processes is important, for instance, in promoting understanding and encouraging diversity, all of which prioritize divergent thinking and new ideas by removing the assumptions that limit creative thinking (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012).

Relational leaders should have the ability to navigate the matrix of information exchanged between people, such as body language, tone of voice, facial expression, energy, words and emergent subtexts, in order to transform it into meaningful interaction that can create mutual value. Therefore, leaders should facilitate understanding, to try to construct a link between the management context and followers' contexts, a process that really requires constructive intervention. Relational leaders should facilitate a common language that enables them to easily comprehend and become competent in dealing with different situations and understand what the real story is behind reactions. The leaders must then facilitate understanding in different contexts, facilitate a process of dialogue, and at the same time facilitate the work process and the tools necessary to achieve the co-created relationship that relational leadership emphasizes. This approach encourages decisions that followers can understand, adapt within their immediate systems and take forwards proactively and productively.

5.4.2 Engagement/involvement/interaction

The theme of understanding that leads to engagement was one of the intuitive concerns of all the participants. They clearly recognized its importance for them and for the organization. It is really an essential part of relational leadership and a leader's approach. Inclusion and collaboration cannot grow without leaders practising quality engagement with employees and the organizational context. It is a sign of how the group works together towards one purpose.

Understanding facilitates followers to air their views on the spot and participate in leading and decision-making. This enables the collective effort of leaders and followers to be catalysed, which is the avenue to discovering everyone's potential and paving the way for innovation. Engagement is mentioned in the literature in relation to relational leadership as it also fosters inclusiveness (Cleary et al., 2018; Komives et al., 1998). Leaders need to encourage learning environments that help

organizations to achieve their goals by encouraging deeper understanding (Komives et al., 1998). To achieve this, relational leadership emphasizes engagement to increase trust and trustworthiness, and this exchange of trust between leaders and followers is important for the positive and proactive interaction needed to achieve added value (Brower, Schoorman and Tan, 2000). Engagement promotes mutual understanding between leaders and followers as well as among everyone else, and strengthens the nexus between them. It fosters empathy, interest and attention, which intensify and focus energy. This creates a stronger connection between group members, which leads them to do things in more efficient, easier and quicker way.

All participants implicitly recognized the existence of, need for and impact of relationship between leaders and followers. Therefore, there is a relational purpose for both leaders and followers (Russell, 2003). However, over time this relationship may evolve positively or negatively depending on the relational purpose and how it gets nourished by the individual, group and context. Only when people are considered the first priority by their leaders and when those leaders do everything possible to support them, take care of them so they feel good about themselves, and establish a pleasant work climate will followers work willingly and beyond the mission target.

5.5 Cycle 3 discussion

Due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as quarantining and social distancing, alongside the University of Liverpool code of ethics and regulations, the face-to-face interviews and close observations were suspended after cycle 2. Moreover, due to the length of additional time needed and the uncertainty around the date when normal life would resume after the pandemic, an educated decision was made to gather and present data for the third cycle utilizing the rich information grasped from the written texts from the interviews conducted to date as a reflexive approach

I returned to the interviews from action research cycles 1 and 2 and looked for themes related to level 3 of relational leadership, and so cycle 3's emerged themes were inferred via a summative reflection on cycles 1 and 2.

Theme Matrix Table For Cycle 3			
Level 3 Influence of Relational L.	Respect	Generosity	Empowerment/ Involvement
	26	30	53

Table 5.2 Theme matrix

5.5.1 Respect/trust

Respectful relationships, where leaders offer empowerment and followers offer involvement in return, lead to a more focused and thoughtful business model that promotes efficiency beyond even the outcomes of the process-oriented mindset (Cleary et al., 2018; Komives et al., 1998). Respect may stand for trust as there is no trust without respect and vice versa. Respect and generosity are among

the very important themes that emerged under the influence of relational leadership construct. Respect is a focal point in treating people with the dignity they deserve.

Respect means you place value on people and what they do, so they exchange respect with you, with outcomes that depend on the amount they feel you expect from them: most of the time they will exert themselves to do extra to impress you. “Thank you” is a priceless phrase that energizes people to do more and more. This theme concerns the value of respect and generosity, which definitely contains an implicit power that boosts individual efficiency and outcomes. Cleary et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of relationship processes and behaviours such as paying attention to members through listening, showing respect and expressing interest, as well as reinforcing a respectful culture, treating individuals with equality regardless of rank and hierarchy, and expressing appreciation by offering acknowledgements that increase motivation.

It is therefore important to understand why and how leadership is really vital and that the evolving concept of relational leadership is an example of a kind of leadership where every participant starts to acknowledge their qualities, strengths and weaknesses, fostering points of strength and exploring them with the people they work with. This develops trust within the team, nourishing it and working with engagement and passion, paying attention to opportunities that they identify through involvement and interaction, and taking these opportunities in order to excel at what they like to do. Getting closer to the team through intervention, showing confidence and respect in them and showing them directly by words and indirectly by gestures that they are trustworthy, thereby building followers’ self-esteem, respect and morale, will increase support for intended tasks.

Relational leadership, therefore, fosters relationships between leaders and followers through trust and respect and has significant potential to improve the achievement of organizational targets through relationships with employees based on respect.

5.5.2 Generosity/facilitation

The role of a manager is to create collaborative engagement and facilitate emancipatory dialogue, leading to mutual learning and insightful understanding in action (Raelin, 2012). The manager facilitates free expression, inquiry and self-direction and encourages creativity while preserving dignity. The facilitator role is popular in relational leadership, and it is an alternative to command and control leadership; it is self-directed and empowering leadership that causes workers to feel autonomy in accepting decisions that affect them and in constructing reflection nourished by productive discourse and constructive dialogue facilitated by their leader. This process of collaborative dialogue is fostered through the application of five principles addressed in the work of Chrislip and Larson (1994), Hicks et al. (2008) and Raelin (2006):

1. Practise no judgemental inquiry, yet foster members’ competence, trust, and value.
2. Practise critical scrutiny based on free will.
3. Make sure that everyone has equal opportunity to influence decision-making.
4. Practise sincere conduct.
5. Reconstruct views based on new genuine reflection.

Relational leaders should express certain values or qualities such as authenticity, transparency, sincerity, humility and generosity. While authenticity, transparency, sincerity and humility are more qualities of facilitation, generosity requires leaders to adopt other values and approaches, such as trust, engaging with passion and energy, dedication, transforming opportunities, generating innovation and being open for collaboration, and empowerment. Relational leaders should understand that they cannot really empower other people such as followers or subordinates; they can only create the conditions that facilitate self-empowerment. Therefore, leaders may switch between the roles of consultant, facilitator, coach and coordinator, etc.

This leadership approach does not tend to focus on the leadership of the group as a whole but on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers (Raelin, 2011). It perceives leadership as a process and practice that is self-correcting (Raelin, 2011), in which leaders and followers reflect on their own and others' actions, reconstruct activities with mutual interest, listen and talk to each other, and engage and think together so that the group as a whole does the work.

