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# **Applying sport management practices to the SME business context: The perspectives of leadership and employee engagement**

International Business

Master's thesis

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The factors essential to this thesis include the continuous globalization across all business sectors and the pioneering status of the sport industry has embarked upon in terms of internationalizing operations. Moreover, the practices of leadership and employee engagement have yet been rather insufficiently addressed within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The innovative approaches observed in the sport context appear to have partial applicability to SME organizations.

This thesis examines the roles and duties of SME managers and sport organization managers, focusing on their leadership and employee engagement practices within both the SME and sport industry contexts. It also discovers what kind of challenges a context to another practice transfer might face. Existing literature indicates that SME managers and sport managers differ in their job duties, skill sets and roles. Although leadership is a well-researched concept in business studies, there is a lack of consensus on its definition the scholars. Employee engagement, typically defined as an employee's emotional commitment to the organization and its goals, is a well-established term. However, current research does not combine sport and SME context and see what kind of a potential there might be in sport context for SME management.

Therefore, the research question of this thesis asks how the SME business managers can benefit from managerial practices in leadership and employee engagement used by managers in sport industry. Additionally, the sub-questions focus on defining the SME manager and sport manager, examining their differences and similarities, and exploring the concepts of leadership and employee engagement and also the practical perspective to those in SME and sport organizations. Moreover, implementation challenges are examined. Empirical part of this study discovers the same topics through expert interviews and thematic analysis.

The findings clearly indicate that several managerial practices from sport industry could be effectively applied to SME organizations. It is suggested that collective and servant leadership, highlighted organizational culture, developed rewarding systems and arranging off-time activities to employees could make SME organizations more effective in leadership and employee engagement. Implementation challenges are solved by concentrating on interfaces, making sure that everyone knows their own role, and other's role, in implementation process and committing everyone to the change. This research offers contribution to theory and practical suggestions to managers.

**Key words:** SME management, Sport management, Leadership, Employee engagement, challenges of implementation, practice transfer

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Tämän tutkielman kannalta vaikuttavia tekijöitä ovat jatkuva globalisaatio kaikilla liiketoiminnan eri aloilla ja urheilualan edelläkävijän asema kansainvälisessä liiketoiminnassa. Pk-yritysten kontekstissa on huomattavissa johtajuus- sekä sitouttamiskeinojen heikkoutta samalla kun näiden käytäntöjen innovatiivisuus urheilukontekstissa vaikuttaa olevan ainakin osittain sovellettavissa myös pk-yrityksiin.

Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan pk-yritysten johtajia, urheilujohtajia, johtajuutta ja työntekijöiden sitouttamista sekä edellä mainittuihin liittyviä käytäntöjä ja keinoja sekä pk-yritysten kontekstissa että urheilukontekstissa. Siinä selvitetään myös, millaisia haasteita kontekstista toiseen käytäntöjen siirtämisessä voidaan kohdata. Olemassa olevan tutkimuskirjallisuuden mukaan pk-yritysten johtajilla ja urheilujohtajilla on eroavaisuuksia työtehtävissä, vaadittavissa taidoissa ja osaamisalueissa sekä rooleissa, vaikka niissä on yhtäläisyyksiäkin. Siitä huolimatta, että johtajuutta ilmiönä on tutkittu laajasti liiketaloustieteessä, sen määritelmä ei ole yksiselitteinen ja useilla tutkijoilla on erilainen käsitys siitä. Työntekijöiden sitoutumiselle ilmiönä on sen sijaan melko yhtenäinen käsite, ja usein se määritellään työntekijän emotionaalisenä sitoutumisena organisaatioon ja organisaation tavoitteisiin. Nykyisessä tutkimuksessa ei kuitenkaan yhdistetä urheilu- ja pk-yrityskontekstia ja selvitetä, millaisia mahdollisuuksia urheilukonteksti voisi tarjota pk-yritysten johtamiselle.

Siksi tämän tutkimuksen tutkimuskysymys kysyy, miten pk-yritysten johtajat voisivat hyötyä urheiluorganisaatioiden johtamis- ja sitouttamiskeinojen hyödyntämisestä omalla alallaan. Lisäksi alakysymykset keskittyvät määrittelemään pk-yrityksen johtajan sekä urheilujohtajan, niiden erot ja yhtäläisyydet, johtajuus- ja sitouttamiskeinojen käsitteet ja sen miten niitä harjoitetaan sekä pk-yrityksissä että urheiluorganisaatioissa. Myös muutoksen toteuttamiseen liittyvät haasteet käsitellään alakysymysten kautta. Tutkimuksen empiirisessä osassa käsitellään samoja aiheita asiantuntijahaastatteluiden ja teema-analyysin avulla.

Tutkimustulokset selkeästi ehdottavat, että joitain johtajuuskäytäntöjä ja useita sitouttamiskeinoja voitaisiin soveltaa pk-yrityksiin. Tutkimus ehdottaa, että yhteisjohtajuus- sekä ”palveleva” johtajuus olisivat sopivia johtajuuskäytäntöjä. Sitouttamiskeinoista toimivimmiksi nousivat korostettu organisaatiokulttuuri, tunteen ja intohimon lisääminen liiketoimintaan, palkitsemisjärjestelmän kehittäminen sekä vapaa-ajan aktiviteettien järjestäminen. Mitä tulee siirron toteuttamisen haasteiden ratkaisemiseen, johtajien tulee keskittyä rajapintoihin, selvittää kaikkien roolit muutosprosessissa ja saada koko henkilöstö sitoutumaan muutokseen. Tämä tutkielma tarjoaa teoreettista kontribuutiota sekä käytännön ehdotuksia yritysjohtajille.

**Avainsanat:** Pk-yritysten johtaminen, Urheilujohtaminen, Johtajuus, Sitouttaminen, toteuttamisen haasteet, käytäntöjen siirtäminen

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1	Background of the thesis	10
1.2	Objectives of the thesis and research question	12
1.3	Structure of the study	12
<b>2</b>	<b>Theoretical background</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1	<b>SME Business manager &amp; Sport manager</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1.1	Definition and role of business manager in SME	15
2.1.2	Definition and role of sport manager in team sports organization	18
2.1.3	Comparison of business and sport manager and their roles	20
2.2	<b>Leadership and employee engagement</b>	<b>23</b>
2.2.1	Defining leadership concepts	23
2.2.2	Leadership patterns and practices in SME business organizations	24
2.2.3	Employee engagement patterns and practices in SME business organizations	26
2.2.4	Significant leadership patterns and practices in sport organization	29
2.2.5	Significant employee engagement patterns and practices in sport organization	31
2.2.6	What sport management practices could be applied in business organizations	36
2.3	<b>Challenges of implementation</b>	<b>39</b>
2.4	<b>Synthesis</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1	<b>Research approach</b>	<b>44</b>
3.2	<b>Data collection</b>	<b>46</b>
3.3	<b>Data analysis</b>	<b>52</b>
3.4	<b>Evaluation of the study</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1	<b>Leadership and employee engagement practices in SME and sport context</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1.1	Leadership in SMEs	62
4.1.2	Employee engagement in SME	64
4.1.3	Leadership in sport organization	67

4.1.4	Employee engagement in sport organizations	70
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Benefitting leadership and employee engagement practices for SME managers</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Implementation challenges</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions and Discussion</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Theoretical contribution</b>	<b>80</b>
5.1.1	Leadership and employee engagement in SME business organization	80
5.1.2	Leadership and employee engagement in sport organization	84
5.1.3	Challenges of implementation	87
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Managerial implications</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Limitations and future research suggestions</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>94</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>96</b>
	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>107</b>
	<b>Appendix 1 Interview guide SME and sport managers</b>	<b>107</b>
	<b>Appendix 2 Interview guide leadership consultant</b>	<b>108</b>

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1 Research process	46
Figure 2 Thematic analysis process	54

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1 Business manager skills	16
Table 2 Similarities and differences of business and sport manager	22
Table 3 SME manager leadership and employee engagement practices	28
Table 4 Significant practices in sport context	35
Table 5 Comparison of SME and sport context in leadership and employee engagement	38
Table 6 Operationalization table	49
Table 7 Conducted interviews	51
Table 8 Coded themes	55
Table 9 Managerial implications	91





# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the thesis

As large corporations continue to expand their international presence and the rate of employee globalization accelerates, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are compelled to devise strategies to remain competitive in globalized market. SMEs are remarkable factor for Finnish economy. Throughout the 2000s, new jobs in Finland have been created in small and medium-sized enterprises. Between 2001 and 2019, SMEs created jobs for more than 160 646 people. Of these jobs, 81 095 were created in enterprises with fewer than 50 employees. SMEs account for more than half (57.5%) of the €445 billion turnover of businesses and just over 40% of GDP (Yrittäjät, 2024). As markets become increasingly global, multinational corporations (MNCs) gain an even greater market share, compelling SMEs to compete with energy for talented employees. According to Kar et al. (2011) high attrition rate in SMEs is due to four factors: salary, type of work, career growth and working conditions. Big MNCs can give more or better to employees in every of the previously mentioned aspects. Hereby it is crucial to engage and lead the employees as efficiently as possible to elicit maximum effort from everyone. To address these challenges and enhance employee engagement and leadership processes, SMEs can draw lessons from the sports industry. The sport industry has been highly globalized since the inception of the Olympics and the emergence of free athlete markets, where athletes, known as free agents, can choose where to practice their profession (Pop, 2013). The sports industry is continually advancing towards greater globalization, driven by commercialization and international TV broadcasting contracts (Pop, 2013). That is the reason this thesis intertwines these two contexts, aiming to uncover management practices from sports organizations that can be applied effectively in the SME setting.

In this thesis it was chosen to analyze how leadership and employee engagement practices are practiced by managers in the SME context and sport management context. Leadership and employee engagement play crucial roles in SME management because employees represent one of the most valuable assets for an SME, and its success relies greatly on their dedication and engagement (Smolarek & Sulkowski, 2020, p. 182). Having robust leadership and employee engagement significantly enhances the likelihood of success in any business environment. Sport organizations serve as excellent illustrations where the

importance of leadership and employee engagement is vividly demonstrated. Weak leadership or employee engagement within a sport organization often manifests in the performance outcomes of athletes. This thesis posits that given the effectiveness of leadership and employee engagement practices in the sport industry; they can rather similarly be applied within SME operations.

