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# ‘Those who tell stories rule society’

An ethnographic study of narrative leadership in an  
HR department

Master’s thesis in *Leadership, Strategy, and Organization*  
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Åbo 2020

**ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY – Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics**

Abstract for Master's thesis

Subject: Leadership, Strategy, and Organization	
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Title: Those who tell stories rule society - an ethnographic study of narrative leadership in an HR department	
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<p>This thesis is an ethnographic study of narrative leadership and how it occurs in an HR department.</p> <p>It is known that narratives are used in marketing and as a way of describing organizational cultures. Research within leadership studies have mainly focused on narratives in combination with HRM or knowledge management. Narrative leadership is a rather new research area, where the focus primarily lies on the leadership without emphasizing the area in which it occurs. Thus, the aim with this thesis is to fill the research gap by presenting how narratives are used in the everyday HR work and how narrative leadership can support this.</p> <p>The material was gathered by shadowing the Head of HR at work and observing during the meetings that the Head of HR took part in, over a timespan of four weeks. Prior to entering the field, the Head of HR was interviewed to get a better understanding of the issues they were currently dealing with. Since narrative leadership relies on social constructions, the other staff members in the HR department, and their interactions with the Head of HR were also taken into account.</p> <p>As a result of the material that had been gathered, it can be suggested that a lot of narratives occur in the everyday HR work. By deliberately using narratives, leadership can be more productive as it lowers the hierarchical thresholds within an organization. In addition, narratives are an effective leadership tool as we are affected more emotionally than rationally by narratives, and thus will better remember what has been said and act swifter.</p>	
<p>Keywords: Narrative leadership, leadership, HR, narrative, storytelling</p>	
Date: 24.04.2020	Number of pages: 79

## Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1.	<b>The problem</b> .....	<b>3</b>
1.2.	<b>Aim and research questions</b> .....	<b>4</b>
1.3.	<b>Delimitations</b> .....	<b>4</b>
1.4.	<b>Disposition</b> .....	<b>6</b>
1.5.	<b>Central terminology</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b><i>Theoretical focus</i></b> .....	<b>7</b>
2.1.	<b>Storytelling</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1.1.	What defines a narrative? .....	11
2.1.2.	Storytelling in organizations .....	13
2.2.	<b>Narrative leadership</b> .....	<b>16</b>
2.2.1.	Previous research into Narrative Leadership .....	22
2.2.2.	Leadership-As-Practice .....	25
2.2.3.	Human Resource Management.....	27
<b>3.</b>	<b><i>Methodology</i></b> .....	<b>29</b>
3.1.	<b>Observational studies</b> .....	<b>30</b>
3.2.	<b>Interviews</b> .....	<b>32</b>
3.3.	<b>Conducting the study</b> .....	<b>33</b>
3.3.1.	Ethical considerations .....	35
3.3.2.	My role as an observer .....	37
3.4.	<b>Processing the material</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b><i>The Empirical Context</i></b> .....	<b>41</b>
4.1.	<b>The Organization</b> .....	<b>41</b>
4.2.	<b>The HR department</b> .....	<b>42</b>
4.3.	<b>Interviews with the Head of HR</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b><i>Findings</i></b> .....	<b>45</b>
5.1.	<b>Stories about work itself</b> .....	<b>46</b>
5.1.1.	Questionable emails .....	46
5.1.2.	The intranet .....	49

5.1.3.	New communications channel .....	51
5.1.4.	The new HR system .....	52
<b>5.2.</b>	<b>Stories about the organization.....</b>	<b>54</b>
5.2.1.	Strategy and change .....	54
5.2.2.	Ergonomics at work.....	55
5.2.3.	Exercise during working hours .....	56
<b>5.3.</b>	<b>Stories used as signals .....</b>	<b>58</b>
5.3.1.	Shared rules for work practices.....	58
5.3.2.	The move.....	59
<b>5.4.</b>	<b>Stories about the past .....</b>	<b>60</b>
5.4.1.	The new HR system .....	61
5.4.2.	International case.....	62
<b>5.5.</b>	<b>Stories about the future .....</b>	<b>63</b>
5.5.1.	Exercise during work hours .....	63
<b>5.5.2.</b>	<b>Compensation.....</b>	<b>64</b>
5.5.3.	New legislation .....	65
5.5.4.	The move.....	66
<b>6.</b>	<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>68</b>
6.1.	How is leadership conveyed in the findings? .....	72
6.2.	How do the findings support leadership? .....	74
<b>7.</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>77</b>
	Swedish summary .....	80
	Sources .....	89
	Appendix 1: interview 1, questions .....	94
	Appendix 2: interview 2, questions.....	95
	Appendix 3: support questions for observations .....	96

## 1. Introduction

*‘Storytelling is among the oldest forms of communication... Storytelling is the commonality of all human beings, in all places, in all times.’*

*– Rives Collins, Pamela J. Cooper & Maurice Saxby (1994: 1)*

The world we live in today would be unthinkable without narratives. We are surrounded by stories at all times and have unknowingly been taught how to tell narratives from an early age when those around us asked follow-up questions to clarify what had happened, who was involved, and when this event occurred (Adelswärd, 1996). Even when doing such a mundane thing as introducing yourself to somebody you are jumping down the storytelling rabbit hole. You engage in this act by doing something you rarely think twice about - you share your own life story; where you come from, perhaps your age, what you do professionally or in your leisure time. (Johansson, 2005; Brown, Denning, Groh & Prusak, 2005; Barker & Gower, 2010)

A narrative is something that does not appeal to our logically wired brains, it appeals to our hearts, our emotions – this is why they stick and the main reason why they are so effective (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006; Chakraborty, 2018). The storyteller wants to convey a certain message or make a certain point by telling the stories, and thus either knowingly or unknowingly feeds the listeners with morals important to them – meaning that when there is something important to us that we want to share, we do it mainly in the form of a narrative (Adelswärd, 1996; Brown et al., 2005; Barker & Gower, 2010). Roland Barthes demonstrates the social centrality of narrative in his essay *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (1966/1977, 79)

*‘The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances. ... Able to be carried by articulate language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures ... Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative.’*

I have personally always had an interest in narratives, possibly more from a lyrical perspective than the traditional narrative of the hero and the foe, but the interest has nevertheless always been present. However, it was not until I attended a lecture by Tommi Auvinen, senior lecturer in management and leadership at the University of Jyväskylä, on narrative leadership that I made the connection between storytelling and organizations. Later on, this grew into a topic of interest for me, especially since stories can be a powerful tool to have in your shed, but not everyone understands that these stories are more than ‘once upon a time’ or a roller-coaster tale from one’s childhood, filled with nostalgia and lessons learned. The notion of a general misunderstanding of stories and how they can be utilized made me want to study this phenomenon in greater depth. Narratives are frequently used in marketing (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006) and as my sister-in-law, who works in marketing, told me, the interest in storytelling and following a red thread through a marketing campaign is only increasing. However, do people also understand that stories are used on so many other levels, both within an organization and on individual levels? That stories are used by both leaders and followers? Questions and discussions like these made me want to investigate further.

The title of this master’s thesis ‘Those who tell stories rule society’ is a saying that Plato uttered over 2300 years ago (Boje, 1999; Auvinen, 2013), implying that leadership and narratives have been used together for centuries, yet as a research field it is rather young. This I found to be both intriguing as well as leaving me asking the question ‘do they really?’, while it simultaneously challenges the thesis in itself as I am in a way telling a narrative based on the theories I have chosen to support the empirical data gathered. In other words, this thesis will be a narrative with many other narratives running through it. For movie buffs, this thesis could be seen as an academically narrated version of *Inception* – a movie in which dreams were created within dreams (IMDb, 2020) although in this thesis the movies are represented by narratives and leadership.

## 1.1. The problem

In today's hectic world, we are bombarded by narratives from every corner of the globe. It is a known fact that storytelling is actively used within marketing (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006), although, if used correctly it can also be applied to other fields of the business world (Brown et al., 2005; Denning, 2011). Many organizations use storytelling to explain their own organizational culture, whether to strengthen morals in the workforce or to transfer inside knowledge to newly recruited employees (Gabriel, 2000; Barker & Gower, 2010; Denning 2011). When it comes to storytelling and management or leadership, the primary focus more often than not lies on how to use storytelling together with knowledge management and human resource development (HRD), among others (Morgan, & Dennehy, 1997; Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002; Boje, Rosile, Saylor, & Saylor, 2015; D'Arrigo, Robini, Larentis, Camargo & Schmiedgen, 2017).

In Chapter 2 on the theoretical focus, I will further discuss the width of using storytelling in organizations. However, how storytelling can be used by leaders within the realm of human resource management (HRM) is still a rather unexplored area within the field of narrative leadership. For the most part, narrative leadership has been explored in rather broad strokes; mainly focusing on the leadership and not on the area in which it is performed, leaving the realm of HRM and the part that storytelling plays in it as somewhat of a mystery. Both economic sciences and traditional leadership studies have been criticized for not including emotions or values, as well as for adopting the narrative aspects of an organization at such a late stage (Auvinen, 2013). One can discern that a great deal of leadership research has gone amiss by not including narrative studies from before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as narratives contain a great deal of information regarding feelings, values, and morals. A whole new area of research can be discussed and brought to light by focusing on narrative leadership within HR, as understanding how this leadership tool can be implemented in HR specifically has not yet been studied.

## 1.2. Aim and research questions

The aim of this master's thesis is to present, through observational studies and interviews, present how narrative leadership is used within the line of human resources (HR), as well as to disclose how storytelling can help in different aspects of leadership in the everyday work of HR. To reach this aim, the thesis will focus on the different types of organizational narratives that occur within HR and to further discuss how these narratives, and the narrative leadership in itself, support the work within the HR department.

In the realm of this aim, the research questions would be: how does narrative leadership contribute to everyday work in HR and in which situations are narratives used within HR.

## 1.3. Delimitations

The delimitations of the thesis are focused on three different aspects; the organization, the department within the organization, and the period during which the empirical data was collected.

The organization at hand was chosen for practical reasons, as it was one with which I already had some contact, and thus it would be easier for me to gain access to the data. Furthermore, I also had some previous knowledge of the organization which meant that during the gathering of the empirical data I could focus solely on observing and the storytelling, and not have to waste any time on understanding what the people I observed were discussing. These two reasons, together with a couple of failed attempts to gain access to other organizations due to the timing of the study, made it an easy choice for me to approach them and ask them to participate. Nevertheless, the department in focus was not previously familiar as such, and thus the observed empirical data is not affected by personal information.



I chose to focus on the HR department within an organization as I am personally interested in this area of management, and particularly interested in how they use storytelling, as HR is an area that deals with a lot of people. Moreover, the delimitation of focusing solely on the HR department was also made to ensure that there would not be too many participants in the different meetings and in the day to day actions that I would observe.

As with any study, the more time you spend out in the field the more data you gather (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The aspect of time is thus the third delimitation that affects this thesis. As will be discussed later at the beginning of Chapter 3.3. regarding the actual conducting of the study and the gathering of the data, only a certain amount of time was spent at the organization itself. The data was gathered over a period of approximately one month, although, I was present at the organization every day of the week, nor was I able to shadow the Head of HR throughout the entire workday, as some of their time was spent in closed-door meetings, etc.

Since only one organization's HR and only one part of the HR department was observed, a clear limitation can be observed. The findings represent a general overview of how storytelling can be used within HR, and can also be interpreted as a case study that can be linked to similar organizations and similar areas of HR. Furthermore, the HR department itself can be seen as a limitation, as I did not have any prior knowledge of whether the Head of HR used narratives or whether there was a 'storytelling culture' in the HR department. Similarly, the layout of the HR department limited the observing of narratives that occurred when the Head of HR was not present, particularly as the personnel mainly consulted each other before turning to the Head of HR (interview 7.1.2020). Additionally, the fact that a lot of communication was passed along through electronic means such as emails also meant that some narratives that could be narrative leadership may have passed without me knowing. Moreover, the issues that were dealt with during my time in the field also create a limitation, as they directly impact the narratives. Finally, the confidentiality agreement can also be understood as a limitation, as it meant that certain information or narratives could not be divulged in the findings on account of their content being either too personal or otherwise in breach of the agreement.

#### 1.4. Disposition

The disposition of this thesis is built up by firstly expanding the understanding of the narrative field by explaining certain terminologies and the theoretical framework on which the thesis relies. This framework is built on narratives and storytelling, narrative leadership, leadership-as-practice, and human resource management. Secondly, the methods through which the empirical data was gathered are presented, followed by a presentation of the organization and the HR department in which the study was conducted and the findings of the study itself. Lastly, a discussion of the findings and their implications is presented, after which the concluding thoughts and future possibilities for studies are presented.

#### 1.5. Central terminology

In order to be able to follow this thesis, some terminology needs to be discussed. The terms *story*, *narrative*, and *storytelling* are quite often used similarly, if not even interchangeably (Auvinen et al., 2031). This is largely due to the fact that scholars, in general, use the terms in different manners, and no precise description has been agreed upon; the way the terms are used depends on the academic background of the scholar (Auvinen, 2013). However, Sibierska (2017), a doctorate at the Nicolaus Copernicus University and author of '*Storytelling without telling: The non-linguistic nature of narratives from evolutionary and narratological perspectives*' states that the terms 'story' and 'narrative' are only partial synonyms as they do not completely mean totally the same thing. The aim of opening up the following terminology at this point is to enable a quick overview of how they differ from each other as the terms themselves will be discussed further in the next chapter, on the theoretical focus. Making a long story short, the terms in this thesis will be used as follows:

*Story* – an objective sequence of events and/or actions

*Narrative* – the chosen perspective given to a story, the material product of conveying a story to somebody

*Storytelling* – the process of composing narratives

## 2. Theoretical focus

*‘Storytelling is by far the most underrated skill in business’*

– Gary Vaynerchuck (2010)

In this chapter, the theoretical focus of this thesis will be discussed, divided into two main parts; storytelling and narrative leadership. This allows me to delve into the realms of the two main parts of the theoretical focus, as well as leadership-as-practice and HR work.

For many years, narratives have been of interest to folklorists alone, while the rest of the scientific community rather focused on ‘facts’ (Gabriel, 2000). However, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century other scientific communities also began to see a deeper meaning in the use of storytelling. According to Czarniawska (1997), narratives in organizations can be divided into three groups: research about organizations that are written in a narrative-like manner; research that collects organizational narratives; and research that conceptualizes organization theory as narrative reading and organizational life as narrative making. In this thesis, it is the third group that will be discussed and analyzed further as it will focus on the organizational life as narrative making.

I will first discuss and open up the narrative aspect of this theoretical focus by going through storytelling and what constitutes a narrative so that when narrative leadership is discussed the main focus can lie on how this part of the field of leadership differs from the rest, and how this is connected to HR.

## 2.1. Storytelling

People have been described as animals that are able to tell narratives (Adelswärd, 1996; Boje, 1999; Gabriel, 2000; Auvinen, 2013). The reasoning behind this is that we think about and understand our lives as if they were narratives themselves. We also use narratives as a way to communicate with others, giving us the name *homo narrans* (Fischer, 1985). As Robert Atkinson, a developmental psychologist and internationally renowned expert on life story interviewing, describes it

*‘All human beings have a story, even many stories, to tell about the life they are living. Everything that happens, happens in story form. Every event, situation, or experience, if we think about it, has a beginning, middle, and end, which leads to another beginning, and on and on’* (Atkinson, 1998: 22).

Gabriel (2000) suggests that there are many different meanings and reasons for storytelling, but that since the 1800s it has mainly been about entertainment, even though narratives carry other functions such as offering reassurance, providing a moral education, warning us, and igniting our imaginations. However, since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this view has slightly changed as fields other than folkloristics have also now taken to narratives and their impact on different fields. Narratives are nevertheless still seen as a complex phenomenon, where even the most crucial and central terminology, such as story and narrative, has yet to be explicitly defined (Palmenfelt, 2000; Auvinen, 2013). This, in turn, has an impact on the study of narrative leadership, which will be explained further in Chapter 2.2.

Narratives are always told from a certain point of view or with a certain purpose (Johansson, 2005), meaning that there is no such thing as an objective or neutral narrative. As Jackson (2002) explains, storytelling is ‘a strategy for transforming private into public meanings’ and ‘... as a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances.’ (p. 14-15). Consequently, this means that it is no longer about reliving through the narratives as they have occurred but reworking them both by oneself and in a dialogue with others. In order to do so, we have to place the narratives in relation to other narratives and situations as well as place them in the correct time in order to best understand them (Johansson, 2005).

Furthermore, as Palmenfelt (2017) explains, narratives make us choose what not to tell, in other words to refine, simplify, and separate the different parts of a story in order to make a manageable whole. From this one can gather that storytelling involves power; being able to give something significance often captures a complex event in which sense, feelings, imagination, and importance are interwoven (Auvinen, 2013). However, when storytelling is connected to a business context Reissner and Pagan (2013) point out that storytelling can be anything that resembles the ‘traditional’ story with made-up characters to simple anecdotes explaining something notable that an employee had done.

According to Polkinghorne (cited in Czarniawska, 1997), there are three main ways of presenting a narrative. The first way is to present it directly to oneself so that we can make sense of what are doing or have done, the second way is to present it to someone else by either speech, written text, or a reenactment. The third way is to receive, interpret and understand what someone else is telling. The two latter ones will be the main focus in this thesis, although the first way will still be prevalent through my accounts of what has been done. Moreover, as Johansson (2005) states, narratives are always told as a mutual effort together with the listeners through interplay. This means that no story is the same when retold as the listeners react differently and may even need more or less information added to the narrative, even though the main message remains the same.

Another way to view storytelling and narratives, according to Cunliffe and Hibbert (2016), is to follow the line of thought of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur as he argues that we relate our lives, identities, and the occurrences around us in different forms of narratives. In order to do so, we construct narratives from the ones we already are familiar with, making the narratives to a degree never-ending since their situations are always open for new meanings and interpretations. Storytelling is thus a way of making sense of the situations we are faced with, allows us to evaluate them, and gives us a tool to enable us to decide how to act (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016). Furthermore, how we make sense of ourselves in relation to others can be described by following the idea of the Ricoeurian *emplotment*. Essentially, *emplotment* is the process of creating a distinguishable plot in which one’s character emerges, by experimenting with varying storylines, hypothetical futures, and counterfactual pasts (Johansson,

2005; Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016). Auvinen (2013) notes that this can be seen in how people can create different narratives even though they went through the same experiences or had the same facts to begin with. When having to describe an event narratively they may vary greatly; in style, which details the storyteller chooses to emphasize, the timespan during which the narrative is taking place, and so forth, as we all have different frames of reference to rely on and build upon. However, as Boje (1999) describes it, it doesn't matter whether the storyteller narrates with the rhythms and charisma of an oral storyteller, or narrate in a more bureaucratic manner, as all of the narratives at some point combine and become a part of the collective memory of the organization.