5.5.3 Empowerment/sharing/autonomy

Empowerment behaviour from the leader, alongside involvement with followers, is one of the behaviours that all participants wish for from their leader or manager. It is an essential characteristic of relational leadership and a focal point of the leader's role (Uhl-Bien, 2006). True involvement is to be involved through both body and soul. If there is a project to be completed, the leader should combine their sweat with the sweat of followers, showing them how attentive they are, hand in hand across the line of the lead-time.

Followers need to know that you are there with them all the way, and hence that you as a leader are visible and approachable and that you have got their backs during a crisis or when they need you. This may require you to set a thin boundary line to prevent an over-involvement that would sabotage the relational approach, either embarrassing followers or creating a psychological burden for leaders. Thus, involvement, while assisting, should occur to the extent that is rational and right for both personal and work demands. On the other hand, leaders should approach followers with courtesy and not force themselves on them. Relational leadership makes leaders friendly but with work at the centre of the relationship, while keeping the thin boundary between being leaderful (Raelin, 2003) and leaderless. It is a question of balancing relational leaders' responsibility for their followers and followers' empowerment.

The psychological merging of self and team result in seeing oneself as similar to others, thereby reinforcing collective interest and empowerment. Hence, the relational approach focuses on interaction and involvement between individuals rather than merely their attributes. One of the big challenges to practising such leadership occurs when such a self-directed judgement or empowerment culture is not welcome in the organization's environment. The development of this style of leadership therefore requires an agent of change who encourages the endorsement of such a culture and who participates within the system to show how such a style of leadership increases team effectiveness. Such agents of change believe that empowered employees are great assets for organizations in delivering high performance and lessening pressure.

5.6 Conclusion

At the start of the research project, my intention was merely to change my followers' way of seeing things; now that my understanding of leadership has evolved, I have started to think more of adjusting my view as a manager and leader to align with theirs, so that our joint understanding can improve and grow deeper to allow a higher level of performance. This implies that the technical aspects may come later and default to what we both, leader and followers, agree on. However, projecting a new leadership style such as a relational leadership approach should fit different contexts through mutual understanding between leaders and participants. For instance, relational leadership can be perceived as an avenue to perfect traditional leadership so that it can be used intelligently, and assistively. Also, it can be perceived as being concerned to fill the gap between good and bad traditional practice by developing the normal and rational positive relationship between leaders and followers to lessen authority and reliance on hierarchy, to enable independent performance and the taking on of responsibility by followers to make tailored decisions across many situations through negotiated understanding. Therefore, leaders and participants can best decide in every situation what the best action is. So, relational leadership, leadership-as-practice or leaderful practice, etc., is a realization or reflection of more developed leadership that suits the organizational context better through reflexive understanding.

At the beginning of the thesis research journey, I assumed that the change target was other people, and mainly followers – that is, that the change would be bottom up. However, I ended up finding that the change required was top down, and that I as a practitioner leader needed to make the most change myself. My understanding of leadership has increased in depth and breadth, my attitude towards dealing with others has changed, and I have become keener to pursue relational and co-action relationships with employees. I found a solid trajectory that would enable people to boost organizational efficiency, effectiveness, and employee morale. Pursuing relational and co-action relationships, which put human and social identity at the core of leadership, answers the question of what else can be done to solve complex workplace problems. As a result, I realized the emergent need for a humanistic approach to leadership that facilitates and empowers followers, and in addition, for research that revolves around the work environment, leadership style, and the influence of relational leadership.

It made me more engaged with employees and with my practice to answer why, what, and how questions critically, so that I became more of a relational leader and improved the work environment. Participants had the chance to question their leader, making thoughtful conversation and listening compassionately. With more empowerment, they showed they can cope with any tough challenges, and give back and commit to the mission with their sense of self energizing and motivating them. So, as a practitioner and manager I have pursued scholarly inquiry to develop knowledge and awareness that boost efficiency, effectiveness, and a healthy work climate, and I have set out a framework for a focused training programme. After intervention, the results witnessed include the following:

1. Efficiency, effectiveness: a higher output than usual was maintained.
2. Absenteeism was lower.

3. The mood of the participants had changed positively: they became more motivated, and more open and willing to talk about issues and challenges and suggest new ways of doing things to create improvement.
4. Supervisors observed an ease in communication with participants.
5. Problem solving in the workplace was improved by empowering participants.
6. Participants became better at time management, less scrap was generated, and operations were more cost-effective.

This chapter discussed the emerged themes along with their associated elements, with the construct of work environment and working relationships representing the crux of participants' experiences of leadership. This chapter also discussed participants' perceptions of leadership, relational leadership and leader characteristics, as well as the influence of the relational leadership approach on participants.

In the next chapter I will discuss the thematic relational concept developed by my research with respect to my work practice, and which has influenced my mindset, understanding and belief personally and professionally. This new understanding led me to highlight a new leadership proposal for my workplace as actionable knowledge.

Chapter VI: Actionable Knowledge

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the developed material founded at my work place, via intervention and action research processes led to an emergence of a proposed leadership perspective for my workplace. It presents an actionable proposal that offers a workable implementation derived from the action research and data findings. It also presents the implications of the implementation and how this proposal can be used at my workplace and potentially more widely in Saudi Arabia or similar cultures in the Middle East. The chapter presents the thematic relational concept and how participants' actions can be geared to their engagement in a cohesive model to produce synergistic outcomes with the flexibility and reflexivity that evolve in a more emancipatory context. This concept should develop the knowledge and awareness required to ensure the development of greater efficacy and effectiveness, as well as a healthy work environment to increase satisfaction and instigate motivation. The concept offers a summary of a framework opportunity for my organization to develop a training programme or vocational roadmap to attest to an alternative work set-up and leadership. It can also be transformed into a focused training programme to put into practice the study findings that were developed via narration.

The goal is to provide a competitive edge to my organization by transcending trends and conventional wisdom with innovative human source development. The company should increase the depth of its engagement practice to help produce deeper and new understanding by practising keen observation of how employees talk, behave and make conversation with one another. In addition, the company should reward employees through relational care proportionate to their diligence, by measuring reality against the wishes that participants conveyed to me during interviews. The influence of relational leadership is clear, although it is implicit it creates a positive atmosphere in which the leader can have an impact on followers' actions. Tangible influence may be developed by a leader's status and position, forged in the power that inherently preserves traditional leadership and authority. However, the great meaning of influence comes from the aura of a leader, cultivated by their relational attitude and in the relationships they establish with followers. This influence of relational leadership urges positive change and extra efforts towards value-added outcomes. This is unlike traditional leadership, where power carries coercive force, which devastates human relationships, as used throughout history by males or masculine powers.

Therefore, the relational perspective is considered a feminine leadership style: one that requires a lot of patience and nurturing, which women normally have the courage to use. It should not be mistaken for powerlessness, but it should involve using power or role power sensibly, in collaboration, as shared power. It is power *with* followers not power *over* them; this is very clear in the style of the leader leading by example.