According to the existing knowledge, this thesis is among the first ones to explore the application of the practices developed in the context of sport industry to address the challenges identified and experienced in the context of SMEs. When using Google Scholar to search for research about the topic using keywords as SME, sport, leadership, and employee engagement in one search the results suggest studies that for example focused on investigating methods of employee involvement in SMEs that prioritize information sharing over consultation processes (Wilkinson et al., 2007), to examine how different leadership styles influence the connection between the quality of work life and employee commitment (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2019) and on providing insight into the objectives, practices and perceptions of small businesses regarding event sponsorship through an explanatory study (Walker Mack, 1999). When using keywords SME, sport and practices the results suggest studies focusing on exploring the perceptions and practices of sport sponsorship within German SMEs beyond the immediate realm of the game itself (Datson et al., 2021), to assess the impact of innovation practices on the sustainable performance of SMEs (Asad et al., 2018) and on conducting a comprehensive review of the field concerning intersection of nationalism and sports (Arnold, 2021). This implies that studies sharing the focus of this research are yet on clear minority, and what comes to SMEs and sport in the same study are mostly related to sponsorship or events. The thesis enriches the SME literature by integrating and offering fresh perspectives from the sport management literature concerning leadership and employee engagement practices. While leadership and employee engagement have been extensively examined independently, their exploration within the SME context remains relatively under-researched, particularly within the realm of the sports industry at higher echelons. While coaching and on-field leadership have been subjects of study, research at the CEO/GM level is notably limited.

This research is based on authors previous bachelor's thesis that was conducted back in 2021. This study largely follows the previous thesis in terms of the theoretical framework.

This theoretical framework was discovered useful during the previous project, and it also suggested this kind of a study as future research.

## **1.2 Objectives of the thesis and research question**

The aim of this thesis is to examine how managers within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can leverage leadership and employee engagement methodologies observed in the realm of sport management. Sport managers employ diverse practices and frameworks in leadership and employee engagement that could hold relevance for SME business organizations. This thesis delves into elucidating the roles of managers in both business and sport contexts while identifying similarities and differences in their leadership and employee engagement strategies. Special attention is given to discerning variations in these patterns and practices. Such disparities, once identified, could offer valuable insights applicable not only to business organizations but also to sports entities. It is also discovered if there are any challenges when implementing such practices into another context. In the light of the above, the key research question of the thesis is as follows:

**How SME business managers can benefit from the leadership and employee engagement practices used by sport industry managers?**

To support my main research question, I have three sub-questions:

1. How leadership and employee engagement practices can be applied in the business context and in sport industry?
2. What leadership and employee engagement practices from sport management could benefit business organization managers?
3. What are the challenges of implementation when transferring leadership and employee engagement practices from one industry to another?

## **1.3 Structure of the study**

The thesis is formed of six main chapters. The first chapter introduces both the research topic and the previous research on the subject, as well as outlines the research questions and objectives. The second chapter, in turn, presents the theories and concentrates on business and sport organization managers. The chapter can be divided into three parts.

The first section begins by defining business organization manager and sport organization manager and their roles, followed by comparative analysis of their similarities and differences. The subsequent theory section explores the patterns and practices employed by both business and sport managers. It primarily addresses whether leaders in SME business organizations could learn something from the leadership and employee engagement practices of their counterparts in sport organization. The last theory part concentrates on the challenges of implementation process. After theory part there is a chapter about conducting the research. It includes methodology, data collections, data analysis and the assessment of the trustworthiness of the study parts. After the research chapter the research findings are presented. Lastly, conclusions are introduced and the whole thesis is summarized. First, I present the theoretical contributions, then practical contributions, and the chapter end to analysis and suggestion for further research based on the results of my thesis. Summary concludes the whole thesis into two pages.

## **2 Theoretical background**

To comprehend the leadership and employee engagement practices utilized in SME business and sport management, it is essential to define the roles of both SME business managers and sport managers. Additionally, an in-depth analysis of both contexts is necessary.

### **2.1 SME Business manager & Sport manager**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of the European economy. They create new jobs, drive economic growth and contribute to social stability. In 2014, the EU's 21 million SMEs employed 88.8 million people across the EU. Nine out of ten companies are SMEs, and SMEs create two-thirds of jobs (European Union, 2020). SMEs boost entrepreneurship and innovation across the EU and are therefore crucial to supporting competitiveness and employment. According to European Commission small and medium-sized enterprises constitute 99% of the total business landscape within the EU (European Union, 2020). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are defined in various ways within the research literature. Typically, the definition depends on criteria such as annual turnover, annual balance sheet total and headcount (European Commission, 2016, p. 10). According to European Union standards, SMEs are enterprises with an annual turnover of less than 50 million euro or an annual balance sheet total of less than 43 million euro and with 250-500 employees, depending on the continent (European Commission, 2016, p. 10). Another approach to defining SMEs and distinguishing them from multinational corporations (MNCs) is by examining qualitative indicators, such as employee characteristics. For instance, SME personnel may often lack university degrees and possess broad knowledge, whereas MNCs typically employ a higher proportion of university graduates who are more specialized (Berisha & Pula, 2015, p. 22).

Although a unified definition for sport management has not yet been established, Retar et al. (2013, p. 83) describe it as the coordination process of key recourses and successful collaboration with key stakeholders, facilitating the effective achievement of organization and/or the athlete business and sports goals in all management processes. Different organizational structure, ownership structure, the structure of the mission, stakeholder structure, and the structure of the key products are behind the particularity of the field of

sport management (Bednarik et al., 2015, p. 276). Organizational structure may differ from association, federation of association to a company for instance. It can be public or privately owned, organization can be non-profit organization or profit seeking, and the stakeholder diversity from athletes to sponsors and volunteers. The main product could be an athlete, a sport facility or an event organized at the sport facility (Bednarik et al., 2015, p. 276). The volume and importance of stakeholders are important especially in sport management since the diversity is so wide. It is critical to have synergetic effects from sponsors, media, coaches, physicians to even engineers to succeed. (Retar et al., 2013).

### 2.1.1 Definition and role of business manager in SME

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2021), an individual who is employed within a company to oversee a specific area of activity or one of the company's departments, is designated as a business manager. In other words, these individuals are office workers who occupy managerial roles and possess expertise in business services, sales, organization development, and administration and in other related functions (European Commission, 2014, p. 1). Within the context of SMEs, defined as an enterprise with 250 or fewer employees, the business manager may assume multiple roles including the one of a CEO or a board member. To fully understand the whole range of roles that a business manager holds in a SME, it is essential to examine their specific tasks. According to Virtanen and Salminen (2020), a SME manager must oversee and ensure the legality and validity of the company's operations. Additionally, they must secure the company's performance and ensure its future. Generally, their work duties encompass planning, preparation, decision making, budget management, company representation, policy implementation and negotiations (European Commission, 2014, p. 1).

To effectively fulfil the duties mentioned, a manager must possess specific skills. Although the required skills of a manager may vary depending on the particular managerial possession one works in, there are essential general skills that are required across all managerial areas (Karanja et al., 2013, Winterton 2002) These skills include "problem-solving, evaluation and decision making, resource management, intellectual skills, communication skills, technological skills and numeracy and financial skills". For a summary of these skills, see Table 1 below.

Table 1 Business manager skills. (Karanja et al., 2013; Winterton, 2002)

Problem solving, evaluation and decision-making	Includes finding and defining the problem, evaluating options and finding the solution.
Resource management	Includes understanding in human resource management, managing own resources and time, managing financial resources of one's own activity area.
Intellectual skills	Includes problem sensitivity, continuous learning and critical thinking.
Communication skills	May vary by industry. Managers must give presentations and are constantly having negotiations, so it is important to be clear in written and spoken communications and listening as well.
Technological skills	Includes understanding of new technologies and utilizing them in business context is highly efficient and companies may have competitive advantage by using them effectively.
Numeracy and financial skills	Includes budgeting and day-to-day business monitoring. It is required skill to understand numeracy and financial reports regardless of the activity area.

In the light of the managerial skills discussed, several essential managerial roles necessary for running an SME can be identified. Virtanen and Salminen (2020, pp. 16-18) posit that a SME manager typically fulfils three key roles within a company: strategic role, a role in business development and a supervisory role. Those earlier mentioned job duties, such as representing the company, planning, managing of budgets and decision making are integral to these roles. According to Bloomsbury (2006), however, the scope of a manager's role is broader and more demanding. It encompasses such additional roles as team building, being assertive communicator and strong leader role. To emphasize this,

these roles are not contradictory but rather complementary, increasing the overall effectiveness of the manager.

The second and third chapters of the book focus on building effective teams and leadership (Bloomsbury, 2006, pp. 13-23). As a manager, the primary role is to lead a team rather than merely being one part of it. This leadership role of understanding and embracing responsibility, maintaining a focus on work, assisting the team to achieve success, rewarding the team effectively, resolving conflicts and leading by example (Bloomsbury, 2006, pp. 13-23).

According to Bloomsbury (2006, pp. 32-40), a manager's increasing interaction with various individuals necessitates one's role to be assertive in all communication. Assertiveness in communication is closely linked to the ability to delegating tasks. Effective management involves sharing responsibilities for functions outside the manager's core competencies with other employees (Bowen, 2010, p. 58). Bowen (2010, p. 58) further suggests that managers role includes deciding which functions to personally undertake and which to are those to delegate to others.

Bloomsbury (2006, p. 52-65) addresses the importance of giving and receiving feedback, which is a topic closely related to interactions and communicator skills that were previously discussed. Providing feedback effectively is challenging (Steelman & Williams, 2019). Even when organizations have established clear systems of feedback giving the implementation may not be optimal (Steelman & Williams, 2019). In spite of its difficulty, manager's responsibility is to both give and receive feedback although that it is not easy (Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 52). Soliciting and offering feedback is important for the development of both the manager and their subordinates. As previously discussed, manager's role includes maximizing the best potential out of every member of the team (Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 13-23).