Seeing that we can all call ourselves storytellers on a daily basis, what is it that defines and separates a good storyteller from the rest of us? According to Torkki (2014), three aspects are 'demanded' from a good storyteller, the first being a varying array of life experiences and good general knowledge. We tend to imagine and stir up narratives from our own experiences, and we can only grasp what we understand. In other words, without either life experience or general knowledge, any narrative told would be without much point or information. The second aspect is considering the sensibility needed to understand what the buzz of an event feels like. When one understands this feeling, one sees the opportunities that lie around simply waiting to be told. The storyteller goes through life experiencing a multitude of emotions and events, and in order to retell these, one has to be able to put them into words. A popular storyteller is one who can verbalize eloquently that moment in time and who gives a frame to a well-known feeling. The third and last aspect is that a good storyteller needs to be creative and inventive, as well as to have the ability to create a character and a manner to express inner feelings. This is the aspect that sets storytellers apart, as it partially comes intuitively although some of it can be learned. A good storyteller can have the tools and know the structures that need to be set in place for a good narrative to become a great one, whereas another storyteller does not need to think of these structures on account of the fact that the narratives come naturally to them (Torkki, 2014). Denning (2005) notes that everyone can become a better storyteller, especially as we begin to use them intelligently to get certain effects. To achieve this, like many other areas in life, we simply have to practice, practice, and practice some more.

It is worth nothing that it can be argued that there are differences between a conversation, a dialogue, and a narrative (Brown et al., 2005). However, as this thesis is concerned with narrative leadership and not with the semantics of the narratives themselves, I do not feel it is relevant to delve deeper into what distinguishes one from the other.

To summarize, storytelling is something we all do and that we can find all around us. It is a way of making sense of, interpreting, and giving value to the events we have lived through, and therefore there cannot be an objective narrative or a narrative with a single truth. We all have different frames of references to which we apply the narratives, meaning that the same event can spur a multitude of different narratives depending on who witnesses the events and their background. Some people have a knack for storytelling, although by consciously using storytelling, and practicing the actual performance, anyone can become a good storyteller and thus be able to apply it to any situation or purpose.

#### 2.1.1. What defines a narrative?

The way Aristotle famously defined a narrative is that it is made up of a series of events or actions, which together create a whole. From this, one can pinpoint the beginning, the middle, and the end (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006; Palmenfelt, 2017). According to Auvinen (2013), a narrative something that references symbolic actions and words, that follows a specific order, and that creates meaning to those who live, interpret and create them.

Most narratives tend to have the same basic elements; a message, a conflict, a cast, and an intrigue (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006). The message is usually a moral statement that through the narrative becomes a fact, thus giving a listener a possibility to take to the said message. The conflict is the core which makes or breaks a good narrative. It is through the conflict and the way it is resolved, usually portrayed by a fight between good and evil, that the message becomes acknowledged. How we actually become intrigued and enveloped by a narrative is through the cast. Many narratives follow the classical layout of 7 main characters that Vladimir Propp laid out in his *Morphology*

*of the Folktale* from 1958 (cited in Mossberg & Nissen, 2006; Hyvärinen, 2008). These are the hero, the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess, the false hero, and the dispatcher. Even though these characters are usually seen as part of fairytales, they can also be spotted in everyday narratives and can thus be one way to spot a narrative in an everyday setting. Finally, the intrigue is what carries the narrative forward. There are a few different methods for this; the best known way is to divide it into the beginning, a climax, and an ending (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006).

It is also important to note that a narrative always has three main pieces of information (Torkki, 2014):

- 1) it has a certain kind of temporality, which means that a narrative is never static, it is set in a certain point of time and moves with it as the narrative develops
- 2) it reproduces some kind of event
- 3) it is adding value to something or defining what the storyteller thinks has value.

This happens when the storyteller first off picks and chooses which narrative to tell, and later on by what they chose to tell within the narrative (Adelswärd, 1996; Torkki, 2014). However, a narrative is always something that builds meaning from small details, and that which separates a good narrative from a not so good narrative is how these small details are connected and interlaced with each other (Torkki, 2014). Furthermore, Torkki (2014) argues that the difference between a fact and a narrative is that a fact is something that has a clear ending whereas a narrative remains open and continues to evolve.

Mossberg and Nissen (2006) claim that there are six different reasons why narratives are important. These are that narratives speak to our needs that give meaning to life, they involve us on an emotional level, they invigorate our notions and fantasies, they convey knowledge, they give attention and entertain, and they also build communities of sorts. The final reason is used extensively within marketing, where for instance ‘brand communities’ have become of importance since they involve a certain amount of people who are tied to a brand and are spread out over a geographical area (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006: 25). However, it should be pointed out that ‘brand community’ can also be applied to organizations, as the people who belong to an organization are engaged by the brand that has been created within the organization.



### 2.1.2. Storytelling in organizations

When it comes to telling narratives within an organization, there are a few different categories that tend to be more prevalent than others. Due to the incoherence in terminology, the following categories of narratives will be referred to as ‘stories’ in the title of the type alone since this is the terminology used by Brown et al. (2005). Further in the thesis, when mentioning these types, they will be referred to as ‘stories’ while still referring to narratives. Sintonen and Auvinen (2009) argue that narratives have an influence on the culture, atmosphere, and the everyday flow of information amongst other things within the organization, thus making storytelling a crucial part of any organization.

The categories by Brown et al. mentioned in this chapter will be the main way of presenting the empirical material in the findings. This is due to the fact that the categories occur in most organizations, which can also make the results of the thesis somewhat more applicable to other areas and organizations as well. As Brown et al (2005) point out, there can be cultural differences on a global scale that can affect the relevance of these categories. However, Mossberg and Nissen (2006) argue that many narratives can be told in different cultures and yield the same result, implying that the situation of when or why the narratives are told may vary from culture to culture but the meaning of the narrative would not change.

Brown et al. (2005) maintain, that the first category of story within an organization is about other people. These narratives tend to be motivated by reliability, trust, and knowledge. One can see this category as gossip, although what is being said while gossiping does usually fall within the three previously mentioned motivations. These narratives can also be what Denning (2006: 46) call ‘taming the grapevine’, where untrue rumors or simply bad news can be downplayed or satirized in order to control the outcome of the narratives. It is however important to note that if needs be, this manner of taming the grapevine can also be applied to many of the other categories of narratives as well if needed be.

The second category of story is about the work itself; these can be about the mundane tasks at work, transferring knowledge from one staff member to another, and so forth. This category of narrative can be quite common during onboarding of new personnel to the organization or while learning a new task (Brown et al., 2005). The reasoning behind these narratives being so prevalent in those situations can boil down to the fact that ever since we were young we started to learn through narrative (Adelswärd, 1996; Brown et al., 2005). In an organization, these would most likely be one of the most common narratives told, as the majority of the time revolves around the work at hand, thus having a great impact on narrative leadership.

When it comes to stories about the organization, which according to Brown et al. (2005) is the third type of narrative, it is a somewhat different matter. An organization simply cannot make up their own story, it is not something you can concoct in a board room or during a meeting. An organizational narrative is something that already exists before you know it; it is something that is created by everyone who is affected by the organization, and by reaching out and asking either the staff members or the customers their thoughts and experiences, one can slowly start to connect them into a manageable narrative (Torkki, 2014).

Stories about social bonding are the fourth category. Social bonding occurs in every type of organization and relationship, and is what anthropologists call phatic speech. As Brown et al. (2005 p. 25), describe it ‘...it’s not the content that matters, but the fact that you’re saying it to bond with another person. You’re doing it as a ritual’. In other words, these narratives are those that come up in situations such as coffee or lunch breaks, or prior to a meeting when most of the participants are present. These narratives do not as such bring value to narrative leadership, although they can allow the person in a leadership position to better understand their subjects as they find out more about their personal lives, opinions, humor, and so forth.

The fifth category of stories is when they are used as signals, or put more precisely, how the signals are interpreted. These narratives may not only be of the spoken kind, as Brown et al. (2005) argue that one can also pick up signals from the mere architecture of an organization; why the offices are designed the way they are, why the desks are placed at certain places and so forth – all signals which you can pick up from

an organization and which tell you more than they might have done at first glance when analyzed on a deeper level. Noticeably, not all signals, such as architecture, may have been created internally in the organization; some may have been created externally and then later on embraced by the organization at hand and further along adapted to. Boje (2008: 84) also takes note of this category, stating that ‘spatial images tell us heaps about the equality or the hierarchy: the corner office, the number of secretary cubicles in an outer office, the size of an office, whether it has a window’ and further continuing by stating that ‘an economic boon, or downturn, can imprint its remembrance on spatial occupation, on vacant spaces, or overcrowded spaces’ (Boje, 2008: 85). By arguing that spaces are a form of storytelling, Boje emphasizes the nonverbal narratives and suggests that external factors, such as an economic downturn, can also have an indirect impact on the narratives as well.

Stories about the past and future are the sixth and seventh categories of narratives and are probably the most likely ones that we think of when we hear ‘organizational stories’. These narratives also promote or control cultural norms and behaviors and can include narratives about different leaders or other important persons (Brown et al., 2005). These categories of narratives may be combined with other categories as well, as for instance a narrative about work itself will most likely take place in the past, although the reason the narrative is told is in order to solve either a present or a future problem.

The final categories of narratives that Brown et al. (2005) mention, are about oneself and about the way that the narratives are told. The eighth and ninth categories are about life and oneself – people either learn from life or learn from other’s life stories; as previously mentioned we all tell stories when we talk about ourselves. Finally, the tenth category of narrative is the electronic story. At any given organization, some form of electronic communication is shared in a much quicker manner than if one were to walk over and talk to the recipient of said communication (Brown et al., 2005). Deriving from the long list of narratives, one can assume that more often than not these also contain a narrative – one of the previously described eight types of stories to be precise.

Gabriel (2000) also touches upon the different narratives that occur within an organization, although he classifies them in a more traditionally folkloristic way. Gabriel (2000) argues, that there are six main storylines within organizational storytelling: the comic narrative, the protagonist as deserving victim or fool, humorous narratives, the protagonist as survivor, humorist, ironist, or wizard, the tragic narrative, the protagonist as undeserving victim, epic stories, the protagonist as hero, romantic narrative, the subject as love object, and the poetic mode. These classifications vary somewhat from those of Brown et al. (2005) mainly due to the fact that Gabriel (2000) grouped them together based on the protagonist, whereas Brown et al. (2005) grouped them together based on how they appear in the organizational setting and what role they play there. However, this does not mean that they rule each other out since they are simply two different ways of portraying the same narratives.

## 2.2. Narrative leadership

Leadership, much like the terminology surrounding narratives and stories, is a complex concept with a lot of different understandings of it, depending on which school of thought they stem from (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). Previously, leadership has been described as a process through which one can get a person or a group to act in a desired manner or as an interpersonal relationship which makes other people follow the leader because they want to, and not because they have to (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). In other words, it has mainly been almost entirely about the leader and their impact on their surroundings, and generally the research has been divided into five different approaches: traits, styles, contingency, post heroic, and new leadership (Parry & Bryman, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). The trait theory places the emphasis on the personal characteristics and implies that a leader is born and not made, whereas the style approach places emphasis on the manner in which leadership is performed (Parry & Bryman, 2006). The contingency approach implies that a leader should be able to change their manners depending on the situation, whereas post heroic values a relational awareness of the group meaning that the leader needs to be socially competent in order to fulfil their duty (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). Finally, the new leadership approach encompasses areas such as charismatic

leadership, transformational leadership, visionary leadership, and simply leadership (Parry & Bryman, 2006). Leadership literature also makes a clear distinction between what a leader and a manager is, implying that management involves the more traditional, administrative work, whereas leadership concerns issues such as strategies, renewal, and change (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). This however, does not intrinsically mean that they are always performed by different people; in some organizations there might be a person that performs both duties interchangeably, depending on the situation at hand. To further specify, leadership will in this thesis represent providing a direction for an ongoing process and an interpersonal relationship.

While differentiating management from leadership, Spoelstra (2018) comments that ‘leaders could be seen as masters of the performative, which is to say that they are capable of doing great deeds with words’ (p.63) and further acknowledges the importance of looking at the language of leadership, commenting that leadership can be understood as ‘the management of meaning’ (p. 61). In other words, by using their language as a tool, leaders are people who can make things happen. Even though they use the same words as others, they are still able to instill hope, help followers undergo transformations, and so on. As Spoelstra puts it ‘Given these effects, the words of leaders do not appear to be “just words” – they are words that act’ (2018, p. 61). As such, these are words that make others take action or in some manner create a reaction. This idea is further supported by Brown et al. (2005), as they explain that the role of storytelling in leadership is becoming more fundamental, and that by the leader telling their own narratives through the lives they are living, the leaders can enhance their own authenticity and credibility. Admittedly, what separates these words from others may in fact have more to do with the authority that the leadership figure represents than the words themselves (Spoelstra, 2018).

The idea of combining narratives, leadership, and power stems back to the ancient Greeks, when both Plato and Aristotle took to the idea of narrative leadership, but it has since lost most of its glamor (Auvinen, 2013). Nevertheless, as a research field, it is rather young, which can be seen from the lack of previous studies in comparison to other leadership theories. (Auvinen, 2013; Auvinen, Aaltio & Blomqvist, 2013) According to Boje (1999), during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, leadership theories averted

from their roots in storytelling by turning towards a theory with a more business management point of view and giving way to an explicitly rational paradigm. Since then, interest in narrative leadership has been on the rise and can now be seen as a somewhat established part of leadership theories, even to the extent of having become a rather fashionable phenomenon with consultants and managers (Auvinen, 2013), as my marketing professional sister-in-law had noted in her line of duty. However, Boje (1999) points out that prior to this popularization, David McClelland and his associates at Harvard researched different aspects related to leadership and storytelling, mainly focusing on different needs such as the need for power or achievement during the 1950s and 1960s. This area of research in combination with leadership theories was later on disregarded as the studies were mainly reduced to theories on needs, and thus later on overshadowed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Boje, 1999).

Some of the traditional leadership theories, such as trait theories and contingency theories, rely on the persona and the traits of the leader, such as honesty, drive, and integrity, as well as the situations they find themselves in (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). Conversely, narrative leadership focuses more on the processes that create leadership, the situational and linguistic dimensions of leadership, as well as the sociocultural definition of leadership (Auvinen, 2013). Consequently, narrative leadership does not aim to empirically verify any truths or traits but to understand the manufacturing and meaning as a discursive construction, and as such, the true sense of the narrative is at the core. In other words, whether a narrative is true or not is not of importance as long as the narrative is believed to be true by the members of the organization and makes them take action. It is however imperative to keep in mind that the leader telling the narrative is also under the same scrutiny as the narrative itself (Auvinen, 2013; Forman, 2013). If either the narrative or the narrator is not credible, both parts will fall flat and lose the point that was being made. Nevertheless, Forman (2013: 29) points out the negative sides of storytelling and that by 'telling a story about the exception without honest disclosure is dishonest, as is telling multiple stories, even expressed by multiple stakeholders, to support a desired image while ignoring other stories of equal or greater weight that undermine it'. By either telling a dishonest narrative or ignoring other narratives that undermine the one being told, the narrator and the narrative itself can, as previously mentioned, fall flat and lose all credibility. However, if the narrative is believed despite its dishonest nature, it can have a negative

consequence further down the line if the dishonesty is discovered and thus have a negative effect on the leadership. Importantly, in regard to ethics and honesty: this thesis will not take a stand as to the ethics or the truthfulness of the narratives brought forward in the findings.

One needs to bear in mind that it is when the narrative has been told that the actual narrative leadership starts. This due to the fact that it is through communication that the narratives are understood and processed; by the followers listening to and retelling the narratives, and by interpreting the narratives themselves. Furthermore, narrative leadership differs from the more traditional views on leadership with sovereign power (Sintonen & Auvinen, 2009) as instead of allowing for more hierarchical argumentations, it makes room for interplay in a more democratic manner seeing as everyone can partake, unlike in hierarchical leadership views, where one can only take part if you're formally authorized to do so (Auvinen, 2013; Auvinen et al., 2013). Furthermore, the so-called sovereign power cannot be applied through stories, even though they can consist of advice, rules, and values, as they do not have a coercive influence on others (Sintonen & Auvinen, 2009). Leadership, in the way it is understood in narrative form, is as previously described created through social interactions which also include storytelling (Auvinen et al., 2013). By combining their leadership with storytelling, a leader can build on the values of the organization along with the narratives of oneself and the organization (Auvinen 2013; Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016).

Both Auvinen (2013) and Denning (2006) argue, that some of the possibilities of narrative leadership are within areas that are traditionally viewed as rather challenging, such as supporting learning, engaging and motivating the personnel, and leading changes in strategies as well as organizational culture. These areas are also dealt with within HR, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2.2.2. Additionally, Brown et al. (2005: 45) note that 'as knowledge becomes more valuable, so do stories', meaning that one of the ways that knowledge is shared is through narratives. And as organizations begin to place more and more value on knowledge, the need for narratives as well as the social understanding and appreciation of narratives becomes equally more important. This in itself has a direct impact on leadership, as people in

leadership positions need to be able to hone their skill for storytelling in order to keep up with the value of knowledge.