6.2 Leadership as actionable dialogue

Dialogue should be used to create interaction between contradictory and multiple voices (Lyotard, 1984), as an endpoint of the dialogue process and engagement rather than a starting point (Tsoukas, 2009). Relational leaders thus ought to utilize emancipatory dialogue to break down bureaucracy and the chains that impede participants' breakthroughs in learning and growth, and to do better in terms

of participants' peace of mind, self-esteem and human condition. Hence, narrative forms of inquiry such as narrative text or ethnographic descriptive methods are a better fit for exploring such leadership practice (Weick, 1989); these are the forms that I used, where the researcher's role is to facilitate observation to become an inquirer in the workplace, adhering to rational ontology while practising reflective emancipatory processes that are subject to scrutiny. Thus, alternative perspectives on leadership, such as that of leaderful leadership, encourage participants to participate in leadership as interested parties so they collectively reflect on their problems to develop effective solutions and initiatives, and this context is facilitated through democratic expression and shared engagement (Woods, 2004), whereas conventionally it is the leader who directs change or mobilizes the change activity, with the organization always in motion. Thus, I have pursued this perspective in my journey to discover more about it in the literature as well as in the real world around me, for personal reasons, and for professional purposes with the people at my workplace.

The interviews provided me and the participants with the opportunity to discuss honestly the workplace climate, leadership styles, and relationships between leaders and followers. I was really surprised by the impact of some of the themes I discovered during the research, which I had overlooked before. I am really thankful for all the participants, who made me see clearly issues I had been taking for granted throughout my career. Some of these issues are lessons learned, such as the following: how important it is for leaders to balance flexibility and resoluteness; how, when a leader engages by lending a hand and facilitating the workplace by creating a pleasant climate, and providing workmates with what they need, followers' energy will be fostered, enabling them to cope with any tough challenges; how important it is for a leader to create one collective vision, a purpose and relationship links by recognizing the sense of self that drives followers to go further; and how leadership that is based on giving help professionally or personally, and even merely compassionately listening, is a powerful cure for followers so that they extend their respect, give back, and are committed to the mission. I also learned from participants that leadership is really an exchange of help and value. Therefore, I was very surprised to discover that followers are not asking for much from leaders to increase their willingness to comply with the required outcomes, and will even exceed those expectations if leaders just act relationally.

6.3 Reflection on the findings as a contribution

The research findings emphasize the reality of complex organizational leadership, which resides in making change by solving problems or making further improvements. It resides also in the perspective that leadership is a complex relationship system, and leadership is relational among leaders, followers and context. Relational leadership is characterized by distinct behaviours relating to what most concerns and fits a particular environment, climate, culture or human development process, all of which is based on human reality, and qualities that lead to efficiency, efficacy and agility. This empirical understanding of relational leadership interaction may be considered a CAS that mimics the behaviour of shoals of fish or flocks of birds when observed in nature, which is not a simple linear leader–follower relationship nor a simple circular leader–follower relationship; rather, it is an epicyclical or planetary relationship:

Simple Linear Leader-Follower Relationship

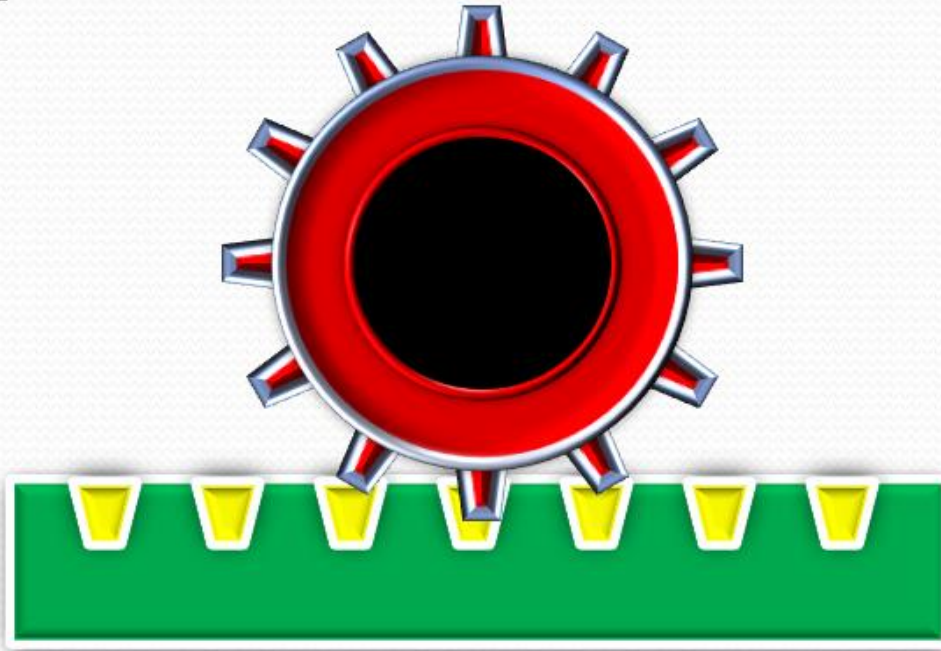


Figure 6.1 Simple linear leader–follower relationship

Simple Circular Leader-Follower Relationship

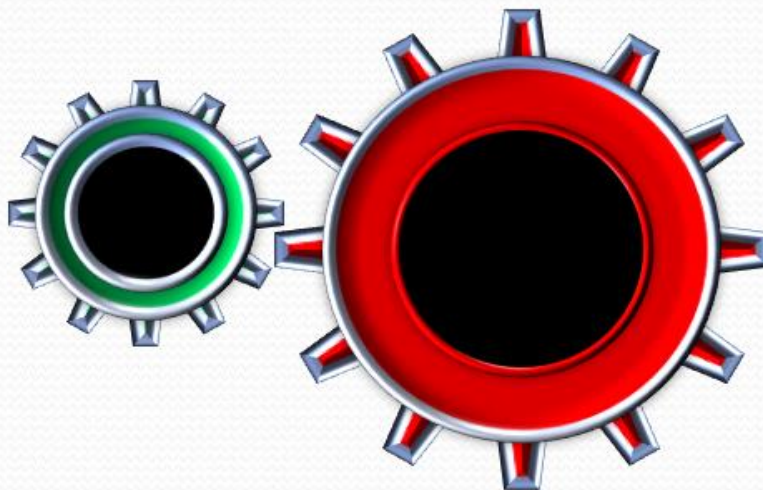


Figure 6.2 Simple circular leader–follower relationship

Whereas:

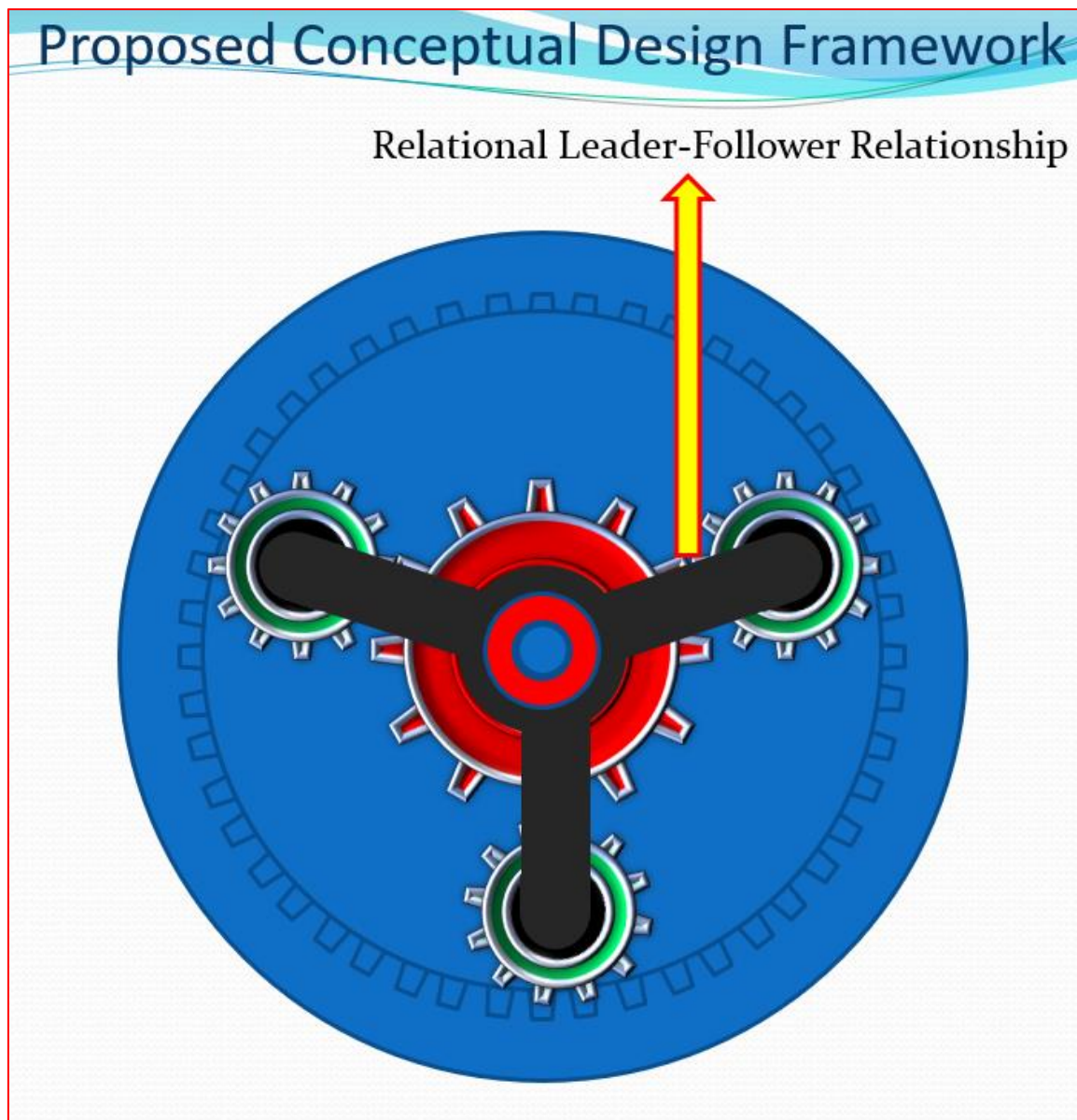


Figure 6.3 Relational leader–follower relationship: proposed conceptual design framework

Figure 6.3 presents the epicyclical or planetary design of gearing or transmission. It is an advanced understanding of leadership relationship interaction, unlike the direct and simple linear or circular gearing that only partially explains the relationship between followers and leaders. In the simple understanding of leadership, relationships happen based on the power of the leader, who is the only driver for the whole system, driving mostly in one direction, and at one speed – as simple as that. However, relational leadership mimics planetary gearing, where the system is rather complex, and where the direction can be forward or reverse. On one hand, the driving is normally in the hands of the leader – but leads to indirect engagement with followers and enables effectiveness. On the other hand, the context or followers can also be the driver, which allows them to set the direction, level of agility and speed, and also enables efficiency. Moreover, sets of these systems can be combined by connecting followers in different sets to create a more complex system, which enables the addition of more directions and speeds, and more powerful execution and diversity from input to output. This is

all possible through the influence of relational leadership between leaders, followers and context, who can all truly drive or be driven in the whole system. The key words in the working of this complex system are smoothness in agility, effectiveness and efficiency, which balance the relational relationship that empowers individuals to bounce back freely to keep on track, goal and purpose.

I have responded in practice by promoting a training programme designed to improve the relationships of all stakeholders in order to gear up organizational effectiveness. This is intended to achieve sustainability and growth to solve complex issues, for example increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and agility in seasons of low demand. The conceptual framework training programme is meant to improve participants' work environment and social climate, so that they comprehend better their opportunities to solve problems, and empower their judgment and decision-making, promoting a higher level of interaction and collaboration. It presents guidelines and generates feedback for better reasoning to support internal change and transition in leadership towards more humanistic leadership. The action plan of research outcomes for the organization clearly fosters relational leader–follower relationships and relational follower–context relationships, as well as enhancing the context, leaders' range of power (they can drive or be driven), and follower rapport. All of these promote comfort, collaboration, facilitative leadership, care, understanding, engagement, respect, generosity, empowerment, and involvement.

Implementing the training programme in the suggested conceptual framework has led to progress towards achieving sustainability in my workplace. It highlights a new leadership proposal for my workplace that emphasizes the reality of complex organizational leadership, which helps in making change by solving problems or making further improvements. The epicyclical or planetary design of gearing displays an advanced understanding that leadership relationships reside in interaction and relationship. This promotes engagement with followers and enables effectiveness in work processes. Also, either the context or the followers can take the lead, which allows them to set the direction, level of agility, and speed, and which enables efficiency. This ensures the influence of relational leadership between leaders, followers, and context, who can all truly drive or be driven across the whole system, leading to balanced relationships that empower individuals to bounce back freely to keep them on track with their goals and purpose.

This also secures employee autonomy to work passionately, in an enjoyable work environment and a social, innovative emergent climate that increases efficiency and efficacy. This humanitarian relations leadership style makes people want to go to work as to a haven, to find peace and inspiration, securing the productivity, sustainability, and growth of organizations and creating avenues for creativity and innovation, rather than merely downsizing and cutting costs.

Through the research study and action cycle, I witnessed the need for and benefits of such a perspective to enhance productivity and efficiency, as intervening and interacting with participants increased their morale and energy. The company saw the difference in production efficiency and achievement reports. The event supporting this conclusion is the mood change in participants from the first to the second interview. I observed how participants became appreciative and willing to talk about their issues and challenges, confront change and suggest new ways of improvement. Also, the daily and monthly reports showed improvement in production achievement and efficiency, and supervisors noticed an ease in communication when exploring relational leadership behaviour. The company can improve the situation by empowering employees, focusing on relational leadership,

getting close to the workforce, supporting them, and facilitating them generously with reasonable working hours, less travel time, more incentives, a better work environment and climate, pleasant accommodation for rest and breaks, food supplies, more flexibility in working hours, rewards or kind gestures, healthcare, care for their families and any related issues or problems to ensure their peace of mind, opportunities to grow, education and visibility.