SME manager possesses relatively wide job responsibilities and the skill set required is versatile. The broadness of job responsibilities may also come from the fact that in SME context the business manager might also be the owner of the company. It creates more duties and responsibilities. The role of business manager can be determined as that of a team centric task distributor.



### 2.1.2 Definition and role of sport manager in team sports organization

An additional context where managerial roles hold particular significance, but perhaps is less explored, is within sport management. Sport manager is defined as an individual employed within the sport industry with specific ties to sports management (Sugman et al., 2002). Building upon this definition of a sport manager, one encompasses any individual who is occupying a managerial position in a sport organization including coaches, agents, team managers, a general manager/CEOs and club owners. In general, they all are sport managers. This thesis aims to investigate the activities and roles of sport managers at the general manager or CEO level, since they are responsible for executing the most diverse range of responsibilities. However, it is noteworthy that sport managers do not solely undertake all tasks themselves. Sport organizations enlist support from a broad array of other professionals including marketing specialists, accountants and sales professionals to facilitate the organizational operations, but these assisting professional units work under the sport manager (Thompson, 2018). According to Thompson (2018) sport manager's primary functions encompass five primary areas: human resource management, general management duties, the business aspect of sports management, promotions and marketing and all the miscellaneous duties on top of that. Human resource responsibilities are multifaceted within sport management side extending to the management of three distinct social groups they must manage: the athletes, other organizational staff and every stakeholder involved in the sporting events such as stadium workers and volunteers (Bednarik et al., 2015). Management responsibilities revolve mostly around schedule management, resource allocation and facility management (Thompson, 2018). The financial responsibilities include budgetary management and the comprehensive evaluation of all the potential financial variables that may either be beneficial or pose risks to the organization (Thompson, 2018). The marketing functions entail arranging interviews and media meetings, coordinating fundraising efforts and managing public relations (Thompson, 2018). In addition to these duties, sport managers undertake numerous miscellaneous responsibilities. These may include additional sport related work tasks for some external organizations, or involvement in entrepreneurial projects (Thompson, 2018).

To excel in the responsibilities of a sport manager, certain skills are required. Abraham (2016) has delineated five essential qualities that a sport manager needs to have. Firstly, a robust understanding of business principles is important which is readily justified with

the multifaceted business responsibilities inherent to sport management discussed previously (Abraham, 2016). Secondly, adept skill regards communication skills that is necessary given the fact that sport managers interact with numerous individuals frequently within and outside the organization. Sport managers are also interacting with the media and thus clarity in communication is paramount (Abraham, 2016). According to Abraham (2016) sport manager must prioritize to be customer focused. In customer-centric field, such as sport, effectively engaging the fans and audiences to the team is vital for success, thus a strong emphasis on customer orientation is needed. The final two qualities highlighted by Abraham (2016) are innovativeness and fervent passion for the game. With the rapid growth of the sports industry, consequently, to stand out, innovativeness becomes imperative for differentiation and success in all aspects (Abraham, 2016). As noted by Bednarik et al. (2015), sport manager must possess a comprehensive understanding of the game and the laws of the game to effectively understand what one is managing.

Now that we have gained insight into the job duties and skills required for the possession, it is relevant delineate the specific roles of a sport manager. Retar (2011) asserts that management of sport primarily entails of planning, leadership and adept management of business processes and key resources. In essence, the role of a sport manager is to ensure that all individuals in the organization, particularly athletes, can focus on their respective responsibilities while maintaining the business operations in function. Jinga (2014, p.78) categorizes the role of a sport manager into three distinct categories: “interpersonal roles, information roles and decisional roles”. The interpersonal role encompasses leadership, liaison and figurehead roles (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). These roles become active when a manager assists, motivates or guides organizations athletes or staff members, engages in public symbolic activities or communicates with stakeholders and other external parties to enhance public relations and manage other public affairs (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). Informational role includes activities such as information gathering, sharing, and serving as a spokesperson (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). In information gathering and sharing, the sport manager evaluates information and disseminates it to subordinates at right times (Jinga, 2014, p. 79). Additionally, it is important, as noted by Jinga (2014, p. 79), to explain the significance information and its implications for achieving the best success. The spokesperson role involves disseminating information to relevant parties, both within the organization and outside of it (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). Finally, resource allocation,

conflict resolution and negotiation are included in the decisional role (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). Given the frequent emergence of tension and unexpected challenges within and outside of the sport organizations sport managers play a pivotal role in providing solutions and preventing potential crises inherent to the sport industry. (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). The role of negotiator holds remarkable significance as sport managers represents the whole organization in negotiations with stakeholders and athletes across various contractual agreement negotiations (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62).

Although the job duties of sport managers are considerably wider than those of SME business managers, they are able rely on other professionals within the organization. To be a successful sport manager, one needs to understand the sport and have deep-seated passion for it. Consequently, the centric role of sport manager lies in efficiently engaging individuals with the organization on multiple levels.

### 2.1.3 Comparison of business and sport manager and their roles

Both SME business organization managers and a sport managers have several similarities along with notable differences. Upon closer investigation of their job duties, it becomes obvious that they share common tasks in general. As outlined by Virtanen and Salminen (2020), SME managers are tasked with overseeing legal issues, ensuring the organizational performance and securing the future of the company. However, securing the future and budgeting prove to be more complex for sport managers due to the seasonal nature of income and variability in sponsorships and athlete contracts every season, thus making the forecasting more difficult. Furthermore, differences arise in the responsibilities in human resources and public relations between sport managers and SME business managers. According to Bednarik et al. (2015, p. 276), volunteers tha are usually involved in sport industry introduces a distinct dimension to human resource duties. Constant management of public relations, having press conferences and giving interviews constantly are more commonly associated with sport managers than with SME business managers (Abraham, 2016) The most significant difference in their job duties is that a sport manager must lead the company's financial performance to be profitable, or at the very least, minimizing the financial losses, while simultaneously focusing on the athletic success. Additionally, a dilemma exists inherent to sport management and regarding organizational profitability. The profitability may fluctuate between achieving victories on athletic front and reaching financially profitable business. From time to time,

sport managers may make decisions that prioritize athletic success over financial profitability that can be harmful for the organization from financial perspective (Bednarik et al., 2015, p. 277). However, athletic success is often somewhat associated with financial success as well.

When investigating at skill sets required for managers, there are more similarities than differences. In the light of European Commission (2014, p. 3), a business manager must have resource management, decision making, intellectual, communication, technological and financial skills to be successful. Similarly, a sport manager must have all these skills as sport management includes leading both the athletic and organizational aspects. To be successful in sport management, a sport manager must utilize the resources effectively, make difficult decisions, think critically, communicate proficiently, leverage new technologies and of course maintain the financial awareness of the organization. However, sport managers must apply these skills a bit differently than SME business managers due to the unique characteristics of the sport industry. In addition, sport managers need the specific skills that Abraham (2016) outlines. These skills include customer-focused thinking, innovativeness and deep-seated passion for the game. Customer-focused thinking and innovative mindset are also skills that could be seen as beneficial for SME business managers. This does not imply that SME business managers lack these skills but rather that there could be potential to utilize those skills more efficiently. The primary difference in the required skill set is the deep passion for the sport being managed. For a sport manager, it is crucial to have both the passion for and knowledge of the sport managed. However, this concept can also apply to SME business management, as business managers, especially in SMEs, must have clear understanding of and passion for their industry.

The similarities and differences between roles of sport managers and SME business managers are intriguing. While their general roles are rather similar, the more specific responsibilities differ considerably. According to Virtanen and Salminen (2020, pp. 16-18), a business manager typically fulfills three roles: strategic role, business development role and supervisory role, which in general are all also sport manager roles. Conversely, Jinga (2014, p. 78) categorizes sport managers roles also into three types: interpersonal roles, informational roles and decisional roles that can also be relevant to SME business management. Nevertheless, when investigating the roles in more detail, they are not that similar anymore. For instance, Bloomsbury (2006, pp. 13-23) elaborates that business

managers role is to build and lead great teams instead of only being a part of the team. While these roles are applicable to sport managers as well, team building is more tangible role for sport manager than to a business manager. They are responsible for collecting the players and staff to the organization as well as negotiating contracts. According to Surani et al. (2014, p. 62) the decisional role of a sport manager includes resource allocation, conflict management and negotiation. Unlike SME business managers, sport managers must frequently negotiate with various parties such as athletes, sponsors, team staff and other stakeholders. Although, SME business managers must negotiate with suppliers and distributors etc., the frequency of negotiations is generally lower. Another notable difference in roles is fast problem-solving and decision-making. Sport managers must often respond to unexpected situations such as, athlete injuries, sponsor withdrawals or incidents during sporting events (Surani et al., 2014, p. 62). As business managers face unforeseen challenges as well, the frequency and complexity of these situation are usually lower. These similarities and differences are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Similarities and differences of business and sport manager (Tulonen, 2021, p.16)

	SME business manager	Sport manager
Job duties	Oversee legal issues, ensure the performance of the company and secure the future	Lead the company financially to be profitable or at least minimize the unprofitability, ensuring athletic success and everyday PR activities
Skill set	Decision making, resource management, intellectual, communication, technological and financial skills	All the same skills are required in sport management, but they are utilized a bit differentially. Also, the emphasis is more in being <b>passionate</b> about the sport and <b>knowledge</b> of the sport
Role	Strategic role, role in business development and supervisory role	In general, the same as business manager, but highlighted role in team building, negotiator role and

		must response to unexpected situations more often
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The table concludes similarities and differences of SME manager and sport manager in job duties, skill set and role. It shows that the managers do a lot the same jobs but clearly indicates that sport managers do a little more. As the job duties, skill set, and role are clear it is easier to understand leadership and employee engagement in SME and sport context.

## 2.2 Leadership and employee engagement

This sub-chapter provides detailed analysis of leadership and employee engagement. The primary objective is to identify the patterns and practices of these concepts within the contexts of SME business organizations and sport organizations. More importantly, it aims to uncover the actual advantages that a business organization could gain from adopting practices used by sport organization managers.