According to Denning (2006), understanding that different types of narratives are required for different situations is the key to succeeding as a storyteller, and thus also in narrative leadership, while at the same time suggesting that there is no correct way to tell a narrative. What this means is that as a leader one needs to be able to understand and pinpoint the different situations and which conform to them as they appear. Denning (2006) argues, that a story showing how the organization is soon to be overwhelmed by a competitor unless they innovate faster will not inspire people to take constructive or independent action, while a so-called spring board story, that is generally is positive in tone, and springs people into action by communicating a complex idea that already has taken place. By contrast, Denning (2006) explains that in order to best share knowledge through a story, they ought to be somewhat negative in tone as they need the essential details of how things actually were accomplished, as opposed to sharing a personal success story that is positive in tone. Further Denning (2006) notes that narratives in organizations, especially regarding any future circumstances, work best if they are told in a minimalist manner without any extra details that would embellish any narrative that is told as entertainment. The reasoning behind this is that by cutting down the narrative to the bare minimum, the listener can imagine this scenario for themselves, as Denning (2006: 44) explains ‘as listeners envision new narratives set in their own contexts, they unwittingly craft action plans for implementation of the change program’. In other words, by making the narrative their own, the listener is more likely to believe it. Furthermore, Denning (2006) notes that narratives that share knowledge seldom are of much interest to others outside of the intended focus group, since they generate understanding through detailed explanations on the cause and effect, highlighting the pitfalls. This can imply that some outcomes from narrative leadership studies are misconstrued if the researcher does not fully understand the subject at hand or the implications it has on the organization.



Narrative leadership amplifies the active role of a leader, as it implies a certain awareness of the leader's limitations and the dynamics within the organization. A leader can simply not hide behind a few traits that have traditionally been understood as well suited for a leader, but needs rather to understand the ongoing activities within the organization in order to function to the best of their capability. Boje (2008) describes this problem through a play called *Tamara*. In this play, there are multiple rooms in which the characters and the narrative unfold. This setup creates the complex surroundings that occur in everyday organizations; rarely does everything happen in one single room, and as a result the audience members have to choose which characters to follow and can as the play moves along can tell the other members of the audience what they have been witnessing, thus being able to obtain a more complete picture of the events unfolding. Consequently, the following dilemmas are created: firstly, one has to choose which character to follow, and secondly, it is impossible to know how accurate the information given about the other characters is, as it is provided through a second party and may not be correct.

As Fisch (2014) notes, humans create different models to explain their experiences which are continually revised as new we gain more experiences, and essentially these models are on some level all some form of narratives. Narrative leadership combines these narratives with the social surroundings of an organization, creating the ability to influence others by giving meaning to the ongoing activities. Further, Fisch (2014) argues that leadership, in essence, means communicating an organization's purpose by establishing a few rules that guide the behaviors of the organization's members. Barker and Gower (2010) also point out that 'stories serve a persuasive communication function for organizations by representing personal, interpersonal, and corporate perspectives' (p. 304), meaning that it is important for the storyteller to distinguish which perspective the narrative tells. Consequently, one can determine that narrative leadership is greatly needed in organizations, as it facilitates meaning-making and sense-making by communicating an organization's purpose, values, and beliefs to its members and to society. Narratives and the narrative identity are according to Ricoeur (cited by Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016) what create form of ethical responsibility. For those in leadership positions this means a sense of relational integrity as the storytelling and acting always occur in relation to others; in essence, engaging in

leadership activities signifies narration of meanings, and the realities as well as the identities in the organization (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016).

Auvinen describes in his dissertation *'Narratiivinen johtajuus: Tutkielmia johtajuuden tarinankerronnan tutkimuksesta ja käytännöstä'* (2013) that we have a long history of narrative leadership in Finland. Many of the typical Finnish leaders, and the Finnish leadership culture in general, have more often than not drawn upon classic Finnish narratives such as 'Kalevala' and the 'Unknown Soldier'. Nevertheless, it is only since the 1990s that narrative leadership has started to grow as a scientific field within Finland. Much of the literature on narrative leadership comes from northern America, although there is nowadays an increasing amount of literature coming from Finland (e.g. Hyvärinen, 2008; Auvinen et al., 2012; Auvinen, 2013; Auvinen et al., 2013), displaying a growing interest in this field on both a national and an international level.

In conclusion, narrative leadership is a social process during which any member of an organization can contribute with a narrative. The main aspect is that the narratives told result in some form of leadership and action; this can be done by e.g. sharing knowledge, presenting a possible future scenario, or evoking emotions. Consequently, narrative leadership emphasizes the active role of the leader as they need to be both aware of what is going on in the organization as well as of their own limitation of not being able to hear every narrative in person. Moreover, narrative leadership facilitates sense-making and meaning-making of the ongoing activities to the organization's members or to society by combining the narratives with their social surroundings.

### 2.2.1. Previous research into Narrative Leadership

It is important to note that storytelling in organizations has been rather widely researched (e.g. Czarniawska, 1996; Gabriel, 2000; Brown et al., 2005; Boje 2008). However, these studies tend to focus on the organization as a whole, which admittedly as such does include management and leadership. Nevertheless, the focus in these studies does not solely lie on the leadership in combination with storytelling, which is

most likely one more reason why the area of narrative leadership has not yet been fully acknowledged by the scholarly community.

As previously stated, studies into storytelling and leadership already began in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Boje, 1999). The studies conducted by McClelland were based on the need for power, the need to achieve, the need for affiliation, and how these different needs affect leadership. During the studies, the participants were shown pictures for a few seconds that were likely to provoke the achievement motive. After having seen these pictures, the participants were asked to write short narratives about the pictures. In addition to these stories, the participants were also asked to write narratives when their needs had not been provoked. After having seen the pictures that provoked the achievement motive, the narratives contained references to standards of excellence, doing well, problem solving, and assuming responsibility amongst other things (Boje, 1999). Even though these studies did not actually look at how the narratives were used to support or construct the leadership at hand, the connection between narrative leadership and problem solving is already brought forward, as well as re-igniting the idea of combining narratives with different leadership situations, and can thus be understood as a precursor to the narrative leadership studies that we see today.

Research into narrative leadership has according to Auvinen (2013), who has in previous studies focused directly on the link between narratives and leadership, hitherto mainly revolved around topics such as how to use narratives for change, learning, understanding organizational cultures as well as the leader or the organization itself. Often these studies have been performed on a theoretical level, although since the 1990s there has been an increase in studies of an empirical nature. Generally speaking, studies into narrative leadership fall into one of two different categories: in the first category narrative leadership is viewed as something functional, where the narratives are assumed to have a certain effect and thus outcome, and the focus lies on the leader's practices and how the intentions of the leader are told, understood and later on retold. The second category is where the emphasis is placed on the meaning of leadership as a discourse that is created through narratives. In this case, the focus is more on the structures and narratives themselves, and how they together create and support either the leader or the idea of leadership (Auvinen, 2013). Simply put, when studying narrative leadership, the subject of the study can be the

narratives told by the leader or the construct of the organization or the leadership through narratives. However, in all three cases, it is the leadership itself that is of interest, and the narratives serve as the vessel for the leader.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the studies where the narrative leadership was studied (Sintonen & Auvinen, 2009; Auvinen et al., 2012; Auvinen, 2013), as opposed to how storytelling or narratives were used in a certain aspect of leadership or organizational work (e.g. Gabriel; 2000; Brown et al., 2005; Denning; 2006; Boje, 2008), the leaders were chosen since they were known for their storytelling abilities or the material was gathered through interviews and eliciting stories rather than by observing them as they occurred in the empirical context itself.

Some of the critiques that have been aimed towards narrative leadership relate to its being a newcomer in the field of leadership studies and that much of the understanding of this area of the field is still lacking. As a consequence of this, a lot of theoretical knowledge has fallen behind creating a discrepancy between the theoretical and the empirical (Auvinen, 2013). Furthermore, as described in Chapter 1.5. on central terminology, researchers have not reached a consensus on the definitions of the central terminologies, which can create confusion and differing results. However, by continuing to increase the number of studies conducted within this field, the theoretical understanding can be strengthened and it may be possible to clear the existing discrepancies as well as to reach more coherent definitions.

Another criticism that has arisen is how some eager managers do not take their time to fully grasp what narrative leadership is before putting it to the test, leading more often than not to outcomes that do not shape up as expected (Auvinen, 2013). Furthermore, the idea that narratives are everywhere and that all qualitative studies are on some level narratives is another aspect that has been critiqued. As the interest in narratives increases, so does the willingness to see them everywhere and to pay attention to them (Gabriel, 2000; Auvinen, 2013). However, not everything that shines is gold and not every study that has to do with narratives and leadership is on narrative leadership nor are the narratives of the most fundamental importance.

### 2.2.2. Leadership-As-Practice

For the most part, leadership is traditionally discussed in both leadership studies and in general by understanding it to be a sole male person who by being somewhat heroic leads the pack (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2010; Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Sergi, 2016). This viewpoint also mainly focuses on the this person's abilities, actions, and traits in order to classify them as a suitable or effective leader instead of looking at the culture or situation (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016). Furthermore, it leaves little to no room for the followers of the leader and the importance they play in well-functioning leadership (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010) However, as the different aspects of leadership studies progress, new areas within the field emerge. Leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) is one of these areas within the field of leadership studies (Raelin, 2016).

Essentially, L-A-P comes down to understanding leadership as an action that is constantly occurring instead of relying solely on the behaviors or traits of the leaders (Raelin, 2016; Sergi, 2016;). This idea of leadership being constantly ongoing and continuing to evolve is also shared by Barker (2001), who states that it is problematic to understand such a complex issue as having a clear beginning and end. Similar to narrative leadership, one can also see leadership when using the L-A-P as something that is accomplished together rather than something that one person does or thinks. To clearly illustrate the difference between the idea of different leadership practices and L-A-P, Raelin (2016) describes it as 'practices... refer to specific sequences of activities that may repeatedly recur, whereas practice refers to emergent entanglements that tend to extend or transform meaning over time' (p. 3). In other words, practices can be understood as the more the traditional way of perceiving leadership, where certain boxes, such as traits, are to be ticked in order to fulfill the leadership role. On the other hand, practice is the continuous and shape-shifting actions of the leader together with their followers that creates the role through dialogue, experiences, and directions. Therefore, L-A-P emphasizes the actions, not the one that carries them out, and can thus be understood as an 'un-heroic' way of leadership (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016).

Raelin (2016) lists seven activities that can be found in L-A-P: scanning or identifying new resources, signaling to mobilize or catalyze attention of others to a project, weaving or creating interaction across networks, stabilizing by offering feedback that may lead to behavioral or structural change, inviting and encouraging everyone to participate by e.g. sharing ideas, unleashing by allowing everyone to participate, and reflecting on the meaning of future, current, and past experiences in order to learn how they can meet needs and interests. As such, the social aspect of L-A-P is evident since six out of these seven activities involve the other members of an organization. Furthermore, the idea of inviting everyone to participate and share ideas, creating interactions across networks, as well as reflecting on experiences so that they can be learned from supports the notion of narrative leadership, as it allows for everyone to participate and uses narratives, which are built on experiences, to have an effect on future practices or situations. In addition, Sergi (2016: 113) describes leadership as ‘a set of practices that have organizing effects, and therefore conceptualizes leadership as a consequence (an effect) of collective action, not as one of its causes’. This also mirrors an aspect of narrative leadership, where narratives told by anyone in the organization leads to some form of action.

By looking at leadership through L-A-P, one focuses on the patterns of the practices that are created; the everyday activities, the interactions, and the performances. It is important to note that not all activities are assumed to be practices; rather practices are all activities that carry a specific meaning, that are routinized, and that a specific group of people understand and acknowledge (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016). This means that L-A-P is something that can only be understood by studying everyday work in its natural habitat, as it is created by the whole and not the individual through different practices that they all acknowledge and adhere to. Additionally, as Collinson (2018) emphasizes, it is important to take into account the relations to structure and the power relations in the organization when studying the practices, as action and structure support one another in real life.

### 2.2.3. Human Resource Management

Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the personnel in an organization were mainly viewed as an administrative function. However, developments following different industrial unrests in the 1960s and 1970s led to a change in the approach to the personnel; a shift during which the personnel started to be seen as a ‘human resource’ with individual needs and potential to develop instead of only a piece of the organizational machinery – thus marking the beginning of what is today understood as Human Resource Management (HRM) (Hunter, Saunders, Constance & Saunders, 2006). Today HRM is one of the main pillars of any given organization, that involves all levels of the organization and all the needs of employment from start to finish (Bogardus, 2004; Bratton & Gold, 2017). When HRM first began to take shape as a specific managerial approach, two themes were employed that are still very much a part of the HR work in organizations. The first one is the attempt to make the HR activities more in line with business outcomes and the second one is the Harvard model, through which the complex human relationships and their interactions could be recognized and supported (Hunter et al., 2006).

According to Rao (2009), there are two main functions of HRM; managerial functions and operational functions. Whereas the managerial functions revolve more around the big picture, delving into functions such as workforce planning, organizing, directing, and controlling, the operational functions are on the other hand connected to specific tasks, as they include employment, human resource development through provision of training, compensation, human relations, industrial relations, as well as handling the exit of an employee (Bogardus, 2004; Rao, 2009). Not only are the two functions complex in themselves, but when considering the fact that humans are complex beings that come from different backgrounds and have different skills and expectations (Rao, 2009; Bratton & Gold, 2017), it undeniably implies that the leadership skills and know-how needed for a skilled HR professional to manage their daily workload are hard to pinpoint and depict accurately. However, as previously mentioned in the introduction, if used correctly, narratives make for more manageable and smarter communication as they tend to affect us emotionally and be easier to remember, and thus may make the work of the HR professionals that much more

achievable. All of the previously mentioned practices follow the needs and strategies of the company, although not all need to be handled in-house. Some, like recruitment and pay administration, can be outsourced, whereas other practices can at times be delegated from the HR department to other managers within the organization (Bratton & Gold, 2017). How these practices are dealt with and how much power the HR department has depends on the organization itself; how it is organized, the size of the organization, and on which functions they opt to put emphasis. Furthermore, as witnessed in the empirical context of Treatise and noted in my field notes; when everything is working as it should and no extraordinary issues are transpiring in the organization, it really is business as usual without any extra antics.

Human Resources was chosen as the main department of an organization for this thesis, as it not only is it an area of interest to me, but HR professionals also deal with a lot of different people and thus need to rely on conveying their information in different manners. Some information needs to be delivered directly and being as direct as possible, whereas at other times discretion and time to discuss matters thoroughly is the best way to move forward. This width of approaches allows for different sorts of leadership and storytelling, and thus ample opportunities to convey the application of narrative leadership. With regard to narrative leadership, a department such as HR is a prime object to study. This is due to the varying activities they perform and especially since they all involve human interaction (Bratton & Gold, 2017). As a result, many narratives are told on a daily basis, thus ensuring a buffet of empirical data.



### 3. Methodology

*‘Storytelling is the art of unfolding knowledge in a way that makes each piece contribute to a larger truth’ – Philip Gerard (2000)*

If this master’s thesis were to be written on the topic of organizational storytelling a researcher could simply if they so wished, stay at home and read annual reports and other documents produced by the organization, as they themselves are a narrative chosen by the organization to portray themselves. However, if one wishes to examine the production or usage of narratives one should head out into the field, as that is where they are created and that is where they are told (Czarniawska, 1998).

Before the refined result of an organization’s own narrative is reached there are many different aspects that need to come together, for example, there needs to be a cohesive view on what the general narrative is, which parts should be emphasized, and which are the areas that should not be mentioned at all to anyone outside of the organization. If one were to rely solely on the polished, and fine-tuned versions that the organizations narrate, one would simply not see the big picture (Czarniawska, 1998). Most of us do have narratives that we are not necessarily proud of, but they have shaped us and made us what we are today, thus being a vital part of our own personal narratives. According to Czarniawska (1997), qualitative research is usually seen as the obvious choice of method when dealing with interpretive studies, as people usually tend to communicate with words rather than numbers, although some exceptions are encountered. This is also why I have opted to use qualitative methods for this master’s thesis.

As a lot of storytelling goes on unbeknown to the actor, it can be difficult to ascertain when, why, who, and how the actors use storytelling (Adelswärd, 1996). Furthermore, by looking at leadership through the lens of L-A-P, one can only research narrative leadership by conducting the study in the everyday life of the leader and those around them, as it is something that is constantly ongoing and thus making it somewhat difficult to pinpoint through questionnaires or interviews (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016).

Because of this, as well as the previously mentioned problem of pre-made and fine-tuned narratives, I have decided upon gathering the data for this master's thesis by observational studies. I will also follow up with semi-structured interviews to deepen my understanding of what the Head of HR was aiming to achieve with the use of storytelling if they were at all aware of them using storytelling, and so forth. This way of gathering data can also be referred to as triangulating (Bryman & Bell, 2013), which means using more than one method or theoretical perspective. The use of triangulating will also allow me to obtain much-needed background information on the Head of HR and the HR personnel that will help me amongst other things to understand their background and their knowledge of narrative leadership since I will not solely rely on the information I would be able to gather from observing them.

### 3.1. Observational studies

As previously described, much of storytelling praxis goes on unbeknown to the actor doing the storytelling. This is one of the main reasons why I have opted to base the majority of my empirical data gathering through observational studies. The other reason is the L-A-P's view on leadership as an ongoing process that cannot be understood or captioned in a questionnaire due to its complexity and developing nature (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016). According to Bryman and Bell (2013), there are four different types of roles an observant can play; complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer. The complete participant is unknown to the other participants completely enveloped in the social sphere of the research. The participant as observer is generally the same as the complete observant, except that other participants are aware of the researcher and their role in the social sphere. The observer as participant is mainly seen as an interviewer, occasionally they observe as well but the difference compared to the two other roles is that the researcher does not participate in the activities. The fourth and last role, complete observer, is one in which the researcher does not generally interact with the participants, nor do they need to consider the researcher at all (Bryman & Bell, 2013). For this research the most fitting roles were the combination of complete observant and observant as

participant, this due to my choice of triangulating my method. If I had solely observed the Head of HR at work, then the complete observer role would have been the best fit.

For this thesis, I performed the role of the complete observer is by observing the HR department and shadowing the Head of HR. Shadowing involves following a participant of the research around for a prolonged period. This means attending meetings, sitting in the Head of HR's office as they attend to desk work and so forth (Czarniawska, 2015; Bryman & Bell, 2013; McDonald, 2005). The main point here was to not remain stationary, as I had to go where the HR personnel were, and thus the storytelling, goes (Czarniawska, 2015; McDonald, 2005). Shadowing also involved some interaction with the Head of HR throughout the day, as questions regarding what they are doing, or the purpose of certain actions or interactions arose (Bryman & Bell, 2013; McDonald, 2005). The problems of this manner of observation will be further discussed in Chapter 3.3. My role as an observer.