This conceptualizing diagram provides management with a framework plan that is easy to practise, enables learning, increases satisfaction and solves complex issues. The conceptual findings can support the organization's employees to gain more insightful information and make better decisions and perform better. The actionable vision presented in the proposed framework for learning processes assumes significant achievement of organizational productivity and efficiency, as well as higher satisfaction overall, from adopting relational leadership practice rather than control and demand leadership. The action research study confirmed through interviews and observation that managements that focus on the inferred effective themes of organization can achieve greater overall understanding that is facilitated through dialogue and an insightful conversational context, helping them to deal with their complex problems and issues better than conventional leadership practice. Therefore, the proposal of the conceptual framework is meant to improve participants' work environment and social climate so that they comprehend better their activities for solving problems and empower their decision-making and risk assessment while analysing data through a process of exploration, information, synthesis and actualization of knowledge. For instance, the proposed framework enables the promotion of higher-level interaction between participating leaders and followers and their facts and environment, allowing human-information interaction to produce better outcomes for improvement and for solving complex workplace issues and moving from single-loop understanding to the double-loop and triple-loop understanding needed to break through difficult situations and create opportunities.

The evidence also indicates that the participants gained and showed a higher level of motivation to work in interactions through relational practice, compared to those of control and demand leadership. The significance of this result is that it suggests that the proposed conceptual relational framework can be used as a context to improve participants' capability to utilize deeper knowledge and understanding and manipulate information meaningfully in order to solve problems. As shared power and dialogue enhances knowledge creation and participants' autonomy, participants become more efficient at finding out key areas of focus and the information required to deal with complex issues.

Therefore, the proposed conceptual design framework helps to trigger an effective and defined focus area for a successful employee engagement plan with actionable goals, skills and practices. The engagement plan will be facilitated through dialogue, questioning, airing concerns, and encouragement throughout the transition period while intervening for evaluation and adjusting if necessary. The suggested work plan for the training is derived from the proposed conceptual design framework and represented in the following cogs or constructs to be geared up:

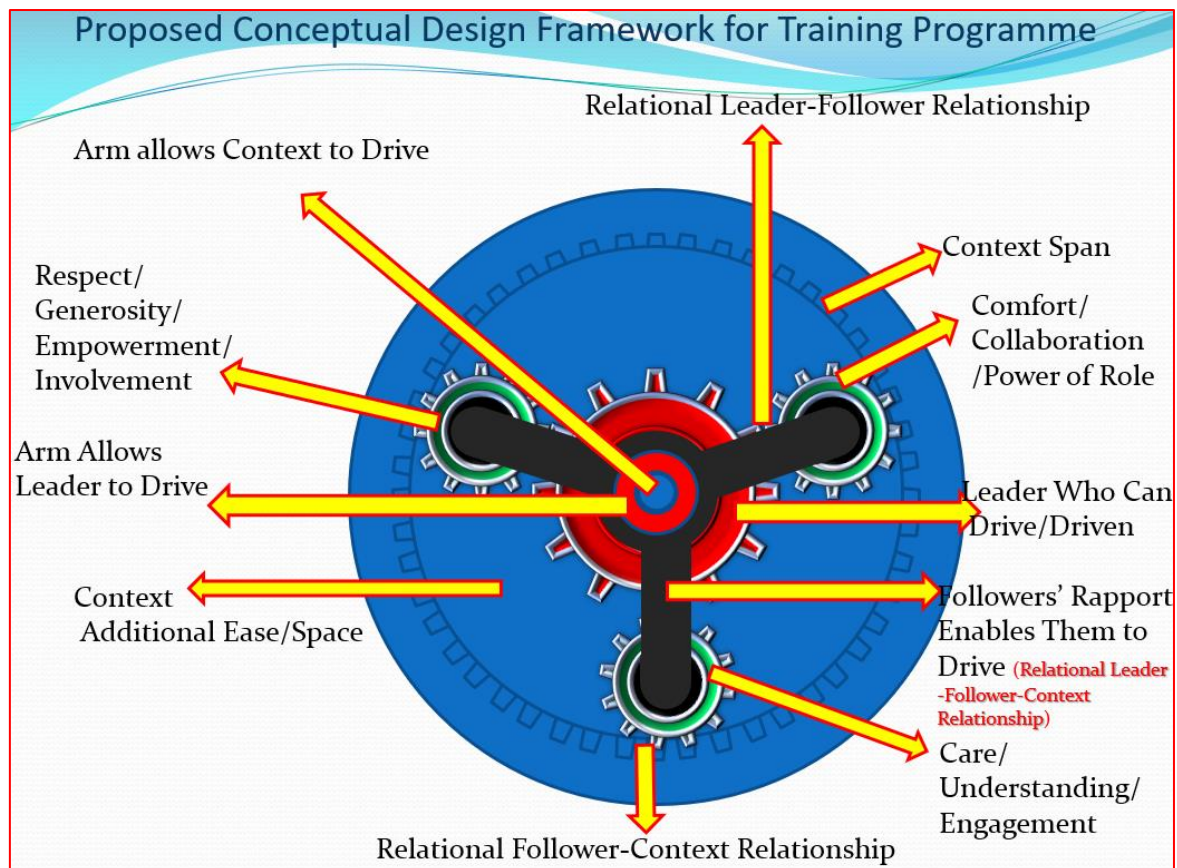


Figure 6.4 Relational leader–follower relationship: proposed conceptual design framework for training programme (relational through an underpinning CAS)

6.4 Conclusion

- A. The focus on the organization's main goal and purpose represented in the central arm in Figure 6.4, above, allows context to drive smoothly.
- B. The focus is on promoting participants' relationships – relational leader–follower relationships – with the understanding that leaders can drive, but leaders can also be driven by followers. Indirect power is thus exercised, where followers are empowered on the basis of relational or leaderful practice to make decisions.
- C. A context that offers a safe, healthy and comfortable space for participants, as a pleasant work climate, is facilitated by hand-in-hand collaboration with leader role power.
- D. Efficiency, efficacy and satisfaction can also be boosted at my workplace by facilitating training based on care, understanding and engagement, where engagement can be achieved in different ways to enable agility, flexibility and reflexivity.
- E. The final suggested focus area for the training programme is to increase the understanding and awareness of emergent themes that influence participants' motivation to do more, which is related to respect, generosity and involvement.

Learning can be measured aggregately through daily and monthly reports on production achievement, scrap generation, rework, absenteeism, productivity and effectiveness, which can give an organization an indication of progression and the success of alternative leadership. This should all reflect end user satisfaction in a dynamic environment. Employees should always be asked directly for their feedback, what influences them, what they need more of and what can be changed, as concrete training develops the workforce to lead the organization better and towards a better future for the company. The purpose of actionable training is to ensure the learning and development of new skills and insights for employees to practise in their lives and at their workplace. Actionable learning enables employees to learn a skill or theory and apply it. This means that the learning context should be relatable and interactive, using references and metaphors to accompany lessons of real-life examples or challenges. All of this encourages employees to take action and seize learning opportunities, and gives them a flexible space to formulate ideas and apply them to develop and transform their work and their role in the workplace through a process of knowledge building, for example through descriptive analytics when forming meaningful trends; diagnostic analytics for reasoning trends; predictive analytics, using historical data to predict what will happen; and prescriptive analytics to recommend interventions.

Thus, the information highlighted in the suggested conceptual framework and developed through performance data and research engagement should be transformed through training into actionable tasks and roles guided by personalized, effective and proactive intervention.