### 2.2.1 Defining leadership concepts

When defining leadership, it is important to note that no single definition for that is universally accepted (Bolden et al., 2011, p. 2). In addition, there are two other characteristics associated with the concept of leadership: the lack of consensus on the most effective methods for developing leadership and leaders, and the limited evidence demonstrating the impact of leadership or leadership development on company productivity and performance (Bolden et al., 2011, pp. 2-22). Nevertheless, discussions about company productivity and performance frequently involve references to leaders and leadership.

Previously, leadership was often regarded as an individual trait, whereas contemporary discussions frame it as a more complex phenomenon, emphasizing the significant roles of context and followers (Silva, 2016, p. 3). For many, the term “leadership” evokes the ‘great man approach’ (Howieson, 2019, p. 35), wherein that leadership is exemplified by iconic leaders such as Bill Gates or Elon Musk. Silva (2016, p. 3), offers a modern definition: “Leadership is the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals”. Summerfield (2014, pp. 251-253) instead provides a simpler perspective, suggesting that

the core function of leadership is to “make things better” (Summerfield, 2014, p. 252). This definition does not exclude Silva’s definition; rather, it complements it. As Summerfield (2014, p. 252) notes, his definition raises many questions but does not exclude other definitions.

Employee engagement is often conflated with work engagement (Srinivas & Yasmeen, 2013, p. 63), and according to Wah (1999), engaging employees presents a significant challenge for organizations. Employee engagement can be defined as a psychological state in which a worker’s behaviour and intellectual focus align with organizational goals (Sharma & Kaur, 2014, p. 45). Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 73) describe an engaged employee as energetic, one who enjoys challenges, mentally resilient and dedicated to work. This psychological state has the potential to enhance organizational performance (Hewitt, 2014, p. 11). High levels of employee engagement are associated with increase in productivity and profitability (Wagner and Harter, 2006). In addition, some scholars have also identified a positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment (Sugandini et al., 2018, p. 3). Employees who have positive experiences and attitudes toward their job are more likely to show positive attitudes and more normative and affective commitment to their job and organization (Sugandini et al., 2018, p. 3).

### 2.2.2 Leadership patterns and practices in SME business organizations

We have already discussed job duties, required skills and roles of SME business managers. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how they practice leadership and employee engagement within their organizations. Despite the complexity of definition, leadership is widely researched topic. However, its research within SME context remains limited (Franco & Matos, 2015, p. 425). SMEs need to find and implement strategies to remain competitive in globalized, technology-orientated and innovative markets, with the managers being the key drivers behind these processes (Rijal, 2010; Rebelo & Gomes, 2008). The behavior, actions and attitudes of managers are in key role in determining the leadership styles they adopt (Franco & Matos, 2015). According to Franco and Matos (2015), the three primary leadership styles employed in SMEs are transactional, transformational and passive-avoidant. It is also noted that there no leader strictly adheres to only one of the mentioned styles; the choice of leadership style is situational.

Transactional leadership bases on exchanges occurring between managers and subordinates (Bass, 2000). In this framework subordinates' needs are met when they complete the appointed tasks. According to McCleskey (2014) these transactions enable the managers to achieve their tasks and performance objectives, maintain the organizational stability, avoid unnecessary risks, emphasize extrinsic rewards and enhance the company's efficiency. Transactional leadership allows subordinates to pursue their own self-seeking, reduce workplace anxiety and focus on clear organizational goals (Sadeghi & Pihie, 2012, p. 188). The clarity of roles and structures inherent in transactional leadership helps both the manager and subordinates in working towards their objectives (Franco & Matos, 2015, p. 429).

Transformational leadership style involves the manager taking the initiative to put subordinates into motion to engage in the change process, encouraging their collective identity and efficacy (Burns, 2003, p. 26). This approach increases employees' sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, leading them to exceed performance expectations (Burns, 2003, p. 26). Managers elicit responses from subordinates through idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration (McCleskey, 2014, p. 120). Idealized influence comes from two aspects: subordinates attribute certain admirable qualities to the manager, and managers positively influence subordinates through their behavior (McCleskey, 2014, p. 120). Intellectual stimulation involves reformatting familiar problems, challenging assumptions and applying new perspective to established challenges and situations (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Optimism and enthusiasm are essential characteristics of inspirational motivation as this aspect encompasses behaviors that inspire and motivate subordinates by offering them a shared purpose and challenge (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The fourth aspect, according to Bass and Riggio (2006) is individualized consideration meaning the manager adopting a coaching or mentoring role, providing more personalized assistance and learning opportunities to help each subordinate reach their full potential.

The third leadership style prevalent in SMEs is passive-avoidant leadership, which encompasses two main components: laissez-faire and management-by-exception (Avolio et al., 1999). Laissez-faire leadership style is characterized by passive indifference toward subordinates and tasks (Avolio et al., 1999). The second component, passive management-by-exception involves utilizing conditional punishment and corrective actions in response to facing deviations from performance standards (Avolio et al., 1999).



In passive-avoidant leadership it is usual that the manager avoids establishing clear agreements, expectations and shared goals, and standards to be achieved. In addition, managers in this leadership style refrain from providing positive feedback, and workers are not empowered to be independent decision-makers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Avolio et al. (1999) assert that the passive-avoidant manager is, in every aspect, the opposite of the transformational manager.

### 2.2.3 Employee engagement patterns and practices in SME business organizations

The most valuable asset of an SME is its employees, as their success is largely dependent on the workforce (Smolarek & Sulkowski, 2020, p. 182). Therefore, employee engagement is important. According to previous literature, job satisfaction, rewarding and leader member exchange (LMX) positively influence employee engagement in SMEs (Sugandini et. al., 2018, p. 3). There are multiple strategies to address these above-mentioned factors to enhance employee engagement effectively.

According to Smolarek and Sulkowski (2020), work satisfaction can be defined in various ways. It might be characterized for example as positive attitudes towards job duties and the work environment or as general attitudes and feelings about the work itself. Fundamentally, it can be understood as the result of a divergence between what employee actually receives from job and what they believe they should receive (Staples & Higgins, 1998, p. 213; Locke, 1976, p. 1319). There is no universal explanation for the factors influencing job satisfaction, however, there are three satisfaction factor groups frequently emerging in the literature: organizational, social and personal (Gros, 2012, pp. 115-116). Organizational factors refer to work related elements such as work safety, pay and promotion prospects. Social factors include aspects like the organizational climate, respect towards employees and customer relations. Lastly, personal factors including individual's characteristics and other elements beyond the company's control, also contribute to work satisfaction. These factors provide insight into the actual aspects that affect job satisfaction within the SME context. According to Smolarek and Sulkowski (2020, p. 189), several factors influence job satisfaction in SMEs. These include employee training, involvement, clear definition of responsibilities, fairness, feedback, good working conditions and environment, and cooperation and communication with the organization (Smolarek & Sulkowski, 2020, p. 189). Employee training and involvement

allows employees to broaden their knowledge and enhance their motivation for individual development. Clearly defined responsibilities help employees to achieve their goals, thereby enhancing company efficiency. Fairness is about reviewing policies and procedures related to for instance the incentives and remuneration. Finally, good working conditions and a positive work environment increase the possibility for employee to reach their full potential (Smolarek & Sulkowski, 2020, p. 189).

As previously noted, rewarding employees is one of the three methods to enhance engagement in the SME context. Bayraktar et al. (2016, p. 45) suggest that when an individual employee is rewarded, it is more likely to align their actions with company objectives. Daft (2008, p. 506) identifies two ways of rewarding: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic rewards refer to internal rewards such as positive emotional responses achieved from personal performance and the completion of assigned tasks. Extrinsic rewards, on the other hand, are more tangible incentives like promotion or bonuses (Daft, 2008, p. 506). According to Brown (2005), many businesses are adopting “total reward” system in place of traditional financial rewards. This shift is attributed to the rapid increase in costs of financial benefits, increasing employee preference for non-financial rewards (Brown, 2005). The “total reward” concept contains both financial and non-financial rewarding experiences. According to Armstrong and Brown (2006) it includes four reward categories: individual, relational, transactional and communal. Individual rewards consist of for example base pay, bonuses and shares. Relational rewards focus on personal development aspects such as training and career progression. Communal rewards, which are non-financial, include recognition, work-life balance, and leadership. Lastly, transactional rewards cover aspects as pensions, holidays and health care (Armstrong & Brown, 2006). As illustrated, SMEs have a spectrum of methods to reward their employees.

Leader member exchange is defined as the improvement in the nature of the relationship between a manager and an employee, which can improve the performance of both parties (Morrow, 2005). According to Lunenburg (2010, p. 1), the manager-employee relationship in LMX is regarded independently with every subordinate, rather than as a collective relationship with the group. The fundamental concept of LMX is that managers form two groups among employees: the in-group and the out-group (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2). The in-group is granted broader responsibilities, attention and rewards, and greater flexibility in their responsibilities, while out-group, which is not part of the manager’s

inner circle, receives less attention and fewer rewards and is managed with stricter oversight (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2). The in-group comprises employees with whom the leader has trusting and open relationship, while the out-group consists of those with whom manager has a weaker connection (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2). A strict line between these groups should be avoided since the out-group could feel themselves as outsiders influencing negatively to their productivity. Moreover, it is not desirable to have a small in-group. Conversely, fostering an extensive in-group and developing as many high-quality relationships as possible with employees is worth striving for (George & Jones, 2008). The more high-quality relationships there are in in-group, the more there are engaged workers.