To be able to recount the results of my observations I needed to take field notes. Bryman & Bell (2013) describe a few basic principles of how to take field notes; take note of the impressions as quickly as possible no matter how minor they were, write more complete notes towards the end of the day and only chose notes that actually reflect on the time of the observations, the place, the participants, and the reasons for the events. Write living and clear notes in order to avoid confusion on the events later on and write thorough notes with the general rule that if in doubt, write it out. Some researchers also carry a recording device to support the written field notes (Bryman & Bell, 2013), which I also did in order to be certain of not missing any part of the storytelling, and which I used according to the agreement that was made with the Head of HR prior to entering the field.

### 3.2. Interviews

Interviews can be structured in many different ways. However, regarding this thesis, there is a clear benefit of using qualitative interviews over quantitative. This is largely due to the fact that the researcher can throughout the process of the interview, or the research, modify the structure to create the best fit for the situation in which it is needed (Bryman & Bell, 2013; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2015; Trost, 2010). As a result of this, the researcher can focus in on a specific question, ask more follow-up questions, or skip some questions in their entirety, while still having some standardized questions to fall back on. Furthermore, this gives the researcher the opportunity of going back for a second interview with follow-up questions.

Bryman and Bell (2013) discuss a range of differently structured interview types. Nevertheless, the most relevant for this research would be the semi-structured interview. This means that a relatively specific interview guide is written before the interview takes place, but during the actual interview, the researcher has to some extent the freedom to move between the questions in the interview guide and ask questions which are not included in the guide, to begin with. Trost (2010), supported by Bryman and Bell (2013), suggests writing down a few topics of discussion rather than specific questions for the interview guide in qualitative interviews. This is so that the interviewer does not steer the discussion but rather gives the interviewee a topic and lets them discuss freely. Nevertheless, the most important part is that the interview guide suits the personal style of the interviewer. An interview guide can also be re-written during the process if the interviewer notices that some part(s) do not work as well as hoped. This method of gathering data can also include a recording device, making it easier to go through wordings used by the interviewee and so forth. However, it is important to respect the wishes of the interviewee if they oppose the use of a recording device for any reason (Trost, 2010).

The strengths of an interview are among others the possibility of letting an interviewee describe their routines or any practical work in their own words and allowing them to reflect on this (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2015). An interview also allows gathering information on emotions and language used during a short time span, which could go amiss if the researcher only observes. On the other hand, a weakness with interviews is that it possibly only reveals a part of a wider phenomenon, which means that it reaps a lot of benefits from being combined with other methods as well. Another aspect that also needs to be taken into consideration concerns trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. A lack of trust can lead to misinformation if the interviewee does not feel comfortable enough to answer, especially if the interview pertains to a sensitive matter (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2015).

In order to execute the triangulation as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I had a two-part interview with the Head of HR; one before the actual fieldwork began, and one after it in order to double-check that the information I had gathered was correct and did not break the confidentiality agreement, and to fill any possible gaps that may have occurred as well as learn to about the developments regarding the data that I gathered since my exit from the field. At the start of this thesis, I also intended to interview the HR personnel at the end of the study in order to ascertain their point of view on the information I had gathered thus far, in alignment with the aim of understanding how they had responded to the narrative leadership. However, this part of the triangulation was unfortunately not completed, mainly due to the unforeseen circumstances created by the Corona pandemic.

### 3.3. Conducting the study

The gathering of the empirical data took place from mid-January to mid-February 2020, over a timespan of four weeks. Throughout this period, I shadowed the Head of HR and sat in on different meetings, during which I observed the attendees while mainly paying attention to the manager. The days during which the empirical data was gathered were decided upon throughout the four weeks, thus allowing for some flexibility with regard to both the Head of HR's and my schedules as to when the day on my part would start and finish, as well as which days were not possible to gather

data at all. The latter eventuality was due to e.g. either to being in a different city or other previously scheduled events that impeded gathering of data. The first interview with the Head of HR took place in their office, the week prior to when the actual gathering of the empirical data was to begin. The second interview took place over the phone, approximately two months after I had exited the field. These interviews, and the general overview of the HR department will be described in chapter 4, 'the empirical context'.

While shadowing I took notes in a notebook (field notes), recording who was speaking to whom, what they were discussing and in what manner. When present, I focused on the type of narrative that was told and how it seemed to be understood; did it need further explanation or was the point clear and so forth. I also noted where these tended to take place and in what kind of settings. As a support function for the observations I had prewritten questions that would help me to focus on the right aspects, such as what I was seeing or hearing as well as what who was interacting with whom (Appendix 3). As previously stated in this chapter, shadowing means that if the Head of HR walks around and goes to different areas or offices, I ought to follow them so that any interactions can be noted and documented. For the most part, this is how I acted. However, at some points the Head of HR stated that they would only 'grab something from the printer' or other acts of a similar manner, during which time I stayed put in their office.

During the timespan that I gathered the empirical data, I was able to take part in one biweekly meeting, with the Head of HR and HR specialists, as well as two triweekly meetings with the entire HR department. Unfortunately, due to scheduling issues I was not able to take part in the second HR specialist meeting. Other meetings also occurred with personnel of other areas of the organization as well as with people from other organizations. These, however, were not reoccurring to the same extent as the previously mentioned 'internal' HR meetings. Some were scheduled ahead of time, whereas others were more ad hoc and occurred whenever it suited the participants. At the start of each meeting my role was made clear, and if necessary it was confirmed by the participants that my presence would not interfere nor disrupt the meetings, and that they did not object to my presence for any other reason. It was also made clear at two different occasions that I have signed a confidentiality agreement, after which the

meetings proceeded as normal. The internal meetings were whenever possible recorded on my phone, with permission from the Head of HR, solely for the purpose of simplifying the process of processing the data and making sure that no piece of information would be lost or misunderstood, especially since several people attended these meetings and at times tended to speak simultaneously.

When entering the field, I quite quickly got to meet a large part of the personnel in the HR department; some of them came to talk to the Head of HR, whereas I met others during the first coffee break of the day. Everyone I met during my time in the field was very supporting and understanding of my role in the field, and some were even somewhat curious about the thesis that I was writing. However, any question I got on the topic of my thesis got more or less the same answer as I had given the Head of HR as a reply – i.e. that I was writing a thesis on the topics of leadership, HR, and a certain kind of communication, mainly due to the fact that I could not be sure whether any other information would make its way to the HR department.

### 3.3.1. Ethical considerations

There are four ethical issues that need to be taken into account when conducting a qualitative study. According to Bryman and Bell (2013), these four issues are a plausible cause of harm to the participants and confidentiality, a plausible lack of consent from the participants of the study, the intrusion of privacy, and withholding important information, false pretenses, or plausible fraud.

The central issue for this thesis is the first out of the four; to ensure that the main participant is given the opportunity to remain confidential and hence out of any harm's way, be it either professional, emotional or physical harm (Bryman & Bell, 2013). For this thesis, I chose to study the narrative leadership in the HR department at an institution of higher education. For the sake of confidentiality, neither the name nor the location of this institution will not be released, and it will henceforth be called 'Treatise', which means 'a systematic exposition or argument in writing including a methodical discussion of the facts and principles involved and conclusions reached' (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The only information that is of key importance to the thesis

will be described, although even this will not be too specific in order to keep the organization and the people that are directly involved as anonymous as possible. No names or personal descriptions will be disclosed so that the identities can be kept anonymous. Instead, the pronoun ‘they’ will be used instead of ‘he’ and ‘she’. This is all in order to assure the confidentiality of the participants. Furthermore, a confidentiality agreement was agreed upon and signed. As a result, some findings may be slightly altered as described above, in line with the confidentiality agreement and the ethical considerations that follow.

The second issue regarding a lack of consent from the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2013) was also dealt with. However, as explained further in the fourth issue on withholding information, full consent regarding use of their narratives in the material was only received from some participants after I had exited the field.

The third issue brought forward by Bryman & Bell (2013) was also be taken into account due to the nature of the tasks involved in the Head of HR’s work. There were some personal meetings that the manager attended that I had to sit out of. Nevertheless, for the majority of the time, I was allowed to shadow the manager and take part in the discussions that occurred.

Finally, the fourth and last issue concerned withholding information, false pretenses, and fraud (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Whereas this thesis was not affected by the two last issues, the first issues needs to be addressed. While contacting the Head of HR as well as while gathering the data, the matter of narrative leadership was withheld so that it would not affect the outcome of the results. Furthermore, while the personnel in the HR department were aware of my presence and that I was shadowing the Head of HR, they were not aware of their impact on the results, and that I because of that I also took notes on the narratives they told. This matter was however cleared up after I had exited the field.



### 3.3.2. My role as an observer

Since I placed myself into an organization and more specifically into an HR department, I had to bear in mind that I could not be completely objective in my role as an observer - this is largely due to my prior knowledge of storytelling and can be explained by the hermeneutic view on understanding and Heidegger's 'new version of the hermeneutic circle' (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2018 p.120). Essentially, we are never free of any preconceived meanings as they are built on past individual experiences and comprehensions. Also, as previously described in Chapter 2.2. on Narrative Leadership by the play called Tamara (Boje, 2008), I could not simply see every part of the narrative leadership, especially since some of the narratives took place when retelling the narratives to others. This may have occurred amongst the HR professionals while I was shadowing the Head of HR or observing during a meeting. In order to minimize the amount of empirical data that could go amiss, as described in Chapter 3.2., I also conducted interviews with the personnel in the HR department in order to ascertain their views on the narrative leadership within the department. Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2013) also recognize the importance of the researcher's values, that mirror the researcher's personal feelings or opinions, which had to be taken into account during the fieldwork and the analysis. I also needed to take into consideration the fact that my mere presence could generate changes in either the behavior of the HR department observed (Czarniawska, 2015). I will later on also reflect and discuss this topic, in order to clarify my personal impact on the results.

In order not to affect the narrative aspects of narrative leadership in the HR department, I chose not to mention this aspect when contacting the Head of HR or when presenting myself and the thesis to the HR department or other parties that I met while gathering the empirical data. Instead, I only mentioned that I will focus on leadership, HR, and a certain kind of communication. Hopefully, by choosing this somewhat unclear wording, I was able to keep the narrative aspect out of the picture and thus not affect the daily work of the HR department or the outcome of this thesis. During the first meeting with the Head of HR and the personnel at the HR department, I emphasized that they should all act as if I wasn't there, not to take any notice of me and try to ignore me as much as they possibly could. However, the Head of HR did discuss my thesis and what it would involve with regard to the collection of the

empirical data with the HR department prior to my arrival. This suggests that they had already shaped some form of preconceived notions of my thesis and what it possibly could involve.

As I, for the most part, was shadowing rather than solely observing, I was able to discuss with the Head of HR, the personnel at the HR department, as well as with the other parties that I came into contact with while in the field. This means that any unclear events or on-goings could be cleared up as they occurred or very soon thereafter. It was also possible to explain my presence or note-taking, thus making other participants feel more at ease and allowing them to behave more naturally. A clear drawback with shadowing, was that the terms of access needed constantly to be renegotiated (Czarniawska, 2015). This was due to the fact that different people attended different meetings, thus renewing the need to ask for their permission and approval that I would take part and observe what was being said.

### 3.4. Processing the material

When enough data has been collected from the field it is up to the researcher to analyze and process the material (Svensson & Ahrne, 2011). It is during this stage that the researcher encounters three different problems: the chaos problem, the representation problem, and the authority problem (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). The chaos problem emerges in the beginning as the qualitative material tends to be both plentiful and rich. To combat this problem and to make sense of the chaos at hand, it is best to go through one's material a number of times and to simultaneously sort and divide it into different categories (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). This is what is referred to as 'coding' (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011; Sang & Sitko 2014), and indicates which categories different parts of the material belong to. It is also worth noting that the theoretical framework that has been chosen usually tends to have some impact on the coding (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). This does not mean that it has a negative impact, it does however mean that the researcher needs to be aware of possible blind spots that the theoretical framework may or may not create.

Following the chaos problem, one needs to overcome the representation problem. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011) describe this as the problem of being unable to present everything and thus having to reduce the material. The aim is to create a good representation of the material, which while being selective still provides a fair depiction (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). Lastly, the authority problem, as described by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011), implies that the researcher needs to argue for their place amongst other researchers and thus claim some form of authority for their thesis and the subject itself. By creating an argument for one's own material instead of only disclosing it, the researcher inevitably contributes to the field.

Whereas Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011) argue for a sequenced manner of processing one's material, Svensson and Ahrne (2011) argue that the researcher usually already begins to process and analyze the material long before all the data has been gathered. Generally, these preliminary analyses happen while out in the field, when the researcher notices general themes or patterns. For this thesis I followed the arguments of Svensson and Ahrne, as approximately half way through my time in the field I started to observe some patterns. At this point I went back through the theoretical framework and realized that the different groupings of narratives suggested by Brown et al. (2005) worked well with the patterns that were emerging in the HR department. After recognizing this connection, I could then follow the narratives in a different way as I was able to group them into either one or more codes already as they happened. After having gathered all the data and the actual processing of the data began, I also noted other codes or themes of the daily HR work in Treatise, which were described or explained by the narratives. These themes consisted of: changes, knowledge sharing, and problem solving.

The material itself was only altered to the extent that it would keep the anonymity the people and the organization. This means that some names were removed, instead of writing him/her I used the gender-neutral term 'they' and so forth. The interviews were transcribed; however, the transcripts do not include laughter, pauses, nor were they exactly typed out word for word - the main purpose was to make the material more accessible and easier to process. The recordings were not transcribed as a whole, only the chosen narratives were first transcribed and later on translated. While listening to the recordings I marked down the times of when a narrative was told, in order to

later on be able to return to these narratives and narrow them down to the ones brought forward in the findings in chapter 5.

## 4. The Empirical Context

*‘The stories we tell literally make the world. If you want to change the world, you need to change your story. This applies both to individuals and institutions’*

*– Michael Margolis (Kerpen, 2016)*

In this chapter, I will describe the organization Treatise, in which the empirical study was conducted. When describing the HR department, I will rely on personal observations as well as information obtained through interviews, discussions, and from the organization’s webpage. Firstly, the organization in which the study was conducted will be described and secondly, the empirical context will be described by describing the HR department in detail. Lastly, the content of the two interviews conducted with the Head of HR will be presented.

### 4.1. The Organization

The organization where the empirical data for this master’s thesis was collected is an institution of higher education. As discussed in Chapter 3.3.1. on ethical considerations, the institution will be kept confidential so that the participants can remain anonymous. For this reason, the organization will be, as previously stated, referred to as ‘Treatise’.

With regard to the size of the organization, one could consider it a large organization as Treatise has more than 250 employees, and it serves more than 1000 students annually (Treatise, 2019). As Treatise is an institution of higher education it has a number of different faculties, each with their ‘own’ designated HR professional who has specialized themselves in the needs of said faculty (Treatise, 2019). Treatise functions in a number of different buildings, meaning that a great deal of the communication occurs through electronic devices. These may be either email, phone calls or video conference calls, as observed while in the field.

As described in the delimitations, I am only focusing on one organization which means that the results will mainly apply to this specific HR department. However, it is plausible that some general ideas and results could be applied to HR departments in similar fields or to departments that are structured in a similar manner. To begin with, I aimed at having two different organizations, as this would have added to the credibility of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Nevertheless, by only focusing on one organization, it is possible to obtain more in-depth empirical data and a wider understanding of the narrative leadership in said organization.

#### 4.2. The HR department

The HR department consists in total of 22 people, 18 of whom are seated in the same location, and will henceforth be referred to as the main department. The remaining 4 members work in another location, remaining in constant contact with the main department via mainly electronic devices and video conference calls. These video conference calls with the entire HR department take place every three weeks when the entire HR department has a joint meeting, and apart from these, the HR specialists have their own meetings together with the Head of HR every second Monday (Interview, 7.1.2020). The roles of the employees in the HR department are Head of HR, HR service manager, HRD manager, HR specialist, HR secretary, and HR planner (Treatise, 2019).

The main department was located in the midst of one of the administrative buildings of Treatise. All the offices of the staff members of the HR department were located along two hallways, making them easily accessible for all, but at the same time giving them a certain amount of privacy that might be needed in their line of duty. By having separate offices, the staff members could quite easily indicate whether they were available to the other staff members by simply leaving their door open or by closing it. Approximately half of the staff members had their own offices, while the other half shared with one other person. The Head of HR's office was located at the end of the hallway, giving it more privacy than other offices. The office of the Head of HR was of decent size, with room for both a desk and a separate table, at which smaller meetings or discussions could be conducted.

The general atmosphere during the month I spent out in the field was very welcoming, calm and laid back. Every so often one could hear discussions taking place somewhere in the main department and twice a day the volume would increase as it got closer to the coffee breaks. There was a low sense of hierarchy, implying that everybody could ask anybody for help or speak their mind if they felt like it. During the meetings the matters were discussed openly, and it seemed as if everyone could voice their opinion or raise matters that they were thinking about.

#### 4.3. Interviews with the Head of HR

The first interview was conducted in order to establish their view on the daily HR work that is done, their background, what issues the HR department is currently dealing with, and how the Head of HR views the department itself. As discussed in Chapter 3.2 on the method of adding interviews to the triangulation, the main purpose of this interview was to obtain necessary background info so that the data collected through shadowing and observations could more easily be understood, thus avoiding any misunderstandings.

The interview took place on January 7, 2020, which for many was the first official day back at work after the Christmas holiday. The main department was rather quiet, even though the majority of the personnel seemed to be back at work, judging by the lights from the offices and the number of open doors. The interview itself lasted for 30 minutes but was at one point interrupted by a coworker who needed some pointers from the Head of HR. They seemed to immediately understand who I was, and what I was there for, which shows that at least this part of the internal communication works well, and that the department had been well informed of my coming presence. For this interview I used some pre-written questions (appendix 1) as a part of the semi-structured interview (Trost 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2013).

During the interview, it was made clear that some of the issues that the HR department is currently dealing with, apart from the ‘usual’ daily tasks that take place, were a new HR system they were implementing, which would add on to the ones already in use, a move from one office area to another one, and a piloted project on exercising during working hours (Interview 7.1.2020). The two first mentioned aspects of the new HR system and the move had a direct impact on the entire HR department whereas the piloted project already had ended and now the Head of HR was discussing on and off with different persons within Treatise on how they could continue on with the project, or if they ought to end it entirely.