In the next chapter I present a summary of the research study, the research problem, what I learned in relation to the research question, the contributions of this study and its limitations and implications, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the research study, the research problem, what I learned in relation to the research question, the contributions of this study and its limitations and implications, and suggestions for future research.

This thesis had the aim of exploring whether relational leadership, a new, alternative perspective on leadership I have learned through my studies, would help in a problematic situation. I wanted to try to produce fresh insight into the way we look at leadership at my organization, which is accustomed merely to the conventional kinds of leadership, such as command and control, that dominate our culture. Hence, the research approach was intended to make the targeted work group more efficient by granting them more control and power to follow their own judgements and decisions. This triggered a change in the work group's ways of thinking, boosting production efficiency and efficacy, prompting them to interact more often, and closely facilitating our emergent practice to develop a better work environment and explore the self-directed team theory by sharing authority among all members of the team to enable a collective and collaborative view of doing things. The purpose of the study was therefore to look at the implications of the adoption of a relational leadership style, conceptualized using three constructs of a CAS framework, in a Middle Eastern context and utilizing action research.

Because we are dealing with human and social dynamic identity, our ability to control whether that identity works innovatively and efficiently, or how it gets influenced, is limited. So, with appreciation of the dynamic nature of human practice and how the idea of facilitatory and dialogical leadership fits with it, this research study was intended to find out the powerful connection between environmental working conditions, leadership and worker behaviour and key elements that influence their outcomes or productivity and morale, while studying the social dynamics of employees' behaviours that result from interaction and relationship. This understanding enables us to highlight the practical social structure and processes of my workplace in line with the work environment social support and facilitation required to solve problems. Thus, the types of behaviour we should pay attention to are emotional behaviour and social behaviour, which consist of conduct and actions exhibited by employees within the workplace and society during rough times, e.g. where the complex problems and issues of my workplace emerge, regarding production efficiency, effectiveness and morale of employees. The problem-solving activities of command and control or conventional leadership are not producing solid solutions for the status quo, causing a great deal of inefficiency and unproductivity that have a negative impact on organizations' survival and growth. What I found was that most of the existing trajectories to solve the complex problems at my workplace had focused on theoretical, practical techniques and technology that have a tendency merely to advance the conventional style of leadership in a quantitative direction, negating the dynamic nature of human practice.

In contrast, relational leadership fosters the socio-material aspects of leadership through the organizational setting, where it critiques heroic and leader-centred management and instead promotes co-relationism and engagement management (Cox and Hassard, 2018). Therefore, relational leadership is a powerful motivational tool that motivates employees' work behaviour at all stages of idea generation, promotion and realization (Akram et al, 2016).

I aimed in the research study to produce workable knowledge tailored to my workplace to confront and resolve its complex issues via this new leadership perspective that challenges existing workplace norms of values and beliefs in the context of the application of this action research. The findings are not simply a narration of a series of events but also contain reflections on them through a process of interpretation and implication. The goal, then, was to find out the influence of the new perspective on leadership on participants and the workplace; to develop a conceptual framework focusing on the new key thematic leadership values and beliefs to offer an edge drawing for problem-solving activity to support both followers and leaders; and to facilitate the workplace context and climate to produce higher-level insights and processes to trigger better decision-making. Therefore, action research cycles were set up to capture meaningful data throughout the intervention through interviews, observation and use of focus groups. The research study employed a qualitative methodology to construct a holistic conceptual framework. Through an integrated understanding of relational perspective theories, such as leaderful practice, leadership-as-practice, LMX, CAS, etc., where the literature introduces shared power, self-direction, self-motivation, and self-empowerment (e.g. Cleary et al., 2018; Komives et al., 1998; Maturana and Varela, 1987; Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012), I have produced a description of my objectives, which I present in the next section.

I would like to emphasize that exploring, researching or practising relational leadership necessitates mainly practising empowerment. Hence, whenever I mention relational leadership, I envisage mainly empowerment. Therefore, whenever relational leadership is mentioned, it implies the use of empowerment practice, as it is the crux of the thesis.

7.2 Objectives

The research objectives were addressed thematically and generated in a code template for analysis. This was done by interviewing participants and observing focus groups to examine relational leadership theory at my workplace. A research study framework was proposed to solve targeted workplace problems by driving attention to the dynamic nature of human practice and how this idea in particular of facilitatory and dialogical leadership influences individual outcomes and the influence of the emerged themes. This helps to confront values and beliefs when looking into problems and issues and attempting to resolve them from another perspective, and it helps in developing theoretical knowledge and exploring professional practice in depth, and increasing understanding of research problems, research skills and knowledge that refine thinking (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). One of the objectives, also, was to answer questions on what approaches offer an effective way to solve the complex problems we face in times of low demand and the negative influences they have that the command and control leadership approach cannot tackle efficiently and effectively. Themes were extrapolated in a conceptual framework that offers a training plan focused on suggested areas for strengthening resolution of such complex issues, prompting participants and managers to capture and appreciate these new findings and approaches to make change happen.

7.2.1 Reflection

I am offering my actionable knowledge framework plan to help others in similar or different national and organizational contexts. Implementing it would require top management to give adequate time and commitment: this plan cannot be partial or contingent. The growth that I observed in my role resulted from the increasing depth and breadth of my understanding of leadership approaches, and from my new reflection and the changes in my own attitude towards dealing with others, as I became

keener to pursue relational and co-action relationships. I am no longer bossy – at home, in public or at work. I criticize my own conduct and behaviour before I look to criticize others.

7.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

The following presents the limitations of the research on leadership as a relational perspective. Limitations are addressed as much as possible considering my own experience.

I should stress that my study has been primarily concerned with a Saudi organization. The proposed conceptual framework was developed to tackle complex problems at a Saudi organization, which is a particular work environment culture dominated by command and control leadership. My analysis, which has concentrated on a tailored conceptual framework, may not be exactly applicable for other cultures, but that offers the opportunity for further studies by researchers. Caution should be exercised when generalizing findings to other cultural situations. Needless to say, the research subject is broad in scope, but the purpose was to produce findings that cover the key themes of relational leadership in my particular workplace. However, each of these themes is large enough to justify a research study on its own, focusing on it to produce much deeper investigation. For instance, a future study could focus exclusively on information related to the work environment that affects participant motivation.

The objective of the proposed conceptual framework is to address key themes that effectively support problem-solving activities in complex situations through a process of exploration, reasoning or analysis, prediction and decision-making. Observations and data collected during the first and second cycles, juxtaposed with my experience, led to a reflexive conclusion on the opportunity and use of the proposal, yet it does not cover the process of confronting and testing the results of the training programme. The analysis of the data collected from participants expressed in the proposed conceptual framework supports participants in work activities including problem-solving and decision-making, and the proposed framework addresses the improvement of participants' morale and attitudes. Also, improvements in work effectiveness and productivity were reflected quantitatively in the monthly cumulative reports. This all helps in answering the research question of whether there are other ways to handle periods of low demand, a complex problem at my organization.

As noted above, the study was conducted in a Saudi organization, and caution should be exercised when generalizing findings to other organizations and cultural situations that may have different philosophical orientations. However, my findings may give hints of key areas to be revisited by similar organizations in this regard, beyond the limitations of the present study. I also acknowledge that using a small sample in the study may be considered a limitation.