Table 3 SME manager leadership and employee engagement practices (Tulonen, 2021)

<b>SME manager leadership and employee engagement practices</b>	
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Employee engagement</b>
Transformational: Leader concentrates on inspiring and motivating followers by fostering a sense of shared vision, empowerment and personal growth.	Job satisfaction: Consists of training, involvement, clear definition of responsibilities, fairness, feedback, good working conditions and environment, and cooperation and communication with the organization.
Transactional: Focus is on exchanges between leaders and followers having emphasis on rewards for performance and adherence to established rules and procedures.	Rewarding: Include two ways of rewarding: intrinsic and extrinsic. With the intrinsic they mean internal rewards such as positive emotional reaction achieved from employee performance and completing assigned tasks. Extrinsic rewards mean more tangible rewards such as promotion or bonuses.
Passive-avoidant: consists of two components: laissez-faire (1.) and management-by-exception (2.). 1. includes passive indifference towards subordinates and tasks and 2. where conditional punishment and corrective	LMX: Relationship nature improvement between manager and worker that can enhance both employee and manager performance. There is inner and outer circle, and it is desired to have more employees in inner circle.

actions are used when facing deflection from performance standards.	
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In summary, three primary leadership styles are prevalent in SMEs: transformational, transactional and passive-avoidant. Moreover, the three most significant employee engagement practices in SME context include: job satisfaction, rewarding and leader-member exchange (LMX).

#### 2.2.4 Significant leadership patterns and practices in sport organization

The job duties and role of a sport manager have been clearly defined thus far and now is time to define specific operational modes in leadership and employee engagement utilized within the sport industry. According to O'Boyle et al. (2015, p. 2), the effective leadership has gained increased recognition in sport management, driven by the industry's ongoing professionalization and commercialization. In sport management leadership, numerous scholars have shifted the research from leader-centric to alternative approaches. The literature identifies three distinct leadership styles in sport management: shared/collective leadership, transformational leadership, and servant leadership.

Collective/collaborative/shared leadership refers to processes and systems where multiple individuals contribute to leadership activities (Lemay, 2009). In this approach, the relationships play a crucial role in facilitating leadership (Chirichello, 2001). However, this is only one definition of the concept, as there is no universally accepted definition of collective leadership. It is worth noting out that shared leadership is an emerging leadership approach that views leadership as a collective phenomenon (Kang, 2018, p. 4). In the sport industry, collective leadership is significant since the emphasis is on "we" over "me", leading to a sense of common shared goals and collaboration within the team to reach those goals. In collective leadership there are both formal and informal leaders. In a sport organization the formal collective leadership includes individuals in managerial positions, coaches and designated team leaders, such as captains (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 56). Conversely, informal collective leadership arises from personal attributes such as maturity and characteristics of an individual (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 58).

Transformational leadership, previously identified as one of leadership styles used in SME context, is also extensively applied in sport management. This leadership style aims

to motivate and transform subordinate's values, encouraging them to achieve a level of performance that exceeds their normal limits through a charismatic characteristic and inspiring them to become leaders themselves. (Kark et al., 2003; Hopton et al., 2007). According to Gomes (2014, p. 46), even though the transformational leadership is well-researched topic in sport management by many scholars it has received limited attention. Nonetheless, the preliminary results have been promising. Transformational leadership comprise three elements: leaders, followers and common goal or purpose, typically within an environment that is highly competitive and stressful. These three elements are highly easy to identify from a sport organization (Gomes, 2014, p. 28). Furthermore, the sport context can be characterized as one where the social evaluations by fans and media are present on a daily basis (Gomes, 2014, p. 28). The industry is highly volatile with a thin line between success and failure. Consequently, the four I's, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, are regarded as effective concepts in sport management leadership as well.

The third leadership style discussed in the literature on sport management leadership styles is servant leadership, which is considered an emerging leadership theory due to its character. In servant leadership, the leader's main focus is on the development of followers rather than achieving organizational goals (Peachey et al., 2015, p. 575). Even though the focus is on follower development it does not mean that organizational objectives are neglected or deemed unimportant. (Peachey et al., 2015, p. 575). Instead, the idea is that the follower needs to be developed first, and the developed followers will be leading to enhanced organizational performance (Peachey et al., 2015, p. 575). Research identifies several dimensions in servant leadership. Peachey et al. (2015, p. 575) highlight van Dierendonck's (2011) conceptualization that has six dimensions: humility, interpersonal acceptance, empowering and developing people, stewardship, authenticity and providing direction. These dimensions are recognisable features from sports organizations. For example, a football team that consists mostly of young athletes, the organization must commit to their development to eventually achieve better result on the field. Consequently, improved game performance the organizational performance enhances as well.

### 2.2.5 Significant employee engagement patterns and practices in sport organization

Employee engagement in the context of sport management context is both fascinating and challenging. The sport industry is rapidly developing, with athletes moving progressively globally in search of optimal environment for their athletic development and personal growth that might include starting a family. Given that athlete's career relatively short, it is crucial for them to find a place where they can maximize their incomes while feeling like home. For instance, Alexander Barkov's decision to sign a ten-year extension with the Florida Panthers (NHL) for only \$80 million even though he is valued higher salary-wise as other teams were willing to pay him more. This example suggests that effective employee engagement strategies have worked to retain such a talent in a team at a lower cost. When examining the engagement practices in sport organizations, factors such as job satisfaction, rewarding and LMX (Sugandini et al., 2020, p. 3) are present. Nevertheless, there are unique elements that affect employee engagement within sport industry. Sport managers must engage the athletes, staff, volunteers and all stakeholders making it necessary to enhance the engagement methods to manage the whole.

In the sport industry, job satisfaction is mainly determined by motivation and organization culture. Mitchell and Daniels (2003, p. 226) define motivation as "inner desire to make an effort" which is believed to have positive impact on employee's performance in organization. That inner drive distinguishes two individuals with identical skill sets making it important for sport organizations to understand the aspects influencing the motivation (Taylor et al. 2008, p. 157). This inner desire comes from fulfilling the unmet needs such as financial necessity or the need for personal challenges (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 157). Taylor et al. (2008, pp. 157-158) argue that the strength of these needs determines the level of effort an individual will exert to remain motivated and engaged. For example, if a basketball player has already earned \$100 million over their career, the money might not probably be the most effective way to motivate the player to stay with the club for an additional six years. To better understand how to attract, work hard and retain athletes in the organization, it is necessary to define the needs. Maslow (1943) outlined a hierarchy of the needs experienced by every people; psychological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. In addition, McClelland's (1961) three need theory which includes need for achievement, need for power and need for affiliation is especially relevant in the sport context. These theories

are classified as content theories that define what motivates individuals whereas process theories are trying to explain how people can be motivated (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 158). According to Taylor et al. (2008, p. 162) many motivation process theories exist with classic theories being Adam's equity theory and Vroom's expectancy theory. Adam's equity theory posits that individuals feel motivated when receiving rewards that are perceived fair relative to their efforts and compared to their peers. For, example if a basketball player receives an undervalued offer from a team, in comparison to the peers also, one may feel unmotivated and unfairly treated leading to lack of motivation to stay in the organization. Vroom's expectancy theory is a bit more complex. It suggests that motivation is based on the belief that being capable of completing a task leads to receiving a reward that one values (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 162-163). If one of these elements (belief in capability, expectation of reward or valuing the reward) are missing the motivation of an individual might be lower or nonexistent.

Organizational culture is extensively defined by common values, beliefs and assumptions in the organization that help coordinate and guide member behavior (Schein, 1991). Typically, these values and beliefs that are underlined in the organizations reflect what is important to the founders and leaders of the organization as they are responsible for defining organization's purpose and vision. Consequently, their behavior reinforces the core values and beliefs (Schein, 1991). According to MacIntosh and Doherty (2005), the commonly accepted values and beliefs have been shown to foster job satisfaction, organizational commitment, increased effort and decreased turnover likely because they provide clear operational guidelines for everyone in the organization. Nevertheless, the organizational culture can vary in strength being either strong or weak (Baker, 2009) Strong culture can be characterized by deep understanding and acceptance of the common values, beliefs, and assumptions organization making it a remarkable guiding force within the organization (McKenna & Beech, 2002). In contrast in weak organizational culture these values beliefs and assumptions are not broadly understood and accepted and therefore do not effectively guide the members of an organization (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 103). In the context of sport and employee engagement, a strong organizational culture is important. It needs to be evident to attract and engage new athletes by making the organization appealing and to further engage the existing athletes to the organization.

Sport organizations use both intrinsic and extrinsic rewarding, including financial and nonfinancial rewards (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 165). Examples of intrinsic rewarding

include sense of achievement and personal growth which are especially meaningful rewards in sport context (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 165). Since intrinsic rewards cannot be provided directly, but are important in the context, managers can structure the workplace to facilitate chances for these experiences, for example through job design (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 165). According to Taylor et al. (2008, p. 176) job design is a process where job duties are designed to be more rewarding and motivating for employees or volunteers. In job design, the task itself should be motivating. Three key elements in job design that enhance motivation include rewarding and meaningfulness of the task, sense of responsibility, and knowledge of the results (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 176). The disadvantage of job design is that redesigning one individual's job to increase opportunities for intrinsic rewards might negatively impact on another individual's job design (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 176). Financial rewards can be direct, such as base salary, bonuses and cost-of-living adjustments, or indirect, such as dental plan, paid vaccination and life insurance (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 166). According to Taylor et al (2008, p. 167) there are four bases for financial compensation in sport organizations: job level, skills, seniority and performance. The job level based rewarding means that the pay structure is influenced by the type of work and its value to the organization, and it is determined by factors such as responsibility, task difficulty and decision-making responsibility (McKenna & Beech, 2002). Skills-based compensation is defined by the required skills and qualifications for the job and it is often linked to the job-based pay structure (McKenna & Beech, 2002). Third base is the seniority-based reward system where the pay is determined by the length of time an employee has been with the organization, emphasizing the value of long-term commitment with the same organization (Taylor et al., 2008, pp. 168-169). The final reward system is performance-based, where the pay is determined by result and behavior. Performance-based pay can be drawn from individual achievements or unit/organization results (Taylor et al., 2008, pp. 169-170). These four bases of compensation can also be utilized in combination. Indirect financial rewards may also include reimbursement for expenses such as skill upgrades and car allowance (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 165). Non-financial rewards, provided by the organization, do not have direct monetary value for the employee. These rewards can be tangible, such as team merchandise, or intangible such as promotion, however those are united by the fact that those are non-financial (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 166).