The Head of HR also commented that more often than not, the staff members in the HR department primarily turn to each other for help and guidance, turning to the Head of HR only as a ‘last resort’ (Interview 7.1.2020). Most of the staff members in the HR personnel had worked there for over a year, some even longer, with only two out of the 18 having started during the past year (interview 7.1.2020). Another matter that was pointed out during the interview (7.1.2020) was that this was the first time in a while that the HR department did not have any major issues or problems to deal with. Previously, Treatise had to deal with, among other things, deal with major financial cuts, which put a lot of strain on the HR department as staff from different areas of Treatise had to be laid off. In other words, during my time in the field, the HR personnel could focus on their daily tasks and not rush with their tasks.

The second interview took place approximately 1.5 months after the material had been gathered (31.3.2020). In total, the interview lasted about 15 minutes and was conducted over the phone due to the ongoing pandemic. To begin with the excerpts from the material I had gathered was discussed and made sure that nothing that had been written out of term or that would violate the confidentiality agreement, after which I asked the follow-up questions as listen in appendix 2. The results of this interview will be presented in the results which are discussed in Chapter 6, as they concerned what had happened after I left the organization and how the work had continued.



## 5. Findings

*'We can't live without stories. In one form or another, everybody lives on them from the age of two until their death.'* – Paul Auster (1997: 336)

In this chapter I will discuss the findings that were made in the HR department of Treatise. The findings will be presented by grouping them into the different types of narratives listed by Brown et al. (2005) that can occur in an organization. The types were: stories about other people, work itself, the organization, social bonding, stories used as signals, stories about the past, the future, life itself, and stories about oneself. Even though narratives about life, other people, oneself, and social bonding were present in the field, they will not be presented in this thesis as they did not have any form of narrative leadership in them. It can however be noted that those narratives that were excluded from this thesis mainly occurred during the HR department's coffee breaks or before any meetings began, when the majority of the participants were present. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the notions of value are based off what I witnessed during my time at Treatise, and as such are my subjective view on what could be perceived as having value by the Head of HR.

The major part of the narratives gathered from the field did not constitute what would be seen as a 'story' according to Mossberg and Nissen (2006), which would include a message, a conflict, a cast, and an intrigue. Instead, the classification of what is regarded as a narrative in this thesis will rely on the three points described by Torkki (2014) that were previously described in Chapter 2.1.1. concerning what defines a narrative. These points are that the narrative has a certain temporality and is, that it describes some kind of event and that it is adding value or defining what the storyteller thinks has value.

The following excerpts from the material were chosen as they both contained a narrative and showed or generated leadership. In general, the narrative style was quite straightforward and transactional rather than conforming to what is more traditionally viewed as a narrative, following the ideas on how a narrative may differ in an organization (Reissner & Pagan, 2013). At this point it is unknown whether this is due to the fact that they were told in 'everyday scenarios' and not e.g. in a training session,

or whether if this is the general narrative style of the Head of HR and the personnel in the HR department.

The findings will be presented in a narrative manner by giving quotes from the field followed by a short explanation of the situation and the narratives. However, only the internal meetings were recorded, as agreed on before I entered the field, thus meaning that other descriptions and quotes are based on the notes taken. It is also worth noting that some chains of events or discussions might have been slightly altered in order to fulfill the confidentiality agreement and to keep Treatise and the participants in this study as anonymous as possible. Nevertheless, the integrity and the meaning behind the narratives do remain the same despite these slight alterations.

## 5.1. Stories about work itself

As one may assume, stories about work itself were the most common narratives that were told, mainly due to the fact that there were some new technological tools that had been put into operation in Treatise, as well as one new system that was going to be applied to the HR department. However, only four different issues will be used as examples and all of these were told during a departmental meeting and an HR specialist meeting. The issues concerned emails, the intranet, a new HR system, and a communication channel.

### 5.1.1. Questionable emails

The first issue came up during one of the internal meetings with the entire HR department. It is necessary to bring attention to any risks or ongoing threats as a large part of today's work goes on via different online tools. On this topic, the Head of HR began to describe an issue with receiving questionable emails

*'I don't know if all of you have gotten these, but I have now twice received weird emails...'* (Head of HR, 16.1.2020)

The narrative was interrupted due to some technical difficulties, as some of the HR personnel are joining over a video conference call. At this point the HR Service Manager added on with a narrative of their own

*'I get them all the time, but I delete them... I get both emails that are badly written, but I have also on many occasions received emails from people I know. But I have also during the past six months gotten emails from four people I kind of know, and I got this feeling that something was not right, and then shortly after I get another email saying that their accounts have been hacked. And then the companies – the emails came from their work email – have reached out and apologized and everything... But I do get lots of them. Not really daily, but on a weekly basis. I even got one from the former rector the other week! And it said that any replies should be sent to "executive rector" which was kind of weird...'* (HR Service Manager, 16.1.2020)

The head of HR agreed and continued

*'Yeah, the one I got last week was an email that at first looked normal. It was sent from company x, with a message saying that they had sent attachments and "please open them". And if one were to open them, well it would have been over then. I think someone at the other Treatise location got them as well? Yeah, so do not under any circumstances open those attachments, because then your accounts will be hacked! So, pay extra attention to any messages on payments that are due from company x if you think that the emails seem a bit off. Apparently, there's quite a few of those emails going around, so pay attention. If you're unsure you can always reach out to the person that supposedly sent an email and ask whether they sent it to you or not.'* (Head of HR, 16.1.2020)

The personnel in Treatise is in contact with other organizations on a daily basis, especially the personnel in the HR department. This means that they are constantly at risk of receiving malware. Even though Treatise uses a rather effective antivirus software, which implies that the majority of these questionable emails would not reach the receiver, as some questionable emails do apparently pass the antivirus and it was highly necessary to remind everyone to stay alert. By sharing this information, the Head of HR may in this way prevent any problems ahead of time instead of having to solve the issue after one of more accounts have been hacked, which would amount to a lot more work. The situation is also accentuated by two different personal experiences, one being that a scam email had been sent from someone they knew (in this case a former rector), and the other one being an email that was sent from a business partner. The message that the Head of HR conveys is hence supported and strengthened by two other narratives. As Brown et al. (2005) note, by sharing narratives that they are living, leaders enhance their authenticity and credibility – which in this case was corroborated and further enhanced by another member of the department. As Denning (2006) noted, the best way to share knowledge is if the narrative has a slight negative tone, which can be noted by them saying that accounts can be hacked if the emails are opened and so forth.

Here the temporalities of the narratives change from ‘last week’ to ‘past six months’ showing that this has in fact been an issue that has been going on for a prolonged period of time. Despite this, it was not brought up until the Head of HR received a questionable email the week before, pointing out that this was an issue of concern, although not urgent enough for the information to be spread in any other manner than to bring it up during the triweekly meeting with the entire department. However, both the Head of HR and the HR service manager place value on being alert and taking note of the emails that might seem questionable.

### 5.1.2. The intranet

The second issue came about during the same HR department meeting. Some of the personnel at the HR department brought up a matter they had noticed with the new intranet which had been launched a short while prior to this meeting. A number of the tasks that are involved in the daily HR work are dependent on the intranet, as that is where information, different forms etc. are stored. Therefore, the new intranet caused some confusion as it was unclear as to who has access and sees what information.

*So, we took a look at the intranet yesterday with another coworker and we started to wonder about the search function, because you get a lot of material when you're searching, and I think the coworker said that you can only find things that you have access to. So also documents from different teams...' (HRD Manager, 16.1.2020)*

Others chimed in and added on:

*'Yeah, and also if you have commented on a document in your teams, that gets saved, I don't know if this is now what's called metadata, but it saves that and it's like "hey, I've been here and commented on something". So that person's name is not mentioned in the document itself, but they have been in the teams-group and commented on something and that's why it comes up... but this shouldn't be visible to you unless you're a part of the teams-group, right? We have to test that!' (HR Specialist, 16.1.2020)*

In these narratives it is clear that there was much uncertainty in the HR department as to what information was saved where, and what information was visible in the new intranet. The temporalities in these examples are a little vaguer, as they only go from past to present tense, although they do both give value to the amount of information that is now accessible and visible as opposed to how it used to be.

At the HR Specialist meeting the following week, the Head of HR brought up the intranet issues that were discussed at the HR department meeting. The Head of HR had also invited a staff member from the communications department to take part in the meeting in order to try to clear up the questions and issues that had arisen during the HR department meeting.

*'So, the intranet... it came up last week, mainly regarding the search function. If you search for a person, it also shows a whole bunch of documents, and we got to wondering what it actually brings up and on what premises does it do this? I mean what documents do we dare to upload? And how should we classify the material? So that's the main reason that I invited you here, so that you could explain to us as far as you know and understand, what it searches for and how it does that'*  
(Head of HR, 20.1.2020)

The issue about the new intranet came up during many different discussions and was brought up during a couple of different meetings. Here, the Head of HR explained in general what had been going on and why they had invited a person from another department to sit in on their HR Specialist meeting. By doing so, the Head of HR narrated meaning (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016) to what had previously been expressed by the personnel at the HR department. As previously noted, a clear majority of the personnel in the HR Department have been working there for a number of years. This means that they had had time to create their own work habits: where to find information, how to find it as quickly as possible, and so forth. With a new intranet in place, all these habits had to be relearned and they also needed to understand the logic behind the new intranet. All of these factors create different levels of confusion, which they expressed in narrative form. The use of narratives is very common when it comes to expressing experiences, especially if the experience includes some form of change. As Fisch (2014) noted, this is due to the fact that we shape our experiences as narratives, which are reshaped over time as we gain even more experiences. In this example the active role of the leader is amplified, where like in the play Tamara (Boje, 2008) the narratives already began long before the 16.1.2020 departmental meeting and the Head of HR chose to follow along with the narratives that were explained to them.

### 5.1.3. New communications channel

During the same HR specialist meeting as in the previous example, the third issue was presented as one of the HR specialists brought up an issue they had had with the new communications channel that Treatise has taken into use, and whether they were responsible for following up with questions that might arise from information they post. The new communications channel came to as a result of the new intranet and the program that was connected to it, thus meaning that both of these changes were introduced more or less at the same time. This issue sparked a discussion on how to comment in the new communications channel:

*'But this is an interesting phenomenon, because we have pretty much created a completely new channel and we really haven't had time to think about that part [who is responsible for it]. Maybe that's something we'll learn along the way... Already though with some fairly easy questions like with the questions on the use of exercise benefits – how are we going to answer there? And where are we going to answer? The issue itself is pretty harmless, and since Treatise decided to not hand out the exercise benefits as we have the other option, a discussion arose where even one from our department had commented that they "had tried to bring this up many times, but nothing happens" – this then leads us to the discussion on what we can comment ourselves, what should we and what is ok for us to comment on in a channel like this. There even was a senior staff member that had liked one of the comments, which leads us to the question of "what is your role?" and if Treatise has made a decision, you shouldn't like something that is against it' (Head of HR, 20.1.2020)*

The issues of responsibility and what role you are portraying is at the core here, where do you draw the line between your personal and your professional self. Much like what McClelland described in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, assuming responsibility becomes an aspect of the narratives when certain motives and needs are triggered (Boje, 1999). Combined with the change that the new communications channel brings, this example narrates the realities (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016) of the effects that as new technology and communication channels come along, the line between work and leisure time becomes increasingly blurred. Especially as this communication channel

functions through an application. If one has downloaded the application to a personal phone it may cause the lines between work and leisure time to become even more blurred as messages can reach you at any given hour. As stated in the quote above, this can also lead to a blurred line between the personal and professional self, which can at times lead to personnel commenting on work related matter in a public channel in a manner that contradicts their professional role. In other words, this excerpt focuses on an apparent need for common guidelines, both for the HR department but also for Treatise as a whole as to how one should use the new communication channel since a similar channel has not yet been used in Treatise.

#### 5.1.4. The new HR system

Following this, the fourth issue arose as the discussion turned to the new HR system that the department was going to start using as an addition to the HR system that was already in use. The Head of HR had signed the contract the same day, but still they asked if the HRD manager had more information on the timetable and how long it would take to actually get the system up and running

*‘They said it was going to take two to three weeks to create our organizations environment. Simultaneously they are also working on a larger update on the “documentation of discussions” module, and they thought that would take about three weeks to make and this was about one week ago that I got this information – so it would be about two weeks from now. This means that it would be really good to start working on the documents for the development discussions a.s.a.p., because then it’ll be really quick to get them uploaded to the new system... (HRD Manager, 20.1.2020)*

After this narrative, the HRD manager commented that it might be a good idea to plan on it taking one week longer than was initially expected, which the Head of HR agreed on. In this example we can see how external factors can play a role in how work can proceed. It is not always purely up to the department at hand to make things work according to a certain timetable, sometimes other external factors or organizations play a part in how the work is structured. This example illustrates further how much



information others in the HR department have that is also necessary for the Head of HR as well, thus pinpointing the importance of knowledge sharing. As Denning (2006) noted, this narrative shares an somewhat detailed explanation on the cause and effect that usually come with sharing knowledge, for instance the timetable given to them leaves for some room to use the time wisely so that the HR department can make full use of the new HR system once it was up and running, instead of waiting until they had gotten the new system and only then started to work on the documents. By sharing this piece of information on the timetable, it now allows the Head of HR to make sure that everything is going according to plan as well as to start arranging the next steps. The temporality in this narrative jumps from past tense to present and even to future tense, and the value is placed on time and its use.

Further on in the same topic of the new HR system, one of the HR specialists asked during the same meeting for more detailed information about what the new HR system was going to be used for. The Head of HR described it as follows:

*‘Well, essentially it has four basic features: handling of training – in this part we could add all of our courses, handling of discussions, then there’s a module on skills management so that you could build a library with your skills, and if everyone would do that then we could just look up in the system and see who from Treatise is really good at... for instance horticulturism... anything really! And then it can also be used to set goals, so you could connect it to our strategies and personal goals, and things like that on a more detailed level, where you would be able to follow it up. But for the moment we’re only going to use the two first features, handling of documents and handling of discussions. It is however totally possible to expand it later on to get other features...’ (Head of HR, 20.1.2020)*

Prior to any new software being actually taken into use, it can be difficult to grasp what change it will entail. By giving a full account for what the new HR system could possibly do, it may allow for a swifter change from the old HR system to the new system, as the HR specialist now knows what to expect and what usage they can get from it. Further it enhances the strength of this precise system and supports the reasoning behind why this specific system was chosen. Here the Head of HR explains the changes that are already occurring and about to be put into use, but they are also

explaining a possible future scenario on what could happen as a result of the procurement of the new HR system. In this narrative, the notion of knowledge is multifaceted; firstly, the Head of HR shares the knowledge they have of the new HR system and its different possibilities, and secondly, it also puts some weight on sharing knowledge throughout the organization as the new system would allow for easier access to understanding what knowledge is held by Treatise's personnel. As Brown et al. (2005) note, knowledge, and the way it is being shared, is becoming more valuable in organizations which could also imply that there is an growing importance for the systems and channels that the organizations use.

## 5.2. Stories about the organization

Stories about the organization are generally expressed rather carefully as they implicate a lot of people and many years of organizational history. They are also created by the organization as a whole and can hence be difficult to change if needed. Three examples will be discussed, regarding strategy and change, ergonomics at work, and exercise during work hours.

### 5.2.1. Strategy and change

As previously mentioned, one of the aspects of HR is employment of new personnel. An ongoing recruitment coincided with my time in the field, which meant that there were interviews that I was allowed to sit in on and observe. One of the interviewees was interested in some guidelines they found online and asked the Head of HR if there were any larger changes currently going on within Treatise.

*'We are currently working on a new strategy, and when that strategy is approved it is something that still needs to be fine-tuned. But it is guaranteed that it is something that will reflect on the work in the faculties and the support functions. We are an organization which constantly develops and changes, even though organizations like ours are somewhat marked as being a fortress that never changes ... The core activities are still there, unchanged, but the way we work needs to be rethought.'*  
(Head of HR 22.01.2020)

Since Treatise is a large organization, changes can take some time to fully take effect. They need to be approved at many different meetings, guidelines need to be drafted and passed around, and all of the personnel need to be informed of the changes. With this narrative, the Head of HR hints at changes that are already in the making and that will sooner or later cause something of an extra burden until the change has been fully taken on and woven into the daily activities, which are challenging aspects that can be made easier through narratives (Denning, 2006; Auvinen, 2013). Additionally, the Head of HR also acknowledges the image and narrative of Treatise may have by stating that some may see it as a 'fortress', which in a way contradicts what they are saying about the ongoing change. By expressing that 'the way we work needs to be rethought', the Head of HR recognizes the fact that despite a constant change taking place in Treatise, there is still a lot that needs to be adjusted or reconsidered.

### 5.2.2. Ergonomics at work

Not long before I entered the field, Treatise changed its healthcare provider, which meant that they had to get acquainted with an entirely new organization and their way of operating. They also had to thoroughly explain the organizational structure of Treatise as well as how some of the daily functions proceed, so that the new healthcare provider understood the needs that the personnel from Treatise may or may not have. During the first meeting with the new healthcare provider, the Head of HR opened up how the how Treatise is structured, with the different faculties and support functions as well as management. When asked by a physiotherapist about how ergonomic the work stations are, the Head of HR responded

*Well, let me tell you... At one time we started with the practice that if someone needed an electric table they would get one, but now with all the new spaces that Treatise will be located in, everyone will have an electric table. Everyone doesn't have their own room, but they do have their own work station which makes it possible to adjust the tables to their personal preferences.'* (Head of HR, 13.1.2020)

The way the Head of HR starts this example is a clear marker that a narrative is about to be told. What can be understood from this example is that some decisions that are taken in Treatise occur in a staggered manner, which as a result implies that it takes time for an extensive change to evolve. Further, this example corroborates to a certain degree what the Head of HR explains in the previous example on strategy – change does happen but not in a manner that would be immediately visibly, at least not most of the time, giving more value to both examples when seen as a whole. This narrative, which is intended for healthcare specialists, would not have caused much of a reaction if shared with any other party. Denning (2006) explains that this is due to the fact that if one is not in the narratives specific focus group, some details may go amiss which then effects the entire meaning of the narrative. Furthermore, as Cunliffe and Hibbert (2016) explain, the Head of HR engages in a leadership activity by narrating the current reality of the personnel in Treatise and how it will change in the future as a result of change.