7.4 Research implications

This section focuses on developing the implications of the study findings to help future practitioners and scholars pay attention to them. It presents the implications of the research on leadership as a relational perspective. In addition, it addresses the implications of practising relational leadership from the perspectives of both leaders and followers. Implications are addressed as much as possible considering my own experience.

Relational leadership's interventional approach fosters leaders' ability to enact effective interpersonal intervention in work groups and work climates to promote social awareness, positive intention and proactive action (Fiset, 2014).

Adopting relational leadership, where no single individual is fully in control of the total outcomes, shifts leaders' actions towards participatory leadership. This view of leading requires leaders to be great givers and great receivers, such as being good listeners and good speakers where dialogue is essential. This leadership perspective is a better fit for complex problems requiring varied, interconnecting areas of knowledge and conduct, utilizing values such as appreciation, cooperation, collaboration, freedom of movement or flexibility, engagement, empowerment, power sharing and generation of ideas and skills, as well as facilitation of the workplace, in order to share one clear, meaningful knowledge set, understanding and purpose. Hence, the research study was meant to shed light on how this new perspective on organizational culture was perceived, how this leadership style can best be tailored to suit organizational practice, and to suggest a conceptual framework for a training programme, to find out the powerful connection between environmental working conditions and worker behaviour and key elements that influence their outcomes or productivity and morale, while studying the social dynamics of employees' behaviours that result from interaction and relationship. This was intended to highlight the practical social structure and processes of my workplace in line with the work environment social support and facilitation required to solve problems. The types of behaviour we should pay attention to are emotional behaviour and social behaviour, which consist of conduct and actions exhibited by employees within the workplace and society, in order to tackle complex organizational problems such as alienation, monotony and dysfunctionality.

My study offers suggestive evidence for the findings that supports the understanding of the importance of leadership impact built on co-relation between leaders and followers and of relationship that leads to the creation of a pleasant, enthusiastic and inspiring workplace climate. The study appears to support the argument for a change in leadership approach; however, findings in the literature inform us that leaders who attempt to use leadership embodied through co-relation should be aware of the depth of its humanitarian approach, hand in hand with the thin boundary between being flexible and resolute. I have conducted this action research using six experienced employees' reflections and also my own. On the face of it, this would suggest that the inferred themes are important factors in participants' outcomes and morale; the findings are assisted by their stories in providing valuable enlightenment on leadership and the alternative approach of relational leadership, which presents a whole new perspective that contrasts with the dominant culture of command and control leadership. If the tentative conclusions of my study are confirmed by participants' views and actions, then there will be a case for this research to encourage those at my workplace and in the country as a whole to discuss the potential benefits of attempting this more compassionate and genuine form of leadership that matches the purpose of organizations and the dignity of human beings. I have observed and witnessed participants' sense-making of such leadership and their agreement with it. I also believe that ignoring such an alternative leadership perspective has negatively impacted our growth, both professionally and culturally. Thus, this ignorance has affected employees' motivation, satisfaction, learning, development and loyalty at large.

The research has explored leaders' and followers' perspectives on relational leadership, and how its characteristics are perceived and interpreted. Awareness of leadership as relational was significant for all participants. So, as this research has considered the views of followers on relational leadership alongside the views of leaders, this gives us a better picture of the nature of relationships between leaders and followers and between followers and others. It is apparent that followers differ in how they react and how they envisage a positive work environment and develop working relationships,

which means that relational leaders should follow their instincts in evolving styles of leadership that fit their particular followers. I have documented participants' stories, preserving accuracy as far as possible. I was very keen during interpretation to allow themes to emerge from interviews prior to drawing any comparative inferences from the literature. Triangulation was used to serve the credibility and validity of findings. More than one present leader and follower were selected to participate in interviews and focus group discussion, assisted by observations during interviews at my office and during their regular work, as well as interactions at their regular workplace. This created an opportunity for participants to express their interest in what was being researched and in the findings, thus increasing their awareness of relational leadership and learning processes, which was one of the goals of this research. The research also gave me the chance to enrich my knowledge and reflect on leadership and my own leadership as a relational process, utilizing the high-quality conversations with all participants and the valuable experience of retelling their stories.

The accessibility and boundaries of relational leadership practice are a controversial area of discussion that is out of the scope of the present research; however, all participants agreed on the importance of leader involvement, engagement and availability. Without research into workplace relationships, it would not be possible to find the key factors that have a deep impact on participants. Hence, this study recommends organizations adopt relational leadership for the development of stronger ties between leaders and followers. During the action research, several new questions popped up as a result of the broadened horizon of understanding of the subject and related issues. These questions are worth researching themselves, and I think possible areas for further research include female viewpoints and those of newly hired employees and more senior employees, different company contexts, and different areas of Saudi Arabia.

The framework is the result of the integration of theoretical and actionable knowledge derived from action research involving experienced leaders and followers. The research study's conceptual framework can be used as a reference to save organizational management the time and effort of searching in vain. Future research might usefully focus in particular on training and implementation of the findings of this research study. One avenue for further study would be empirical research to validate the proposed framework model or some of its focus areas in order to revise or refine it. For example, the following questions can be investigated:

- What are the key elements in workplace comfort?
- Can we separate collaboration from dialogue?
- Can we separate engagement from involvement or interaction?
- Can we separate respect from trust?
- Is facilitation the same as generosity?
- What is the proper mix of empowerment, sharing and autonomy?

The research study contains the details of how the proposed conceptual framework's key themes interacted in tangible activities. The research study can be helpful as an introduction to understand what is required, such as the implications of implementing relational leadership practice at my workplace in Saudi Arabia.

I have concluded that ignoring the relational leadership perspective has negatively impacted our growth, professionally and culturally; I concluded this when interviewing participants and observing, when I got close to them, how this affected employees' morale. The evidence to support this was inferred from their happiness while talking about work issues and empowerment, as well as their consequent willingness to do more, which by default results in satisfaction and loyalty.

I addressed the research objectives thematically and generated a code template for analysis by interviewing participants and observing real focus groups, integrating questions to be asked or items to be observed that were highlighted in the literature and in research and which supported the theory of empowerment or relational leadership. The study findings have summative key areas or themes that drive the study's aim of progress towards care, comfort, respect, generosity, engagement, understanding and dialogue. The themes present in the findings are specific to Saudi manufacturing organizations' work culture and particularly to my organization. But in general, the surprising finding is that Eastern cultural organizations have the same positive impression of empowerment theory as Western cultural organizations. The theoretical relational leader–follower relationship conceptual design framework I have drawn supports these findings.

The practical and managerial implications are the need to revisit this leadership approach and especially to emphasize relational leadership as an avenue to energize employees and solve problems. The study findings can be transferred to similar contexts, especially contexts grounded very much in command and control, like most Saudi manufacturing contexts. The study and findings were not free, of course, of the influence of political, economic, technological and sociocultural factors; I have tried my best to provide sufficient information about my workplace and research context to enable managers from similar organizations to assess whether my findings are relevant to them, and I have attached more in the appendices, recommending managers and leaders to revisit their leadership approach.