The significance of LMX is highlighted in sport organizations, particularly in team sports. In such settings, differential treatment by leaders is often visible to team members thus the sport team context emphasizes the significance of LMX (Martin, 1984; Sias & Jablin, 1995). The differential treatment can be perceived positively or negatively depending on various factors. Leader-member exchange (LMX) refers to practice where subordinates are treated differentially, categorizing them into two groups, so called “inner circle” and “outsiders” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2). The primary aim is however to get as many followers as possible into the inner circle. According to van Hooper and Martin (2008) in team sports the effectiveness and harmony are enhanced when rewards, particularly social rewards such as feedback and attention, are distributed equally. However, research indicates that unequal distribution of rewards might not lead to internal conflicts if it is perceived as justified on other grounds, such as status, seniority or individual needs (Leventhal, 1980). In team sports, such as ice hockey, where players have special skills, for example someone is a goal scorer and one can defend well, leaders may distribute the task-related rewards, like playing time, differentially to achieve the best results (van Breukelen et al., 2010, p. 48). A team members perspective about this practice can vary. It might be different depending on if the emphasis is solely on team performance or if the team atmosphere is prioritized (Anshel, 2003). If the emphasis is on atmosphere rather than performance, the differential treatment can lead to negativity and conflicts within the team. In professional sport organization main focus should be on the team performance outcome and everyone should understand that the emphasis is on achieving the best team results although the team atmosphere is an important aspect to reach those results. Thus, while fairness is important, the emphasis must be on team performance. In a professional sport team, members will understand and accept this priority as long as the reward **situation** is fair and equitable.

Table 4 Significant practices in sport context (Tulonen, 2021)

<b>Significant practices in sport context</b>	
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Employee engagement</b>
Collective: Involves shared responsibility, collaborative decision making and a focus on harnessing the diverse skills and perspectives of a group to achieve common goals.	Job satisfaction: Consists of motivation and organizational culture. Motivation is an inner desire that formulates from unmet needs -> focus on identifying needs. Organizational culture, comprising common values, beliefs and assumptions guides member behaviour -> winning culture
Transformational: Leader concentrates on inspiring and motivating followers by fostering a sense of shared vision, empowerment and personal growth.	Rewarding: Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards as in SME context. Specialities are active job design, advanced financial rewards system, cost-of-living adjustments.
Servant: Prioritizes the well-being and development of followers, with leaders serving their team member's needs and facilitating their growth.	Highlighted LMX: Idea same as in SME context, but it is highlighted in sport context as it is more visible for team members. Focus on fairness and performance outcomes.

The predominant leadership styles in sport management are collective leadership, transformational leadership and servant leadership. Employee engagement in sport industry is a challenging topic. While job satisfaction, rewarding and LMX are methods to engage employees, practices differ from those in the context of SMEs. Factors like organizational culture, motivation, complex reward systems and highlighted LMX are characters that are particularly related to process of employee engagement in the sport industry.

## 2.2.6 What sport management practices could be applied in business organizations

At this point, literature reveals numerous differences in leadership and employee engagement practices between the SME context and the sport industry. While not all presented practices from sport management are possible to directly transfer into SMEs, some are more applicable and could be efficient. Especially, collective leadership, highlighted organizational culture and more advanced rewarding systems are those practices that could be successfully adapted to SMEs.

As limited liability companies (LLC) one and only legal duty is to maximize their profit to shareholders it can be assumed that their plan is to grow and fight for bigger market share (Minilex, 2024). Collective leadership could be highly effective way to growing an SME into a large company or at least competing with large companies for market share. As an emerging leadership approach that is characterized as a collective phenomenon, collective leadership could be especially suitable for SMEs due to their smaller number of workforce that allows the shared responsibility to be managed if needed (Kang, 2018, p. 4). With collective leadership, individuals are more likely to be committed to the organizational success over personal interests. As previously noted, sport managers often carry significant responsibility and are visible leaders, but on the lower levels of the organization leadership activities are frequently executed collectively. Especially at the team and team management levels, leadership can be collective, with informal leaders playing an important role. According to Johnson et al. (2012, p. 58), informal leadership within teams emerges from things like maturity and individual characters. Therefore, it would be efficient for SMEs to recruit more mature employees and to have more informal leaders to the lower-level teams as well. Ilkka Paananen, CEO of the gaming company Supercell, supports collective leadership and breaking hierarchies, allowing teams within the organization to make all necessary decisions to produce world-class games (Turunen, 2018). However, it is still industry dependent on where this kind of collective leadership is possible, being more likely to be efficient in environments with high amounts of workers are specialists.

The previously mentioned example of Supercell's non-hierarchy structure is related to the organizational culture as well. Supercell globally recognized for its non-hierarchical and team driven high-quality business operations (Turunen, 2018). As creating organizational

culture is a practice already undertaken by companies, including SMEs, it is often not utilized as effectively as in sport industry. In the case of Supercell, they capitalize the reputation of their organizational culture as strategic advantage. When asking from an sport organization member about their organizational culture, they can define it not only because it is evident at the workplace but also due to all actions, particularly team's actions are aligned with it. Additionally, sports organizations have emphasis on cultivating the winning culture. According to Rogers and Meehan (2007, p. 254) in winning organizational cultures all employees understand not only what their tasks are but also why they are doing them. They also note that less than 10 % of companies are successfully able to create a winning culture. Such winning culture can quite clearly be seen in sport organizations. For example, stadiums often display tangible items or something similar showcasing the team's accomplishments over the years. These elements engage both fans the employees leading to a collective desire to be part of that previous and future success together. The initial step in building a winning culture involves managers recognizing and treating their employees and fans like a team. Rogers and Meehan (2007, p. 256) outline five steps for creating a winning culture: setting clear expectations that illustrates how it leads to success, ensuring the leadership team is aligned with the common vision and required behaviour, prioritizing actions over words and understanding that that culture drives the team towards the goal rather than being the goal itself; making necessary changes within the team to find the culture and communicating these changes so everyone is aware of them, and celebrating victories without declaring the win outright. In the context of SMEs, creating a winning culture by celebrating small victories and integrating them into daily activities could lead to exceptional employee engagement within the company.

How can SMEs recruit and retain more mature workers, whose competencies may match or exceed the roles they are offered? This can be achieved partly through creating a winning culture and the sense of team belonging, but also by advanced rewarding systems and thoughtful job design. According to Taylor et al. (2008, p. 176), job design can create opportunities for intrinsic rewards, which could be the first step. In the context of sport, a commonly used direct financial reward, especially for foreign athletes, involves covering cost-of-living adjustments (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 166). This typically includes providing a comfortable home and sometimes even more typical is that some meals are included in their contracts. The houses provided to employees are often owned by the

organization, serving as an investment, so it minimizes costs and facilitates the and facilitates the integration of talents. In addition, organizations usually have agreements with local car dealerships to provide cars for the employees for commuting. Another advanced reward technique for SMEs could be the four bases of financial compensation mentioned by Taylor et al. (2008, p. 167). While these bases of financial compensation are already utilized in incentive or bonus systems, they could be applied more efficiently. Taylor et al. (2008, p. 167) suggest that compensation can be based on job level, skills, seniority or performance and those bases can be combined for more effective reward system. When considering a more mature employee recruited for a position that is actually like their previous role, adding these kinds of financial rewards can be seen as an effective method to motivate them. Given their greater skill and maturity, and **achievable** performance rewards, they can be more motivated than in their previous workplace. In addition, their presence can also be highly valuable for the company, as they are likely to be respected and appreciated by young prospects, serving in a mentor like appearance.

Table 5 Comparison of SME and sport context in leadership and employee engagement (Tulonen, 2021)

	<b>SME context</b>	<b>Sport context</b>
<b>Leadership practices</b>	Transformational	Collective
	Transactional	Transformational
	Passive-avoidant	Servant
<b>Employee engagement practices</b>	Job satisfaction	Job satisfaction: Motivation and organizational culture
	Rewarding	Rewarding: Job design, advanced financial rewards system, cost-of- living adjustments.
	LMX	LMX: Highlighted

Table 5 shows the comparison of leadership and employee engagement practices to show the differences based on existing literature. Basically, in engagement section the main ideas are the same but there are a few extra aspects in sport context that are marked in the table. In conclusion, several sport management practices in leadership and employee

engagement can effectively be applied to SME context. Especially, collective leadership and informal leaders, establishing winning organizational culture, and advanced rewarding systems are factors that could be further developed to enhance effectiveness within SMEs.

### **2.3 Challenges of implementation**

When considering the best practices with potential for transferability, it is imperative to acknowledge that such transitions often manifest solely in theoretical constructs. Real-world implementation may encounter significant impediments, underscoring the necessity of scrutinizing the practical challenges inherent in such transfers. Barriers of implementation set certain limitation for transferring the leadership and employee engagement practices straight from sport context to SME context. There is no research where this topic is directly researched so the theoretical part relies heavily on studies that have researched for example knowledge transfer challenges and innovation adaption challenges to SME companies. The information can also be gathered from organizational behaviour related texts and knowledge management texts. Even though the studies and texts are not directly related to the practice transfer it can be assumed that knowledge transfer and practice transfer goes hand in hand since leadership and employee engagement practices are essentially know-how which is simply translated into action. Kroll et al. (2016) made an interesting observation and found 30 challenges in knowledge transfer, but they were able to spread those challenges into three categories: coordination, communication and cultural. From the texts I found relevant it was easy to identify four challenges: resource limitations, skill and knowledge transferability issues, different organizational culture and communication. These challenges were more or less rather similar to the ones Kroll et al. (2016) were able to point out, so it can be said that the challenges are quite the same in the context. Of course, there are differences and some of their findings are not applicable in this study but in general it works fine.

Resource constraints are a major challenge in transferring leadership and engagement practices from one organization to another (Baptista Nunes et al., 2006). These constraints are linked to several factors, including the availability of time, specialist skills and lack of financial resources. These resource constraints can have a direct impact on the smoothness and effectiveness of the transfer process in the host organization. I would point out the meaning of expertise. Lack of specific expertise can be a major barrier to

the successful implementation of transferable practices. The expertise needed may relate to issues such as technology adoption, change management or cultural integration. The organization needs to assess how it can acquire the necessary expertise, either internally or by seeking the cooperation of external experts (Brinkschröder, 2014). Lack of financial resources or the limits of financial resources affect all of the above. Even though the decision makers in SMEs might know that some investments would help the company to develop their management practices, the limits of resources or lack of them make them hesitate those kinds of decisions (Baptista Nunes et al., 2006).