### 5.2.3. Exercise during working hours

The issue with exercise during work hours can also give us a better understanding of how diverse the different areas of Treatise are when it comes to manners of working. This excerpt from the material is from an internal meeting for the entire HR department, where the Head of HR explains the discussion they had had at a management meeting

*'I took part in one of the management meetings last Monday, and I explained the results of the work environment survey. We now used for the first time the expertise of an external company that can analyze text, so that you can see which areas are positive and which are negative, and they rank them in different ways. Through this way of analyzing we found out that we have personnel that are ambassadors, meaning that they speak highly of Treatise and would recommend us as an employer, and we also have critics. And amongst the ambassadors, one thing that they experienced as something positive was exercise during work hours and other areas that were related to health, such as the electric tables. I mentioned this as well as the satisfaction with exercise during work hours and said that we have to have another meeting with senior personnel. They all nodded and said yes, but there wasn't really anyone that said "yeah, we're going to do something about this" ... So, it's not buried, but I don't know how warmly they relate to it...' (Head of HR 7.2.2020)*

Through this excerpt from the material, one can start to see the diversity in the way that the work tasks are performed in Treatise, as some of the personnel are more mobile due to their line of work. Thus, not all of the senior staff members are equally as keen on the piloted exercise during work hours project and the change that it would amount to. By bringing up the positive feedback that had been recorded in the survey, the Head of HR aspired to factually show its impact on the personnel and show that this project creates a lot of positive emotions and connection to the organization itself. Additionally, the Head of HR also brings forward the sort of image that some of the personnel already have of Treatise, and which ideally the entire personnel would share. In other words, one could argue that the Head of HR places value on two things; the well-being of the personnel and the image of the organization. As Mossberg and Nissen (2006) pointed out, narratives engage us on an emotional level, and by bringing up the positive and emotional effect this project has had the Head of HR in essence doubles up on the emotional importance and value of this narrative. Furthermore, Auvinen (2013) and Denning (2006) point out, narratives are useful when leading changes, which the Head of HR basically is doing as they are supporting the continuance of the piloted project.

### 5.3. Stories used as signals

As Brown et al. (2005) and Boje (2008) pointed out, not all narratives are of the spoken kind. Every organization has constructed itself differently due to varying reasons. These constructions can be seen from multiple angles, although only two examples of these signals will be presented: shared rules for work practices and the move.

#### 5.3.1. Shared rules for work practices

One of these that was encountered during my time in the field, was an agreement that the HR department drew up called ‘shared rules for work practices’ (sv. ‘gemensamma spelregler’). These are rules that the members of the HR department wrote together in order to make the atmosphere and workflow better, and are as follows:

1. *We will write on the note by the door if we arrive later, leave earlier or head out.*
2. *We will always notify if we are absent.*
3. *We will agree in advance on teleworking.*
4. *We will try to make time for coffee breaks. In the morning we will drink coffee at 9:30 and in the afternoon around 14:00. The break will not last for longer than 15 minutes. We will not discuss work matters during the coffee breaks.*
5. *We are not expected to respond to emails outside working hours.*
6. *We aim to inform all involved parties as soon as possible. We will ask if there is anything unclear.*
7. *We deal with issues with the people involved and work out any misunderstandings.*
8. *We will write protocols from our internal meetings.*

The Head of HR had this taped to the wall by their door on the inside of the office. With it being in plain sight, one can draw the conclusion that it is something that they

try their utmost to follow, thus shaping the way in which one conducts oneself as a member of the HR department and therefore narrates the everyday life in the department. Each of the eight rules places value on some aspects, mainly on respect for others, but also on the HR departments own culture and when it is acceptable to either take a break or refrain from working. By adhering to the rules listed and as such interpreting them themselves, the personnel in the HR department make the rules into a part of their own narrative as they describe their own experiences at the department (Fisch, 2014). It should be noted that not all of these rules were visible during my time in the field, as for instance notifications of teleworking may have happened prior to my arrival or for example via email, that I did not have access to. Nevertheless, even though a clear majority of the rules described above were followed the rule on not speaking about work matters during the coffee break was the one most frequently broken, one of these instances will be found further along in the findings. Creating these rules together with the entire HR department is in line with the seven activities that Raelin (2016) notes to be found in L-A-P. Firstly, everyone was allowed to participate and able to share their ideas, and through the feedback rules were created that in turn changed the structural behavior of the HR department, for instance with the coffee breaks. Furthermore, these coffee breaks have become a routinized everyday activity that leads to interactions and that carries a specific meaning, which also is in line with L-A-P (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016).

### 5.3.2. The move

Another example of stories used as a signal can be seen by how the seating arrangement was made when it was time for the HR department to move to another building. Previously, the offices in the HR department had been either for one or two persons, but in the new building there would be two rooms where four people were placed, and the rest, apart from the Head of HR, HR service manager, and HRD manager, would be placed in two-person rooms. The managers of the HR department were placed in their own rooms, as they at times need privacy for sensitive or private discussions, thus painting a picture of the internal structure and of the tasks that are involved in the HR work of the different positions in the HR department.

During an informal meeting the Head of HR, the HRD Manager, and the HR Service Manager started to plan who would sit in which room and, maybe more importantly, with whom they should share a room. By doing so, they were signaling who would benefit from being seated together, and how they believed that the work would flow best. The Head of HR and the HR managers had knowledge on various health aspects that also needed to be taken into account, implying that some form of discussions had been held with the personnel in the HR department about the move and their needs with regard to it. However, by deciding on who should be seated where, the Head of HR and the HR managers made an otherwise tedious process of going back and forth with everyone's preferences fairly quick, and also produced a narrative on their views on the internal structure. This seating plan was later presented to the main department towards the end of the second meeting for the entire department that I got to observe, during which the Head of HR also reminded everyone to mention if there were any furniture that they needed in their office that hadn't been thought of as of that moment. The importance of architecture and the spatial image is brought forward by Boje (2008). Even though the Head of HR as well as the HR managers were not able to have any impact on the architecture, they were able to influence where everyone would be seated. The seating arrangement was made to ease the everyday flow of information, which Sintonen and Auvinen also identify as an important part of narratives. In other words, by placing the personnel in the manner they did, the Head of HR together with the HR managers allow for more narratives to be told, and thus signaling and inviting everyone to participate, much like Raelin (2016) suggest supports the notion of L-A-P.

#### 5.4. Stories about the past

These narratives tell us where the organization has been and thus, where it is going. The narratives about the past bond people (Brown et al., 2005) and have an influence over the behavior within the organization. These can be about the organization as a whole, but in these cases, they are directly connected to the HR department. Here two examples will be presented: the new HR system and an international case.



#### 5.4.1. The new HR system

The procurement of the new HR system was one of the main things that was discussed during my time in the field. It came up in multiple different discussions with a handful of different people. This was however not the first time that the current Head of HR had been involved in a situation like this, a fact that came up during a phone call with one of Treatise's lawyers

*'At first, we thought that there weren't any other (HR) systems, and later on it turned out that there was another one which also proved to be cheaper and had all the features we needed. Much later we then realized that it didn't have all the features we needed, so we had to back track and that took up a lot of time – at that time we were even holding planning meetings with this company...'* (Head of HR, 16.1.2020)

In this example, the Head of HR explains through past mistakes why they were being extra cautious with the procurement of the new HR system and thus shares their knowledge. It is a costly process that also demands a lot of man hours, as it needs to be tailored to Treatise's needs and integrated to the other systems. The main value is in the example placed by the Head of HR on time, especially as we learned in the example on the timetable of the new HR system that is now always a question about the time of the personnel in Treatise that is at hand. As a result, they try to avoid as many risks and problems as possible while going through this process of procurement and therefore change. Raelin (2016) suggests, that one can see L-A-P in progress by reflecting on past experiences. In this case the reflection is done in a narrative manner together with another member of Treatise's personnel. By sharing the knowledge that the Head of HR had gathered from past mistakes, they were able to open up the process that was going on at that moment from a different angle. Moreover, by noting the negative side effects, Denning (2006) notes that the knowledge is shared more effectively.

#### 5.4.2. International case

As Treatise is a somewhat international organization it also means that the HR department at times has to adhere to rules and regulations of other countries, as employees at time may work abroad. An issue relating to general payroll in Canada was brought up by one of the HR specialists after the HR specialist meeting during a small ad hoc meeting with the Head of HR, the HR service manager, and the HR specialist. After having brought up the issue, the HR service manager commented on it by referring to a previous case that was somewhat similar

*'I think this (the case in Canada) kind of reminds me a little bit about that one case we had in California, where it ended up dragging on for a very long time, and we tried and tried to clear it up, and still did everything to our best ability to get clarity in the situation with the general payrolls, and it simply just took years... And this situation with the case in Canada is exactly the same! And they do describe that it would basically be possible to make a "business decision" of sorts, just like in the case in California, where we decided on not doing anything especially as we're nearing the time limits to act on it...'* (HR Service Manager, 20.1.2020)

Both the Head of HR and the HR specialist agreed with the HR service manager that they should not yet act on this issue, as they were unsure of how they should move forward with it. In this scenario it is not the Head of HR who is doing the narrating, further upholding the concept of L-A-P as well as the narrative leadership by lowering the hierarchical structure (Auvinen, 2013; Raelin, 2016). However, the Head of HR is agreeing with the narrative and thus giving their approval. Through this narrative, the leadership steers towards problem solving as the three HR workers aim to learn from what has been done in the past in order to solve a current issue. The negative undertone of the example used furthers the knowledge shared via the narrative (Denning, 2006).

## 5.5. Stories about the future

Narratives about the future are very frequent no matter what the situation. They, like stories about the past, promote organizational culture and norm (Brown et al., 2005). However, these show more forthrightly the direction in which the organization wishes to be heading. Four examples will be given on this type of narrative: exercise during working hours, compensation, new legislation, and the move.

### 5.5.1. Exercise during work hours

One of the issues that the Head of HR already brought up during the first interview was that of exercise during working hours. This was a piloted project in which a part of the personnel was able to take part, and a project that created both interest and conversations as well as a few issues for the HR department. As the Head of HR put it to two staff members from Treatise, that are external to the HR department, during a meeting

*'As I see it, and I'm sure there are many opinions about this, but when we did the pilot with a part of the personnel, it wasn't about shortening the working hours. Instead, the instructions were that they could take a break during the day when they had the possibility to, and maybe go for a walk. [...] I have a hard time seeing this working in the future if we can't get it approved for all members of the personnel, and I also think that it will be difficult with a decision where you'd be allowed to take off x-amount of hours from your work plan, because we didn't do that during the piloted version – you took a break whenever and if it suited your work load. ... one thing we also will have to do is that everyone who wants to take part in this has to register in advance, it won't be something that you can just join in with on a whim. And they would also have to follow up through an application so that we get reports on it. [...] We never told anyone to clock out, so in that sense the employer did pay for it as it was during working hours, but it wasn't like you automatically were able to exercise each week. So, if we want to get this approved we need a creative solution.'* (Head of HR, 30.1.2020)

Treatise has a wide variety of different types of staff and work tasks, such as administrative and teaching staff to name a few, which means that changes like the exercise during working hours can be challenging. Not everyone works some set eight hours per day, and some weeks are more intensive than others. In this example we can see how narratives are used to clarify misunderstandings, or at least to clear up differences in how new directives and ideas ought to be put into action. Moreover, the Head of HR makes clear that this is their personal perspective on the matter at hand, and not that of the organizations or the departments - supporting the authenticity of the narrative as well as their own credibility (Brown et al., 2005), and that they place a great deal of value on the personnel's well-being. It may however be that others in the organization and department agree with what was said, but little is done to take action as they are still unsure of the exact ramifications this may have on the different departments and faculties. The Head of HR goes on sharing their knowledge and in return quite frankly asks for help with solving the problem, through which we can understand that the Head of HR understands their own limitations within the organization as pointed out Boje (2008) to be an important aspect of narrative leadership. Furthermore, Barker and Gower (2010) note that a narrative works as a persuasive manner of communication when representing a personal perspective, which can strengthen the message of the Head of HR's narrative.

### 5.5.2. Compensation

The size and type of compensation provided for a completed task is one matter that at some point will land on many of the desks in the HR department. For the most part there are previously agreed practices and standards, but as times change so do the manners in which jobs are completed and as a result, the compensation might not be as simple as before. This is something that one of the HR specialists notes in a case where the classes will be taped and can be used as educational material in the future. After some time of discussing further details the Head of HR refers to another case of a similar type

*'I think it would be fine to let them agree on a lump sum, that's actually what we did with the workshops on equal treatment, diversion, and inclusion that we hold. They created the material for the workshops, and they also did a short video as a teaser. We then agreed on a lump sum for that instance. But in general, it would be good if we sat down and with one of the lawyers and discussed how similar situations should be handled in the future, if there could be a general agreement readily made up that serves this purpose.'* (Head of HR, 21.1.2020)

The Head of HR uses a past experience to explain how a somewhat similar matter was solved on a previous occasion but points out that it would be best to try and work out a standardized way to deal with any future cases. In other words, by sharing knowledge, the Head of HR aims to solve the problem at hand but also suggests a more standardized way to deal with similar situations in the future and therefore develop clearer practices to rely on. Unlike the previous examples of knowledge sharing, this narrative does not have a negative undertone, which Denning (2006) suggests being the most effective way. This could be due to the fact that the Head of HR immediately after sharing how things had been done goes on to imply that future cases should be solved in a different manner, and thus placing more value on the future than the past by only narrating a model from a past experience (Fisch, 2014).

### 5.5.3. New legislation

Rules and regulations are a big part of any HR work (Bratton & Gold, 2017), and as society and technology evolve, new legislations regarding these also come up. The Head of HR sat in on one of Treatise's management meetings, during which one of these new legislatures was presented. They then later on presented it to the HR department at one of the department meetings

*'Another thing that came up during last week's meeting, which I don't know yet how much it will affect us, but a new law on handling information has been enacted. There's a core group of which main purpose is to unify and streamline handling of information, may it then be processes, descriptions, responsibilities, or impact assessment. This means that we most likely have to act similarly as when the GDPR law was enacted, and each department has to go through the information they handle, how it's handled, when it's handled, and at what times. I still don't know to what extent this will burden us, we have to get back to that once we know more. The core group must first sort out what this actually means, and then take it from there so that we have a unanimous view on this in Treatise. This is something that most probably will affect the majority of us, but we will get back to it later on.'*

*(Head of HR, 7.2.2020)*

By referring to a prior case of new legislature which took a lot of time and effort to adhere to, the Head of HR is implying that this as well will be a big change. As Cunliffe & Hibbert (2016) noted, we relate our lives to narratives that we are already familiar with, thus making sense of the situations and providing options on how to act. Additionally, Denning (2006) argues that when narrating about the future it is better to keep it minimalistic and leave more room for the personal and internal narratives that will be created as a result. So instead of painting an image of what the new legislation could imply, the Head of HR only mentions that it could indicate similar changes that a past legislation created. Furthermore, as Treatise is a large organization this also means that it will affect a lot of people, that may or may not contact HR to ask for more information on how to proceed with the changes, and how the changes may affect them. Furthermore, by using this narrative, the Head of HR is sharing their knowledge of a pressing matter that is yet to have occurred.

#### 5.5.4. The move

One aspect that every once in a while came up for discussion during the coffee breaks was the upcoming move. During one of these breaks, the Head of HR brought up the move that the department had in front of them in about one month after this narrative was given

*'It seems, by the way, that now when we're moving that we'll also get to the two last rooms to our disposal. We still have to wait until tomorrow when an official decision will be made by the board, but I'm pretty sure that we now can proceed with this information, and that we now can rethink a little bit. It's not a lot of space in square meters, but it makes possible for some adjustments. This would also mean that we almost have the entire floor, apart from the conference room that others also use.'*  
(Head of HR, 23.1.2020)

Yet again it is evident that in a larger organization, such as Treatise, decisions take time and change takes even longer. The building that the HR department was moving to was already in use by others in Treatise, thus meaning that the former occupants needed to be replaced before the HR department could move in. One of the rules in the shared 'rules for work practices' that on a few occasions was broken was that the personnel at the HR department ought not to discuss work-related matters during the coffee break. However, at this point the rule was broken in order to share knowledge that may ease some of the personnel's minds and give a slight insight into how things were developing. As Cunliffe and Hibbert (2016) point out, storytelling is about making sense of the situations we are faced with and thus allowing us to evaluate them. As this had been an ongoing process that involved people outside of the HR department, thus tying the hands of the Head of HR in regard to whether the department would have access or not to these rooms, and only allowing them to start evaluating the move properly when this decision had been made.

## 6. Discussion

*'Storytelling is the single most powerful tool in a leaders' toolkit'*

*– Howard Gardner (Fachler & De Corte, 2010: 91)*

If one were to place narrative leadership into one of the five leadership areas presented by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010), it could be argued that it would fall into three approaches: the style approach, the contingency approach, and the post heroic approach. The reasoning behind narrative leadership being an area of the style approach is that as it does not focus on who you are or what you do but on how you do it; which with narrative leadership emphasizes the narratives yet does not immediately mean that the leader has to be the narrator (Auvinen, 2013), and with the post heroic approach it relies on the relational awareness. On the other hand, the contingency theory relies on the situation the organization and the members are in. As already noted, a lot of narrative leadership relies on the events that are at that moment unfolding within and around the organization. This implies that the leader needs to understand when to turn to the narratives in order to get the best outcome (Denning, 2006). However, even though a large part of the idea behind narrative leadership would fit into the style and contingency theories, it is worth noting that neither of these theories accentuate the followers and their impact on the same level that narrative leadership or L-A-P does.

Previous studies (e.g. Auvinen, 2013) point towards narrative leadership mainly being used when organizations undergo changes or during different times of development, such as training situations. As the Head of HR pointed out, this was now the first time in a while that the HR department was not in any of those situations, which may have had an effect on the different narratives that were used. However, as seen in the previous examples, there is constantly an ongoing process of change. The size and significance of this process may differ, but with the steady stream of new technology, legislation and experiences, our everyday life is undoubtedly always evolving. Furthermore, it is imperative to note that of the previous studies on narrative leadership some (e.g. Auvinen et al., 2013) actively searched for either organizations that were undergoing major change, creating different training sessions, actively



sharing knowledge, or for leaders that were known for being good storytellers. As a result, the narratives told may have been clearer or more noticeable than the narratives told in this thesis.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to tell how the examples used in this thesis have progressed and developed over time. Approximately one month after I had exited the field a pandemic broke out, which halted much of the other work in the HR department as all attention was turned towards the crisis at hand. While discussing the examples with the Head of HR (interview 31.3.2020), they more often than not could not comment on the developments as for two reasons: firstly, not enough time had passed and secondly, the majority of the time that had passed had been influenced by the pandemic. As a consequence of the pandemic, I will use two main questions that developed while I was going through the material in order to discuss the results. These questions are ‘how is leadership conveyed in the findings?’ and ‘how do the findings support leadership?’. By using these two questions I will be able to highlight key areas of narrative leadership, as fulfilling the aim of presenting how narrative leadership is used within HR as well as disclosing how the use of narratives can help in different aspects of leadership in HR. Before continuing with the two questions, I will first discuss some general aspects about the study.