7.5 Contribution

This research study provides a glimpse of actionable data on the activities influencing relational leadership in a work culture dominated by command and control leadership practice. Changing leadership from the command and control approach to a relational approach enables organizations to tackle complex problems that put them at risk of losing opportunities to grow and develop. The envisaged conceptual framework produced by this research study can be used to trigger intellectual discussion on adopting relational leadership more in declining organizations managed by command and control leadership, to help them survive and find new opportunities to replenish or rejuvenate themselves. We conducted action research at my workplace with six employees, to trigger discussion and dialogue on leadership styles, presenting the relational perspective as a leadership approach where employees are empowered and motivated to do more, better and in a better way. The actions of empowerment, discussion, dialogue, observation and interviews with the six employees in the focus group were intended to derive insights into key areas that raise their spirits to gear up organizational innovative force. Moreover, the proposed training programme's key thematic focuses can effectively support such qualitative intent to target workforce efficiency and effectiveness, and instigate innovative insight. It is also important for researchers and leaders to develop measurable targets for mentoring to evaluate whether the training programme matches the outcomes of the proposed conceptual framework. The proposed conceptual framework can be a useful contribution to

participants' understanding in all different phases of data processes involving complex problematic situations.

The research study has provided actionable data using an actual workplace and actual focus group employees. I experimented with relational leadership throughout the research and got positive outcomes on employees' self-esteem and productivity. The study findings indicated a training programme I have discussed it with senior managers. Nonetheless, it was a lesson that has impacted my own leadership practice and attitude, which has encouraged me to view my own leadership and management context within the wider education field and has provided a wealth of resources on various leadership styles and alternative approaches. I examined these alternatives in depth while researching my literature review and methodology, when I became fascinated with them, and I saw my leadership approach change during the action research, both personally and professionally. My study findings contribute to supporting relational theory and have aided my workplace practice of the alternative leadership approach and particular key themes that can be considered for practitioner knowledge and future academic research avenues.

Undertaking this research study has been an invaluable learning experience. I have gained ample understanding of the nature of research and of the cyclical nature of the research process. This research study has also provided some key ideas that have helped me examine my own professional values, and guidelines for possible changes to my own practice. The research process has also encouraged me to view my own leadership and management context within the wider educational field and has provided a wealth of resources from which I can learn in order to improve my personal, social and work environments.

I was blessed to have observed and interviewed these great employees, who agreed to share with me their stories regarding their work environment, challenges, perceptions of leadership and views of relational leadership. Listening to them without judgement enabled the flow of information that richly and positively impacted my knowledge of leadership and leadership as a relational process, hand in hand with my literature review. The research journey has been an exceptional experience that has deepened my awareness of leadership and has been an exploration of the humanitarian alternative of relational leadership. Action research allowed me to learn abundantly about relational leadership, our workplace environment, our workplace leaders and followers, and about myself in all of that. Indeed, I have learned a lot about myself and my leadership approach: interpreting the themes that emerged has impacted me by causing me to recognize how much I should be aware of the depth of the alternative views of leadership. It really has been a unique experience that has enriched my awareness of leadership and of leadership as a relational process, as a leader and as a person. I have discovered new areas I had been overlooking or taking for granted, for example leadership characteristics, followers' and leaders' behaviours, and the workplace environment, all of which have increased my awareness throughout the participants' storytelling. I was really blessed by their participation and true insights that enabled me to discover a lot about leadership and myself. For instance, you do not intend to acquire a collective view if you have already reached a conclusion. When you intend to listen to followers you really should be listening, and when you interact, you should interact with care like you really mean it.

I encountered difficulties while in the dual scholar-practitioner role, being both the decision-maker, as the manager normally is in our common work culture, and whom we hold responsible for

ramifications and execution outcomes, and the scholar, who wants to critique and rethink common views, value and beliefs. For example, it was not easy to let go of power and empower the work focus group, and they would not accept this easily themselves. We all felt out of our comfort zones, in fear of change and the unknown. I tried to balance these roles by getting close to participants slowly and politely. I started by getting to know them better, via work issues and personal subjects such as their families. I got really involved in how they think and work while practising my managerial role, which was instilled with more relational leadership thanks to my research.

Relational leadership is one of the new, alternative perspectives and a model of action to address complex problems and solve them by facilitating and constructing critical reflection that requires self-consciousness to create reflexivity, rather than merely reflection, in action rather than on action, double and triple loop rather than a superficial single loop, and in depth rather than breadth. That is, “parathetically rather than hypothetically” (Raelin, 1999). I also used my experience, intuition and knowledge as a researcher and manager to confront my workplace’s complex issues, driving participants to start seeing things differently from how they have always seen them. Thus, simplicity is not an approach that by itself can replace complexity. The essence is to make the complexity deep inside any complex system look nice and simple when seen from the outside. For instance, human beings have very complicated cells and organs inside us; however, they look very simple and neat when seen from the outside. So, when scrutinizing the inside of a complex system such as an organization in order to learn how to make it work, it becomes clear that relational leadership is a great avenue for gearing up organizational processes (cogs) cohesively towards action in a CAS. This leads to enhanced efficiency, effectiveness and agility for any organization that intends to change. The primary benefits of the relational approach are the ability to construct meaningful information through engagement and interaction in order to understand relationships between actions and variables and influence action, where a relational leader empowers employees and facilitates their growth by building on their strengths and improving their weaknesses. This is a clear purpose of relational leadership to emphasize: the intention for relational leaders to get closer to employees through dialogical engagement and interaction. Facilitating this will help in the conceptualization of a better vision and values, boost morale, and ensure effectiveness and efficiency. As a result, the relational leadership perspective promotes an innovative climate to generate ideas and develop skills, which is encouraged by the relational leader. However, the relational leadership style goes beyond professional skill and knowledge to influence personal traits, morale and behavioural responsiveness.

I found participatory or collaborative action research to be a rich avenue for collecting data and information that presented experience and knowledge that were vital for addressing the original work problem. It really gets to the heart of the problem. Although I have Workplace Authorization, the research design was not discussed with senior colleagues, which on one hand may be considered a weakness of my study; however, on the other hand, the key strength of the study has been researching in the actual workplace and actual work group, and thanks to my research I got to know better how they feel and how they do things. Also, I learned the magnitude of the power of relationships and learned to appreciate co-action, and I would use participatory action research again and again as a way of life, even though the methodological difficulties require the researcher to change personal attitudes, move out of their comfort zone and be humble enough to revisit what seems to be fact. However, to make change happen as proposed may be a rather ambitious objective, which can also be considered a study weakness.

I think I have used a rich range of research methods – interviews, focus groups, observation, organizational documents and personal reflections on experience – that enabled a rigorous study and inferences. I have provided further information about thematic/template analysis in the appendices; however, I presented only direct quotations from participants in the discussion. The findings from these forms of data collection drastically reshaped my proposed actions and recommendations. As a matter of fact, the applied research methods and findings impacted the thoughts I had that generated the actionable knowledge of the proposed relational leader–follower relationship conceptual design framework, and which contributed to the proposed framework for the training programme.

I believe my own practice as a manager and leader has developed and become more participatory. This study has changed my role and relationship with research participants and made it more positive, effective, resilient and peaceful. Indeed, the DBA research was an avenue to facilitate organizational and personal change.

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