The transferability of skills and knowledge from one context to another can also be a major challenge. Management practices developed in specialized contexts, such as sports management, may require unique expertise, experience or sectoral knowledge that cannot be easily transferred to SME management. In addition, differences in stakeholder expectations, decision-making processes and organizational structures may require management practices to be adapted or tailored to the new context (Szulanski, 2000). Regarding knowledge issues Nooteboom (2001) says that the cognitive distance might be a problem in these kinds of transfers. If the sport organization and SME are on a whole different cognitive level it is hard to even, try to make the other part understand some ideas behind certain practices.

Every organization has its own culture, and leadership and employee engagement practices can be strongly linked to a particular culture. According to Cote (2023) organizational culture consist of shared beliefs, values, norms and assumptions that lead and shape the activity and mindset within an organization. It is logical that something shared and commonly agreed within a particular community might make it hard to implement something that is coming from different background. It's not only that there are practices coming from somewhere else and the other company is used to something else, but it's that the shared values, beliefs, norms and assumptions that guide the activity and mindset most probably differ from existing ones and might cause misunderstanding and be overwhelming within the company (Rad, 2006).

Practices may be based on a particular communication style or language, which can cause problems when transferring them to another environment. It is important to ensure that communication is effective and understandable within the target organization (Jones et

al., 2004). I believe that language barrier isn't an issue in this kind of leadership and employee engagement practice transfer because those are quite universal phenomena. This challenge is anyways more related to the leadership side than employee engagement, but it is best to make sure that the line of communication and style of communication doesn't change too radically. It must be a mix of old and new and change gradually. Also related to communication it is important to communicate about the change itself very clearly. Regarding communication problems it is important to have a sound documentation when transferring information (Kroll et al., 2016). As previously mentioned, the whole change might cause misunderstandings and employees be overwhelmed so that is something that needs to be avoided as much as possible (Jones et al., 2004).

## **2.4 Synthesis**

This study tries to tell how SME managers could use leadership and employee engagement practices in their business context as sport managers operate in sport organisation context. SMEs are cornerstone for innovation and economic growth all over the world and sport organizations are ahead of them in leadership and employee engagement processes since sport context has been highly global from ancient times already. At this point in the light of literature it can be seen that there are both similar and different practices employed in both sport context and SME context. It is clear that all the presented theories and practices are not possible to be transferred to any context as they are but however some of them could work well in another contexts.

The theoretical part clearly includes two levels: individual and organizational. On the individual level there is a relationship between manager and employee and on the organizational level there are two factors observed, leadership and employee engagement. These individual and organizational level are related to each other directly. Employee works for a company and manager is one's supervisor. That link is easy to understand, and it is obvious that managers behaviour has impact on employees regarding their engagement to company. On company level leadership and employee engagement practices are known to be the effective ways to engage employees and ultimately, especially in SMEs, the manager is responsible for those practices. That is why it is justified to look into employees, managers, leadership and employee engagement practices.



When defining SME business manager and manager in sport organization they have a lot of similarities but also differences. SME manager duties are to oversee legal issues, ensure the performance of the company and secure the future (Virtanen & Salminen, 2020; Docue, 2024; OYL 624/2006 § 6:17; Vilkkumaa, 2009). According to Thompson (2018) sport manager has five primary functions: “Human resource responsibilities, management duties, the business of sport management, promotions and marketing and on top of that all the miscellaneous duties”. Even though the duties seem not to be the same these all are quite close to each other, and it is possible that sport manager has certain similar duties that SME manager has and vice versa. The needed skills that both these managers need to succeed in their daily jobs are rather similar as well. However, their roles have difference. The basic role of a manager is of course the same but however, more detailed categorizations highlight differences in interpersonal, informational and decisional roles. Sport managers are often responsible for team building in a tangible manner, negotiating contracts with athletes, sponsors and team staff, and handling fast decision-making in response to often unexpected situations (Bloomsbury, 2006; Surani et al., 2014). Business managers on the other hand, may have lower frequency of constant negotiation and encounter fewer variables in decision-making processes.

Again, on the organizational level the leadership and employee engagement practices have similarities and differences. In SME context theory highlights transformational, transactional and passive-avoidant leadership styles. In sport management side collective, transformational and servant leadership styles are the most common. In SME context the most important ways of employee engagement are job satisfaction, rewarding and leaders-member exchange (LMX). In sport context equivalent ways of employee engagement are the same, job satisfaction, rewarding and LMX. However, in sport context the practices differ and organizational culture, motivation, more complex rewarding system and highlighted LMX are especially related to sport context.

What comes to the challenges of implementing different leadership and employee engagement practices from sport context to SME contexts we need to understand that it is yet completely unresearched field and facts rely on theoretical findings from near this phenomenon. Four relevant challenges that transferring those practices might face in real life were still able to be found. Resource limitations, skill and knowledge transferability

issues, different organizational culture and communication problems are the challenges that could be found from the literature.

All that theory answers partially rather broadly to the research questions and responds to the aim of the study well. In the light of literature this field is good to be researched because it implicates that there might be potential benefit for both SME managers and sport managers but especially SME managers. Being said that SMEs are an essential part of innovation growth and essential part of economic growth it is important to gain more information that helps SME managers to manage their business better. Since the theory answers partially to research questions, empirical research looking into the practice is needed to increase understanding about the studied phenomenon.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter talks about the methodology in this thesis. It tries to make clear the ideas behind certain decisions that have been made in this research. This chapter delineates the empirical aspect of the study, outlining the qualitative research methodology, the approach to data collection, and a profile of the interviewees selected for the study. In this research, a semi-structured interview design was employed, followed by thematic analysis of the gathered data. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the analysis of the research data and its trustworthiness. This chapter is divided into four parts. First part concerns research approach. Second part is about data collection following the third part that discusses data analysis. At the end I will evaluate the validity and ethics in this thesis.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

For this thesis I chose qualitative approach. When the aim of this study is to gather information about how business managers in SMEs can benefit from leadership and employee engagement practices used by managers in sport industry, I concluded that I would get the best results by doing a qualitative study over quantitative or mixed method.

According to Sogunro (2002) quantitative research is empirical research where the data is represented in numerical format whereas qualitative research is empirical research where data is not in numerical format. In the same text it is said that quantitative research relies to statistical analysis and numeric data unlike qualitative that relies on verbal data and subjective analysis (Sogunro, 2002). In this thesis where I try to investigate a phenomenon where leadership and employee engagement practices are transferred from industry to another it is hard to find a way to investigate it by numbers and numerical data. With numerical data I could investigate the success rate of such transfers if there was knowledge that such transfers have been made. But at this point where there is not data about such transfers it isn't possible to investigate that. By numbers and numeric data, I cannot say if it is possible to make such transfer and what could be the best practices for the transfer so that is why I need data that has qualitative character.

The term "qualitative research" itself refers to a variety of methodological approaches aiming to cultivate a profound and interpreted comprehension of the societal realm, these approaches involve studying individuals' social and material conditions, their experiences, viewpoints and histories (Kemperaj & Chavan, 2013). My thesis

concentrates on verbal data and subjective analysis as I will gather the data by interviewing experts in a subjects of SME management, sport management, leadership, employee engagement and implementing strategies. In addition, qualitative research aims to interpret, explore or obtain enhanced comprehension of social phenomena (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013). Transferring and observing leadership and employee engagement strategies can be seen as social phenomena.

Qualitative method was chosen as the approach for several reasons. First, qualitative research is particularly useful for studying complex phenomena such as organizational culture and leadership (Yin, 2017) This type research offers the opportunity to deepen our understanding of phenomena that are difficult to measure using quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018) As the subject of leadership and employee engagement are highly complex and context-specific concepts, a qualitative approach allows for a multifaceted exploration of these concepts. Secondly, qualitative research allows views and experiences of participants to be taken into account (Merriam, 2009). As this thesis tries exactly to understand and prove if the whole idea of transferring anything from sport management context into SME business context is possible it needs on top of the theoretical justifications perspective and opinion from a professionals in those fields. Qualitative methods, such as interviews that I will conduct, enable such in-depth understanding to be gained. Third, qualitative research allows to take context into account (Patton, 2015). My research topic relates to the different environments of organizations, and understanding the context is key to investigating the possibility to transfer the leadership and employee engagement practices from context to another. On top of those factors, Kemparaj and Chavan suggest that in qualitative studies researcher is intensely involved in data gathering and the research design in qualitative studies are flexible and open for development during the process (2013). That means that qualitative research allows for flexibility in the research process. Because my topic is complex and may require a deeper dive in unexpected directions, the qualitative approach allows me to make necessary changes during the research process. As well, I am highly involved in this study as I am the one who conducts the interviews for the data.

In conclusion, what separates quantitative and qualitative research is that quantitative research is empirical research where the data is numeric and in qualitative it is not in numeric form. In qualitative studies the analyzed data is in verbal form. Qualitative research offers the best opportunity to deepen my understanding of leadership and

employee engagement practices and their transferability from sport organization context to SME business organization context. This approach allows for a multifaceted exploration of phenomena, consideration of the voices of participant, understanding of the importance of context and flexibility in the research process.