In total, 12 different topics related to the daily HR work at Treatise were presented through narratives; the intranet, the new HR system, exercise during work hours, the new communications channel, the questionable emails, the new legislature, new strategy and its implications, the new work healthcare provider and ergonomics at work, the issue with general payroll abroad, compensation, the move, and the shared rules for work practices. While these were presented in the findings by grouping them according to the types of narratives that can be found in an organization, there were some recurring themes that were present in the narratives. These were changes such as the new communication channel or the new HR system, knowledge sharing such as the new legislation or the issue of compensation, and problem solving as seen in the international case or exercise during workhours. The findings will further be discussed from the point of view of how leadership was present and how the narratives supported leadership.

By using the nine different categories by Brown et al. (2005), I was able to get a sense of what may lie in store before even heading out to the field on the daily basis. It could be argued that this may have had an effect on the results, as the knowledge of these categories could have affected the way I understood what I was witnessing. However, as already mentioned before, I could not be objective during the observations due to the other information on e.g. storytelling that I had prior to entering the field. Furthermore, the thought of using the nine different categories did not occur to me until approximately half of the time had been spent in the field, thus not affecting all of the results in the same way.

Even though certain issues came up during many different situations, it was fairly evident that the larger part of the narratives was created ad hoc, instead of being narratives that the Head of HR leaned on from time to time. It could however be argued that the narratives might have changed as the issues themselves developed, and the Head of HR, or the personnel in the HR department, became more acquainted with the issues. Another possible explanation could also be that ad hoc narratives are more common in the everyday work of HR whereas more thought through narratives are told in situations that happen every now and then, but for the main part remain the same such as for instance during onboarding of a new employee.

As the majority of the examples given in the findings were not at first clearly recognizable as narratives, it is essential to note that not all narratives have clear markers such as the example on the ergonomics, where the Head of HR starts with 'let me tell you'. Furthermore, as Reissner and Pagan (2013) noted, storytelling in the business realm can differ from the 'traditional' story, and simply be a short anecdote describing something that someone had done. Consequently, if the narratives are not clear enough it can be helpful to look at the situation in which the narrative is told. For example, on the note of how to distinguish narrative leadership from non-narrative leadership it could be argued that one effective way is to look at how the organization, or the area of the organization in focus, is structured and how the communication flows. Narrative leadership creates less of a hierarchical manner of communication and knowledge sharing, as everyone is allowed to partake. One does not need to be in a leadership position in order to share insights, questions or values, as proven by some of the examples in the findings. As a consequence of this, the leader does have to

remain in an active role and be aware of the dynamics and the current events in the organization as the narratives need to reflect these in order to be effective. Another way to identify non-narrative leadership is to look at the message itself. For a message to be a narrative it needs to create a whole (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006), by having some form of temporality, describe an event, and give or define what the storyteller considers to be of value. In other words, a message is not a narrative if it is relayed by listing things off in a manner that the parts of the message are not connected in a causal order but can if needed be swapped interchangeably without it creating a new meaning for what has been communicated, and as Torkki (2014) mentioned – a message or text needs to be able to evolve in order to be a narrative, otherwise it is a fact.

It is also worth noting, that a clear impact on the narratives and thus the leadership can be down to the fact that the personnel in the HR department primarily turned to one another for help, and only to the Head of HR as a 'last resort'. Even though there were little hierarchical structures found other than the work titles, the threshold may have been lower to contact a colleague working with similar issues as oneself rather than to turn to the Head of HR unless it was absolutely necessary. Furthermore, as the Head of HR expressed during the first interview (7.1.2020), this was a calm time for the HR department as a whole, and even more so the first calm time in a long while. This can have had an impact on the amount of narratives told as well as on the types or narratives told. As noted by e.g. Auvinen et al. (2013), narrative leadership is highly used during times of change – during my time at the HR department there were only some smaller indications of change, either on for the department itself or for Treatise as a whole. Moreover, the realm of human resources is one that is greatly impacted by the issues taking place in the whole of the organization rather than only being affected by their own work. With that said, it is more likely than not that the results of this thesis would have been drastically different if my time in the field would have taken place only a couple of months later, when the pandemic began to have an effect on Treatise and the society as a whole.

## 6.1. How is leadership conveyed in the findings?

Leadership, which can be a quite complex concept, is in this thesis understood as providing a direction for an ongoing process as well as an interpersonal relationship. Importantly, the leadership witnessed during my time in the field did provide with direction, at times by referencing to the past or by explaining where what was of value from a personal point of view. The aspect of leadership and interpersonal relationships can be seen by interactions during the coffee breaks or the more democratic manner of socializing by allowing everyone to partake by sharing narratives. This aspect also supports both the notion of narrative leadership (Auvinen, 2013) as well as L-A-P (Raelin, 2016).

The issue with the intranet is one example where the direct impact the narratives told can be noted on leadership, when understood as providing a direction. During one of the HR department's internal meetings, the confusions and worries of what information can be found via the search engine in the intranet was brought to the attention of the Head of HR. As a result of these discussions, the Head of HR reached out to the communications department and asked if they could sit in on one of the HR's meetings and go through and explain these issues. Rather than have a one-on-one meeting with the communications department and thereafter explain what they had learned, the Head of HR decided on letting the personnel from the HR department voice their questions themselves and thus also allow for any discussions and questions that might follow.

The example on the shared rules for work practices that the HR department abide by also gives us a window into how narratives are provided with leadership and direction, which then in turn contribute to the departments on narrative. As explained in the second interview with the Head of HR (31.3.2020), the need for these rules was created as a result of workshops that the department held internally a few years ago. During these workshops they discussed issues that worked well in the department and issues that needed to be worked on, and through these discussions certain aspects took shape and developed into the shared rules for work practices. Interestingly enough, only one of these, the coffee breaks, came about from a direct need. The Head of HR

explained during the second interview (31.3.2020) that some of the personnel in the HR department felt unfairly treated prior to creating the shared rules for work practices, as some were able to take more and longer coffee breaks than others. And by having it written down on paper, it allowed everyone the same 15 minutes twice a day for a coffee break. In other words, the narratives of the personnel steered the workshops and the decisions that were made with regard to which points to add to the shared rules. However, this example could also be a discussion much like the question about the chicken and the egg – which came first? On the one hand, it was the narratives during the workshops that illustrated a clear need for guidelines on how long and how often coffee breaks should be. However, on the other hand prior to these narratives emerging, a decision needed to be made that the workshops were to be held.

The last example presented shows the relational awareness of the Head of HR. A leader needs to be socially intellectual and aware of the relational issues of the followers (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). In the last example where the Head of HR breaks the rule on not discussing work matters during the coffee break, they in fact do so to share their knowledge about a somewhat pressing matter. Especially since the physical structure would change rather drastically from one or two-person rooms to having a maximum of four persons in the same room, this change allowed them to place three persons in a different area of the new department, thus allowing for more space for the others. By sharing this piece of knowledge with the rest of the HR department, the Head of HR could provide some positive news on a matter that could inflict a considerable amount of stress.

In general, leadership literature agrees on leadership being something that is present during change, thus implying that it is present when guidance is needed (Parry & Bryman, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). The example on the new legislature provides good insight into a change that is about to occur, and how the Head or HR explains that even though they do not have all the information at that time, it may cause similar efforts needed as with another legislature that affected them before. Even though the situation is unclear at the moment, the narrative has already formed a somewhat graspable understanding of the future yet allowing the listeners to form their own understanding of what that future would look like (Denning, 2006). However, when it comes to the aspect of change that was present in both the example on the new

strategy as well as ergonomics, it is clear that some change takes longer to fully actualize (discussion with the Head of HR, fieldnotes). Especially in a larger organization, it is inevitable that some changes and decisions can seem a bit ad hoc as a sudden need appears, for instance with the electric tables, which later on develops into the standard that everyone uses. This unavoidably affects the image that reflects the leadership in the organization. Furthermore, the example on the new communication channel shows another change that not only impacts the HR department, but Treatise as a whole. As a result of the behavior in the channel, which evolved during a short time span, the Head of HR expresses a dire need for guidelines as dire issues may develop otherwise if the organization members do not know where to draw the line.

## 6.2. How do the findings support leadership?

As the excerpts from the material showed, the larger part of the issues had already been going on for some time or benefited greatly from leadership through prior knowledge. They can therefore be understood as an ongoing process, and from everyday activities and interactions it can at times only be seen as an indirect process as a result of a narrative that supports the notion of L-A-P (Barker, 2001; Raelin, 2016; Sergi, 2016). For example, exercise during work hours is an issue that has both been going on for quite some time but is also something that the Head of HR cannot take into their own hands, as it involves the entire organization. By continually having these discussions with different actors in Treatise about the issue of exercise during work hours, the different parties may gain a better understanding of one another. Throughout the process the narratives may change, however this is something that I did not witness in the field. This may be as a result of either the amount of time spent in the field or due to the issue itself.

As Barker and Gower (2010) put it, hearing about the experiences of others can be a powerful way to learn. We can for instance take the example with receiving questionable emails. Since Treatise is a public organization, names and contact details of the personnel are readily available online (Treatise, 2019). Most of the personnel

do not receive these questionable emails on a regular basis, as Treatise uses various antivirus software to minimize the risks. Nevertheless, as shown in the example there are some that do get through. By explaining that these can come from either companies or persons that the personnel know, the sheer width of this issue is presented. Moreover, by the HR service manager mentioning that the replies to the emails from the former rector were to be sent to 'executive rector', they add a bit of humor thus connecting to the emotions of the listeners which makes the narrative stick better (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006). Another example of this is the issue with compensation. By explaining to the HR specialist how previous, and somewhat similar, cases had been dealt with, the Head of HR gave the HR specialist at least two options: to follow the same road as before or carve out a new one. The latter option is also something that the Head of HR suggested they would do, to be able to create a standard way of operating in similar situations.

When combining the social aspects of both narrative leadership and L-A-P, a dynamic connection between the leader and subordinate is identified. As seen in some of the examples from the findings such as the intranet, the new HR system, or the international case, it was not always the Head of HR that told the narratives. Nevertheless, by acknowledging these narratives and getting first-hand accounts of them, the Head of HR gained much-needed insight into the issues that the HR department were dealing with. This supports the notion of narrative leadership as it allows for everyone in the organization to be a part of the narratives – it is however up to the leader to steer the actions that take place as a result of the narratives that were told. Furthermore, the majority of the narratives presented in this thesis took place during different meetings. This could be a result of the working culture that the main department has, where, as explained by the Head of HR (interview 7.1.2020) a majority of the personnel have worked for a longer period and they tend to reach out to the Head of HR only as a last resort if their coworkers are unable to help.

While this thesis has not presented any of the narratives that were not directly connected to leadership, it is vital to point out that these play an important role in the organization and the HR department itself – social bonding is created and strengthened by sharing personal narratives. As Brown et al. (2005) continues to explain, the content in these narratives is not as important as the fact that you are sharing a narrative. For

example, a lot of personal narratives about the family lives of those in the HR department were told during the coffee breaks, and as the HR department strive always to enjoy this break together, they all get to hear, share, and partake in these personal narratives. By themselves, these narratives do not offer more than an understanding of the life of the one doing the storytelling, but as Cunliffe and Hibbert (2016) explained, we relate the happenings and our lives in narratives and construct these narratives from ones we know from before. Hence if needed be, these personal narratives could be used as a way of narrative leadership to explain future situations. If told correctly, it could be an effective way to get a point across to the personnel as they are already familiar with the personal narrative and its outcome. Furthermore, these narratives do play an important role in supporting leadership as they provide those listening with a small degree of understanding of the narrator's background and personal views on ongoing issues. Narrative leadership requires that the leader maintains an active role, this also includes taking note of the narratives that are on a more social level as they give clues to the narrator's beliefs, which in turn can make leadership just a little bit less complicated.

Finally, during the second interview (31.3.2020) the Head of HR pointed out the importance of being present, open, attentive, supportive, and responsive while working in a leadership position in HR. A lot of the work encompasses on some level emotions, which means that it is important to be able to read a situation well. By paying attention to the narratives that are told, one can much easier remain aware of what is going on. The active and present role of a leader that is portrayed in narrative leadership is therefore well suited to the realm of human resources.



## 7. Conclusion

*'Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, challenge. They help us understand. They imprint a picture on our minds. Want to make a point or raise an issue? Tell a story.'*

*~ Janet Litherland (1991)*

In studies such as *Constructing Leadership Through Storytelling* by Auvinen et al. (2013), the managers were chosen as they were known to be storytellers. However, this was not the case in this master's thesis. The aim was to see how narrative leadership is produced in the everyday work in an HR department. As such, the narratives themselves were not as clearly distinguishable as in other studies. However, there were narratives present which could be placed into nine different organizational narrative groups. Not all of the narratives noted in the HR department did had a direct impact on leadership, and thus only the narratives from five different groups were presented.

Narrative leadership contributes to the daily HR work by acting as a bridge between the ongoing situation and the past or the present. It also facilitates otherwise difficult issues such as knowledge and change, by allowing the narrator to express themselves through different examples. Furthermore, if linked with Leadership-as-Practice, it also allows for the leader's subordinates to adopt the role of narrator, as it is understood to be a common practice that everyone can gain from and act on. As a result of this, one can deduce that narratives can be found in all situations in the daily HR work, even during the coffee breaks. Additionally, it can also be noted that narrative leadership is of great assistance in organizations of a larger size, as certain areas such change on an organizational level take a longer time to be executed. Narratives and therefore narrative leadership are well suited in the line of HR. This is due to the fact that a certain level of awareness, openness, and willingness to communicate is required in order to be able to grasp the ongoing situations that occur within HR.

If this had been on the topic of organizational storytelling, the material could have been gathered in a myriad of ways, such as interviews, annual reports or other documents. However, as the interest lay in how the narratives are used in the daily work of HR it meant that I had to immerse myself in the field. The use of observation and shadowing as the manner of gathering material gave a broader understanding of the ongoing issues in the HR department. Even though most of the narratives did occur during departmental meetings, the bigger picture they developed from would not have been as clear had I only taken part in said meetings. By shadowing I also got to understand the mannerisms and the meanings of the Head of HR fairly well as we ended up spending quite a lot of time together. This also allowed me to gain a better understanding of the points that they were trying to make with the different narratives.

Since the field of narrative leadership is rather young, there are still a lot of areas that are yet to be researched. The results in this thesis are somewhat inconclusive for two reasons: firstly, only approximately one month was spent in the field, and secondly, the elaborations of the issues that were brought forward was more or less halted due to a pandemic. As such, further research could be done in the same realm of HRM, although more time would need to be spent in the field to see how and if the narratives change. This could give a better understanding on how the narratives are linked to the ongoing situations, or whether they are more so linked to the narrator and their personal style. By spending more time in the field, shadowing the same person or department it could also be possible to illustrate whether the narrator uses similar narratives for different situations or whether they change accordingly. Another area where future research could be done is by comparing the narrative leadership in a new versus old organization and observing how the situation the organization finds itself in affects the narratives and thus the leadership. Similar research could also be done by focusing on the same organization, but while it is in different situations, and thus determining whether there is any difference in the narrative leadership that occurs during 'normal' HR work and during work that is affected by some sort of change.

In the introduction I asked myself if those who tell stories really do rule society. The truthfulness, or accuracy, of this quote is still up for debate as this thesis only touched upon leadership and HR, and not society as a whole. However, in this realm, one can state that the use of narratives in combination with leadership does facilitate the work that one has. So, for this thesis, a rewritten version of the same quote could be ‘those who tell stories, make the HR realm swifter and more understandable’.

## Swedish summary

### 1. Inledning

Världen vi lever i idag skulle inte vara densamma utan narrativ. Vi är konstant omringade av dem och har lärt oss att berätta narrativ sedan vi var småbarn, utan att vi ens var medvetna om det (Adelswärd, 1996). Ett narrativ är något som tilltalar våra känslor, och det är precis därför vi minns dem och varför de är så effektiva (Mossberg & Nissen, 2006). Jag har personligen alltid varit intresserad av narrativ, men det var inte förrän jag deltog i en föreläsning av Tommi Auvinen, lektor i organisation och ledarskap vid Jyväskylä Universitet, som jag insåg kopplingen mellan berättandet och organisationer.

Titeln till denna pro gradu-avhandling konstaterar att de som berättar narrativ styr samhället, och yttrades av Platon redan för 2300 år sedan (Boje, 1999; Auvinen, 2013). Detta konstaterande fann jag väldigt intressant samtidigt som det fick mig att fråga mig själv ifall det verkligen var sant. Utanför den humanistiska världen, används narrativ främst inom marknadsföring och för att förklara en organisationskultur, vare sig detta innebär att stärka moralen inom arbetskraften eller överföra kunskap till nyrekryterade arbetstagare. Dock då det kommer till berättande och ledarskap, ligger oftast fokus på kunskapshantering och personalutveckling. Detta innebär med andra ord att stora områden, så som ledarskap inom personalledning, ännu är outforskade. Syftet med denna pro gradu-avhandling är med andra ord att genom observationer och skuggning synliggöra hur narrativt ledarskap används inom personalledning. Två forskningsfrågor används för att stöda detta ändamål: hur bidrar narrativt ledarskap till det dagliga arbetet inom personalledning, och i vilka situationer används narrativt ledarskap?

## 2. Teoretisk referensram

Den teoretiska referensramen byggs upp utav två helheter; berättande och narrativt ledarskap. Till den första helheten hör storytelling, hur definieras ett narrativ och storytelling i organisationer. Den andra helheten berör narrativt ledarskap, ledarskap som en process och personalledning.

Berättande är en stor del av hur vi kommunicerar då vi ofta använder olika former av narrativ för att beskriva de händelser vi upplevt (Adelswärd, 1996). Gabriel (2000) menar att det finns många olika orsaker bakom berättandet, men att det sedan 1800-talet ofta har handlat om att underhålla andra, även om det finns andra orsaker som att erbjuda oss lugn, lära oss om moral, varna oss och sätta eld på vår fantasi. Berättande kan dock uppfattas som en form av makthavande, då man genom att återberätta det som redan har skett får välja vilken syn på händelserna man beskriver (Jackson, 2000). Cunliffe och Hibbert (2016) hävdar att vi även använder berättande för att förstå det som sker omkring oss, då vi kan relatera händelser, personligheter och våra liv till sådant vi redan har upplevt, och på så vis lättare besluta oss för hur vi bör agera.

En berättelse kan påstås ha tre olika delar med vilka man kan känna igen dem: en temporalitet genom vilken berättelsen utvecklas och förs framåt, den återberättar en händelse, och den ger värde eller beskriver vad berättaren anser vara av värde (Torkki, 2014). I organisationer förekommer det nio olika sorters narrativ (Brown, Rosile, Saylor & Saylor., 2005). Dessa är narrativ om andra personer, om själva arbetet, om organisationen, som en form av social gemenskap, som en signal, om det förflutna, om framtiden, om livet, om en själv, samt de elektroniska narrativen.

Narrativt ledarskap är ett nytt område inom ledarskapsforskning, något som lätt märks på avsaknaden av forskning inom ämnet (Boje, 1999; Auvinen, 2013; Auvinen, Aaltio & Blomqvist, 2013), dock har intresset för detta område ökat sedan 1990-talet och kan nu ses som en något etablerad del av ledarskapsteorier samt ett populärt fenomen bland konsulter och chefer. Trots detta är kombinationen av narrativ och ledarskap inte ny, då det redan användes i antikens Grekland av Aristoteles och Platon (Auvinen, 2013). Där de traditionella ledarskapsteorierna, såsom egenskaps- och kontingensteorin, förlitar sig på ledarens personliga egenskaper samt de

situationer de befinner sig i, fokuserar narrativt ledarskap på de processer som skapar ledarskap, de sociokulturella definitionerna av ledarskap samt ledarskapets situationella och språkliga dimensioner. Därutöver skiljer sig narrativt ledarskap från de mer traditionella synerna på ledarskap då det istället för att följa hierarkiska riktlinjer gör utrymme för ett mer demokratiskt samspel då alla kan ta del av narrativen (Auvinen, 2013; Auvinen et al., 2013). Det narrativa ledarskapet förstärker med andra ord ledarens aktiva roll och kräver även en viss medvetenhet om det som pågår kring ledaren (Boje, 1999) då ledaren kan påverka hens undersåtar genom att kombinera narrativen med de organisationens sociala omgivning, och kan på så vis ge betydelse till de uppgifter som pågår (Fisch, 2014).

Narrativt ledarskap stöds även av teorin om ledarskap som en process (eng. Leadership-As-Practice, L-A-P), där ledarskap förstås som en fortlöpande process (Raelin, 2016) och där ledarskapet skapas tillsammans, istället för att fullständigt förlita sig på ledarens beteende eller egenskaper (Barker, 2001). Processerna i denna teori syftar på de vardagliga aktiviteterna och växelverkan som medför en specifik mening och som en specifik grupp förstår och erkänner (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016). I och med att det narrativa ledarskapet är en process och produceras i samspel med andra, kan man endast förstå det genom att studera det i den omgivning där det förekommer.

Personalledning är en viktig del av en organisation som bland annat berör skolning, personalplanering, kompensation, rekrytering och uppsägning (Bogardus, 2004; Rao, 2009). Hur en organisation väljer att strukturera sin personalledning påverkar på storleken av personalledningen i och med att allting inte behövs skötas inom organisationen om inte så önskas (Bratton & Gold, 2017).

### 3. Metod

Som tidigare nämndes fås full förståelse för narrativt ledarskap genom att studera det i den sociala omgivning där det förekommer. På grund av detta har materialet för denna pro gradu-avhandling samlats in genom triangulering, d.v.s. att man använder sig av mer än endast ett insamlingssätt (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Dessa insamlingssätt är skuggning, observation och semistrukturerad intervju. Att skugga någon innebär att man följer en deltagare under en förlängd period (Bryman & Bell, 2013). I detta fall

skuggade jag en personalchef under fyra veckors tid. Därtill observerade jag personalavdelningens arbetstagare samt personalchefen under de möten de hade tillsammans för att få en bättre helhetsbild av de narrativ som berättades inom personalavdelningen. Den tredje delen av trianguleringen bestod av två intervjuer. Innan jag tillträdde fältet intervjuade jag personalchefen för att få en inblick i de ärenden som personalavdelningen arbetade med vid den stunden, och på så vis bättre förstå de narrativ som berättades. Ungefär sex veckor efter det att jag samlat in mitt material intervjuade jag igen personalchefen för att erfara hur de arbetsuppgifterna jag vittnade under min tid på fältet hade utvecklats och fortskridit.

#### 4. Min studie

Organisationen som denna avhandling baserar sig i kommer att hållas anonym, för att inte peka ut någon av deltagarna som jag skuggade eller observerade. För denna orsak, kallas organisationen i fråga till "Treatise".

Treatise är en institution för högre utbildning, och kan anses vara en stor organisation då de har mer än 250 anställda samt tjänar mer än 1000 studenter årligen (Treatise, 2019). Personalavdelningen inom Treatise består av 22 personer, varav 18 arbetar i samma byggnad medan de fyra övriga arbetar i en annan geografisk ort. De olika arbetsuppgifterna består av personalchef, chef för personalärenden, personalutvecklingschef, personalsekreterare samt HR-specialist. De två olika avdelningarna håller konstant kontakt via olika elektroniska hjälpmedel, och har bland annat ett gemensamt avdelningsmöte var tredje vecka. Därutöver har även HR-specialisterna ett eget möte varannan vecka tillsammans med personalchefen och de två övriga mellancheferna. De flesta inom denna avdelning har arbetat inom Treatise i många år.

## 5. Resultat

Resultaten från fältet presenteras genom att dela upp dem enligt de nio olika sorters narrativ som Brown et al. (2005) presenterade. Det bör påpekas att fastän alla sorters narrativ förekom i fältet, fanns det endast narrativt ledarskap i fem av dessa. Därmed kommer inte narrativ om livet, andra människor, om en själv och som social gemenskap inte att presenteras. Dock bör även nämnas att de exempel som lyfts fram från fältet kommer i denna sammanfattning enbart beskrivas, med andra ord kommer inga direkta citat presenteras.

### Narrativ om själva arbetet

Inom denna grupp förekom det fyra olika teman där det tydligt förekom narrativt ledarskap. Dessa teman berör e-post, intranät, ett nytt HR-system och en ny kommunikationskanal. De olika narrativen lyfte fram aspekter som säkerhet, förändring, behov av riktlinjer och kunskapsöverföring.

### Narrativ om organisationen

Gällande narrativ om organisationen lyfts tre exempel fram. Dessa behandlar teman som strategi och förändring, ergonomi på arbetsplatsen samt motion på arbetstid, och kopplade narrativen med aspekter som förändring, beslutsfattande, välmående och hur övriga uppfattar av Treatise.

### Narrativ som signal

De narrativ som fungerar som en signal är oftast inte direkt berättade av en person. Två exempel lyftes fram, varav den första behandlade gemensamma spelregler som personalavdelningen hade tillsammans skapat. Med andra ord signalerar dessa regler vad personalen i denna avdelning lägger tyngd på och hurudan deras arbetskultur är. Det andra exemplet handlar om en kommande flytt, då personalavdelningen skall flytta från en byggnad till den andra. I detta exempel finner man signalerna i hur personalen placeras: vem som får vilket rum och vilka det är som bör dela rum.



### Narrativ om det förflutna

Två narrativ om det förflutna lyfts fram i denna avhandling. Dessa handlar om det nya HR-systemet och ett internationellt fall. Genom dessa narrativ överförs kunskap från tidigare misstag och framgångar.

### Narrativ om framtiden

De fyra olika narrativ om framtiden som presenteras i avhandlingen behandlar motion på arbetstid, kompensation, ny lagstiftning och flytten. Dessa exempel visar hur narrativ kan användas för att klargöra missförstånd, föreslå framtida praxis, måla upp en bild om framtida arbetsbördor och kunskapsöverföring.

## 6. Diskussion

I och med den pandemi som i början av mars började påverka Finland är det svårt att till fullo få ett resultat av studien vid detta skede. Detta på grund av att det för det första inte har löpt tillräckligt lång tid sedan min tid på fältet, men även för att två tredjedelar av tiden har arbetet på personalavdelningen tillägnats till pandemin. Därmed kommer två huvudfrågor att användas för att kunna diskutera resultaten som kom fram från fältet. Dessa frågor är “Hur förmedlas ledarskap i resultaten?” och “Hur stöder resultaten ledarskap?”.

Tidigare studier (ex. Auvinen 2013) påvisar att narrativt ledarskap främst används vid de tillfällen då en organisation genomgår stora eller svåra förändringar. Under första intervjun påpekade personalchefen att detta var första gången på länge som personalavdelningen inte hade något större problem på sina händer, utan att de i lugn och ro kunde fokusera på sina vardagliga arbetsuppgifter. Detta faktum kan möjligen ha påverkat på de narrativ som förekom i fältet. Trots det kan man ändå se att det pågår en konstant förändring i Treatise då nya lagstiftningar, kommunikationskanaler eller HR-system påverkar arbetssätten. Det var även relativt tydligt att de flesta av narrativen inte var övade, eller sådana som använts många gånger, utan att de förekom ad hoc och var därför till stilen rätt problemfokuserade och på så vis transaktionella.

## Hur förmedlas ledarskap i resultaten?

I de exempel som presenterades förmedlades ledarskap på några olika sätt. Exempelvis ledde narrativen om den information som kan hittas via intranätet till att personalchefen bad en expert inom området komma och diskutera problemet under ett HR-specialist möte, och på så vis ordnades en informell utbildning i sökmotorn. De gemensamma spelreglerna visar hur de narrativ som kom upp under en workshop bidrog till att en numera självklar del av personalavdelningens kultur, kaffepauserna, kom till. Genom att ta upp de aspekter som ansågs vara problematiska och genom att ta hänsyn till de narrativ som kom fram från avdelningen i en proaktiv miljö kunde riktlinjer skapas som numera strukturerar arbetsdagarna så att de är lika för alla. Trots att de gemensamma spelreglerna framför att man inte bör diskutera arbetsrelaterade saker, bröts denna regel med jämna mellanrum. Ett exempel kom fram i narrativ om framtiden, där personalchefen bryter mot precis denna regel för att beskriva ny information hen fått om flytten. Med andra ord handlar det om kunskapsöverföring, men vid ett informellt tillfälle. Detta tyder på en relationell medvetenhet från personalchefens sida, då hen informellt berättar hur de nu kommer att få mera utrymme än först utlovat. Ledarskapet här är den relationella delen, då hen på så vis lugnt ger information om en stor förändring som kommer att påverka precis alla inom personalavdelningen. Ett annat exempel där förändring ligger bakom ledarskapet är exemplet om den nya lagstiftningen. I narrativet dras paralleller med en tidigare lagstiftning som påkostade arbetet till en stor grad i personalavdelningen. Genom denna parallell förvarnar personalchefen att det kan i värsta fall innebära liknande prestationer denna gång.

## Hur stöder resultaten ledarskap?

Många av de exemplen som lyftes fram hade redan pågått en tid eller så drog de nytta av tidigare kunskap. Man kan även förstå dessa narrativ som en pågående process, vilket innebär att vardagliga aktiviteter och interaktioner kan förstås som en indirekt process som ett resultat av en berättelse och stöder därmed uppfattningen om L-A-P. Genom att kontinuerligt framföra olika narrativ kan missförstånd redas ut och åsikter förtydligas. Dessutom är det narrativ ett effektivt sätt att förmedla upplevelser,

och som Baker och Gower (2010) påpekar, så är detta ett bra sätt att lära sig utav varann. Som exempel på detta kan man nämna e-posten, där två olika händelseförlopp med ifrågasättbara e-postmeddelanden presenteras så att de övriga minns att vara aktsamma då de öppnar meddelanden. Ett annat exempel hade med kompensationen att göra, då personalchefen berättade hur de hade tidigare löst ett dylikt problem. Såväl narrativt ledarskap som L-A-P betonade att det inte alltid är personen i ledarskapsrollen som är berättaren. Detta faktum bestyrks av resultaten från fältet, då det bl.a. I exemplet om intranätet var andra från personalavdelningen som tog upp problemen. På så vis fick personalchefen viktiga insikter i det som pågår och genom att erkänna narrativen fick hen bättre förståelse för vad det är som personalavdelningen behöver stöd i.

Det är dock även viktigt att poängtera, att fastän inte alla narrativ presenterades i denna avhandling bör man minnas att narrativ som social gemenskap även kan vara viktiga för ledarskap, då de förstärker gemenskapen samt ifall ledaren lyssnar nog på de narrativ som förekommer kan hen få bättre förståelse och insyn i de som sker i undersåtarnas personliga liv.

## 7. Avslutning

Narrativt ledarskap bidrar till det dagliga personalledningsarbetet genom att agera som en bro mellan situationer som pågår nu och i det förflutna eller det framtida. Det underlättar även annars svåra ämnen som kunskapsöverföring eller förändring genom att låta berättaren uttrycka sig själv genom olika exempel. Därtill tillåter det alla inom personalavdelningen att delta i utvecklingen av avdelningen då det inte finns någon hierarki i vem som får och inte får berätta olika narrativ. Dessutom bör det påpekas att narrativt ledarskap stöder väl större organisationer i aspekter som t.ex. förändring, detta då narrativ är lättare att minnas och det kan ta en stund innan förändringen är slutförd.

Narrativ och narrativt ledarskap lämpar sig väl inom personalledning, då det är ett område i en organisation som kräver en hel del medvetenhet, öppenhet och villighet att kommunicera för att kunna greppa de situationer som kan pågå inom personalledning.

Genom att skugga och observera fick jag en bredare förståelse för de situationer som pågick under min tid på fältet. Dessa sätt att samla in material, tillsammans med intervjuerna, lämpade sig väl för denna pro gradu-avhandling, då syftet var att synliggöra hur narrativt ledarskap används inom personalledning.

Framtida forskningsområden kunde vara att antingen skugga samma avdelning en längre tid för att se hur och om narrativen ändras, eller hur de olika situationerna som avdelningen finner sig i påverkar narrativen. Därtill kunde ett tredje framtida forskningsområde vara att jämföra hur narrativt ledarskap skiljer sig i organisationer där en stor del av personalen arbetat en längre tid till organisationer där majoriteten av personalen är relativt ny.

I inledningen tog jag upp citatet utav Platon, där han konstaterade att de som berättar narrativ styr samhället. Sanningshalten av det konstaterande kan denna avhandling inte svara på då den endast berörde ledarskap och personalledning, inte samhället i sin helhet. Men inom personalledning går det att påstå att man underlättar det arbete man har framför sig genom att använda narrativ i kombination med ledarskap. Därmed kunde denna avhandling bidra med en omskriven version av konstaterandet: de som berättar narrativ, gör arbetet inom personalledning effektivare och mer förståeligt.

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## Appendix 1: interview 1, questions

### Bakgrund

- Kan du börja med att berätta om dig själv
  - Bakgrund, tidigare arbetsuppgifter → hur skiljer sig dessa från de nuvarande?
  - Hur länge du arbetat på Treatise
- Hur du kommit att arbeta här på Treatise
- Hur uppfattade du Treatise och/eller arbetet här på Treatise då du började
- Vad fick dig att ursprungligen bli intresserad av att arbeta med HR?

### HR Arbetet

- Hur skulle du beskriva en “normal” dag?
- Vilka delar av ditt arbete tycker du mest om?
- Vilka delar av ditt arbete anser du vara mest krävande?
- Vilka delar av ditt arbete anser du vara mest utmanande?
- Hur har dina arbetsuppgifter utvecklats sen du började arbeta på Treatise?
- Vad skulle du anse att är det viktigaste då man arbetar med HR?
- Hur skulle du beskriva din ledarskapsstil?
  - Coachande? Direkt? Empatisk? Demokratisk? Etc.

### Personalavdelningen

- Hur skulle du beskriva er avdelning?
- Hur skulle du beskriva gemenskapen på er avdelning?
  - Hur påverkar det att en del sitter på en annan ort?
- Hur kommunicerar ni med varandra? (elektroniskt, korta möten, telefon)
- Vilka utmaningar arbetar ni med just nu?
  - Hur påverkar dessa?
- Vilka utmaningar kämpar universitetet Treatise med för tillfället?

## **Appendix 2: interview 2, questions**

- Hur har situationen med kommunikationskanalen utvecklats?
- Har alls frågan om motion på arbetstid gått framåt?
- Hur gick processen till då de gemensamma spelreglerna skapades?
- Hur är situationen nu med intranätet?
- Har den nya lagen redan börjat påverka ert arbete?
- Hur gick det med flytten?
- Hur har covid-19 påverkat?
- Hur ser du på ledarskap specifikt inom HR?

### Appendix 3: support questions for observations

- Vad ser jag?
  - Hur ser det ut?
  - Vad ser jag omkring mig?
  - Vad finns i de olika rummen? → hur skiljer de sig från varandra
  - Hur är utrymmet uppdelat?
  - Hur ser människorna ut?
  - Hur klär de sig?
  - Hur beter de sig?
  - Vad gör människorna?
  - Hur kommunicerar de?
  - Hur bemöter de andra inom samma arbetsplats?
  - Hur bemöter de utomstående?
  - Hur uttrycks de olika positionerna i organisationen?
  - Vilka normer uppfattar jag?
  - Vilka osynliga regler finns det?
  - Vilka ritualer uppfattar jag?
  
- Vad hör jag?
  - Vad säger människorna?
  - Hur kommunicerar de med varandra? (fokus på stil → narrativ eller ej)
  - Vilka berättelser tas upp?
  - Vem berättar?
  - Hur reagerar de andra på berättelserna?
  - I vilka situationer berättas?
  - Vilka andra ljud förekommer?
  - Hur uttrycks de olika positionerna i tal?
  - Hur närmas olika problem?
  - Vad pratar de om under pauser?
  
- Hur känns det?
  - Vilken stämning råder det? (allmänt)
  - Vilken stämning råder det? (på möten)
  - På vilket humör är personerna?