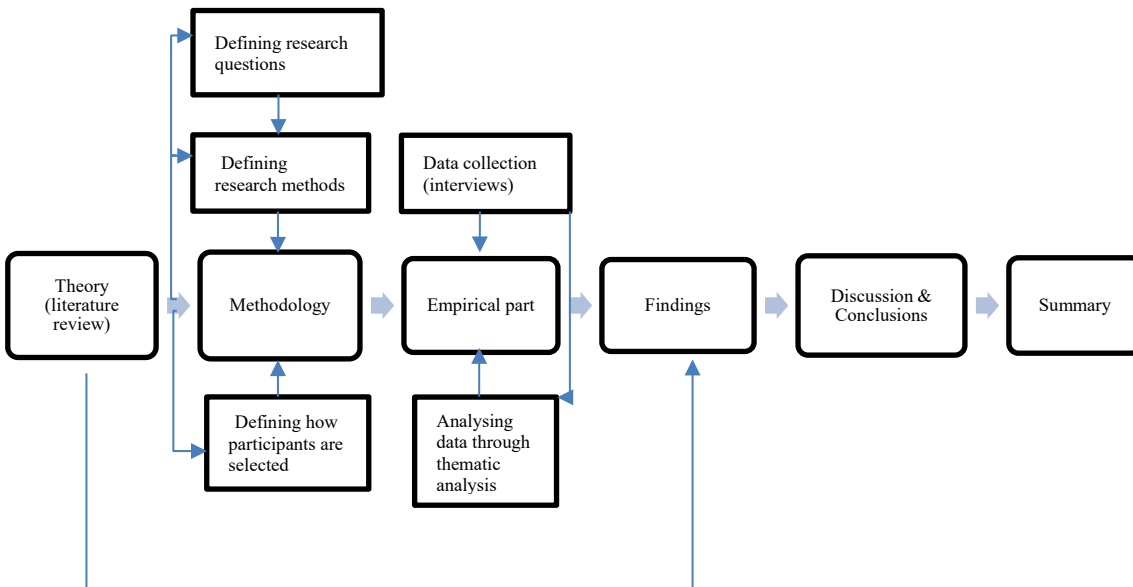


Figure 1 Research process (Tulonen, 2024)

The figure above illustrates the research process as whole. It makes it easier to understand what is done and when. This section explained the choice of qualitative research method. The methodology is described more in detail in the next sections.

### 3.2 Data collection

The most common data collection methods used in qualitative research are interviews, surveys, observation and data analysis of various documents, as Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) note. Depending on the research problem, available resources and other factors, these methods can be applied alternatively, simultaneously or in different combinations. In particular, for business-related topics, the use of interviews is an effective and practical way of collecting information, which explains its relatively widespread use. In addition, there may not be sufficient published data available on the subject in question, making it necessary to generate new data for this purpose (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 94).

Qualitative interviews can be categorized into three main types: structured interviews, semi-structured or unstructured interviews, and group interviews (Myers & Newman 2007, p. 4). The use of structured interview would have significantly constrained the scope of the interview, and a group interview would not have been possible because only one person was interviewed for this thesis. The semi-structured interview, also known as the thematic interview, represents a common method of data collection in qualitative research. The semi-structured interview method was chosen as the aim of the study was to give space to the views and opinions of the interviewee, with the aim of collecting the broadest and most diverse data possible. The choice was influenced by the versatility and flexibility of the method, which is suited to the needs of the study (Kallio et al. 2016, p. 2955).

The semi-structured interview is based on an in-depth and detailed discussion of the research topic, which allows for a free-form dialogue about the research subject. This approach builds on the informal nature of the interviews, allowing the interviewer to adapt and tailor his/her questions to the interview situation, while at the same time looking more closely at unforeseen trends in the interview situation (Yazan 2015, pp. 144–145). Although the interview framework is pre-established, compliance with it is not strictly mandatory. The flexibility of the interview method allows questions to be repeated, if necessary, which helps to address possible misunderstandings, clarify expressions or concepts and facilitate additional discussions beyond the main questions. Consequently, openness, flexibility and the allowance for improvisation are key strengths of the semi-structured interview. Additionally, the order of the questions can be adjusted based on the context, further enhancing the of the method's flexibility. In exploring leadership and employee engagement practices and their transferability, this approach is crucial because it allows the researcher to indirectly prompt informants to disclose other concealed issues that may be relevant to the subject area. Conversely, interviews require significant amount of time and can be more expensive than surveys and email interviews, which are weaknesses or challenges of this research method (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 63).

The objective of this study is to understand how managers in a small and mid-sized enterprise (SME) can benefit from leadership and employee engagement that are practiced in the context of sport management. To gather such understanding diverse perspectives, ideas and experiences were decided to obtain from a range of different

sources. Here the semi structured interviews are ideal for this purpose, as the interviews were designed to explore thematic areas that had emerged as key from literature reviewed before. At the same time, the interviewees highlighted various issues based on their opinions and brought new themes into discussion. Semi-structured interview provides moderately structured form, primarily focusing on addressing themes and topics in a certain order as outlined in this section. Therefore, the interviewer's primary role is to lightly guide the discussion and to ensure that the predetermined interview themes are discussed. Myers and Newman (2007, 13) address that in interviewer role it is crucial to show empathy, listen attentively with genuine interest and respond appropriately. Also, the interview atmosphere is advised to be kept relaxed. As I made both videocall interviews and phone call interviews the setting was a bit different each time. When both participants see each other sometimes only a gesture is enough to show interest and attention but in phone calls interviewed must let some noises to indicate that they are still there. Also, it felt that in phone interviews interviewer needed to guide the interviewees more than in video interviews.

In this thesis there were three separate contexts that were interviewed: SME managers, sport organization managers and leadership consultants' point of view. That led to a situation that there was one core interview guide prepared that was modified depending on who was interviewed (Appendix 1). According to Kallio et al. (2019) a semi-structured interview comprises two types of questions: main questions and follow-up questions. The interview was tested using field-testing method with a potential participant. This method was applied to see if the interview framework worked and to clarify the questions after testing.

Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews are rather flexible, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) stresses that it is not appropriate to ask anything one can think of. In spite of that the objective is to discover responses that align with the research's purpose and its research questions. That is why researcher felt it justified to address themes for the interview. The interview themes were (1) leadership, (2) employee engagement, (3) implementation and (4) implementation challenges. These themes were followed with a little wider perspective to gain more relevant information.

Table 6 Operationalization table (Tulonen, 2021)

Research question	Sub-questions	Theoretical concepts	Interview themes
How SME business managers can benefit from the leadership and employee engagement practices used by sport industry managers?	How leadership and employee engagement practices can be applied in the business context and in sport industry?	Leadership, employee engagement, SME management, sport management	Leadership, Employee engagement
	What leadership and employee engagement practices from sport management could benefit business organization managers?	Leadership, employee engagement, SME management, sport management, performance, efficiency	Leadership, Employee engagement
	What are the challenges of implementation when transferring leadership and employee engagement practices from one industry to another?	Implementation challenges, communication, resistance to change	Implementation, implementation challenges

Operationalization table shows the themes and what sub-question each theme answers to. The first interview theme's aim was to map interviewees' ideas about leadership and its role in engaging employees to the company. It also was to find out which kind of a leadership practices leaders in both SME and sport organization context use. The next theme was employee engagement. Its purpose was to determine what is employee engagement's role and how, the interviewees', practice it. On the other hand, it was also to find out their attitude about the whole phenomenon by listening how they react to questions about it. The third and fourth theme are rather merged with each other. The themes are implementation and implementation challenges. They were to figure out if SME and sport organization managers see it possible to implement practices from



organization context to another and what kind of challenges they see there. Once the interview themes had been discussed, interviewer let interviewees point out themes and ideas that they felt relevant regarding the research that hadn't been discussed yet. While the themes were initially designed to address specific sub-questions, it's important to note that responses may also impact other questions and themes in various cases.

The data for this thesis was gathered by interviewing a leadership consultant, three sport managers and two SME managers. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 85) say that the individuals from whom data is collected should have a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, or at the very least, they should have relevant experience in the matter. That being said leadership consultant is an expert in the areas of leadership, employee engagement and implementing strategies while sport managers and SME managers are obvious choices for interviewees to get a grip of the leadership and employee engagement practices that are used in their organizations. I decided to collect the data by interviewing experts because I consider it to be the most efficient way to get the information that I need for this study. I also feel that the nature of this study supports my idea to interview experts and there is no other way to get the relevant information regarding the topic. As talked in theoretical part there is no similar studies done yet, so I had to make the decision by myself who to interview. Bogner et al. (2009) say that expert interviews are relatively efficient and concentrated method of gathering data compared to for example systematic quantitative surveys than participatory observations. With expert interviews it is possible to shorten the time-consuming data collection processes, especially if the interviewees are "insiders" that can speak for a larger group of experts centrally (Bogner et al., 2009). On the other hand, at least sport managers are rather busy all the time and work on odd times, so it was quite hard to get in touch with them and arrange time for a quick interview. According to the same authors expert interviews also are efficient in situations where it is difficult or impossible to gain access to a certain field to gain the information (Bogner et al., 2009). For example, in my thesis it was hard to get into sport organization and SME business organization to observe the leadership and employee engagement practices to analyze them. Also, for this thesis I really needed a professional perspective to the whole phenomena and especially to the implementation challenge's part. Basically, to highlight the efficiency point of view here, it would have been hard to get into those organizations and on top of that it would have taken a serious amount of time to conduct this without making an expert interview. Expert interviews are

efficient also in a sense that those might enable researcher new contacts that might again help to gather more data for further research. If an interviewee is professional in some field one probably knows other professionals on that field or possibly from another field where researcher needs to collect information.

All participants worked in different organizations, and they were without exception CEOs or higher-level managers. They all had expertise in leadership and employee engagement. Also, the sport managers had experience from SME context from their earlier career. Interviewer predetermined the number of interviewees so that there was comprehensive enough amount of point of views but still efficient number of participants that time wasn't wasted. In table 3. there are interviewees, their positions and the interview duration presented. As one can see some of the interviews were very short. As mentioned before, both industries may be highly busy. It was hard to get in touch with some of the managers and it was essential to have interviews with certain people. However, the timing was not the best for the interviews as product SME was heading to the other side of the globe for a work trip and the CEO of an ice hockey organization was in the middle of very tight playoffs series. Thus, these two interviews are a little shorter than everyone else, but still valuable information was gained from these interviews as well. This research has adhered to ethical scientific practices, and to protect the confidentiality of each participant, their names and companies are not disclosed in the study.

Table 7 Conducted interviews (Tulonen, 2024)

PERSON	POSITION	LENGTH	DATE
<b>1</b>	CEO/ Leadership consultant	1h 47min	21.11.2023
<b>2</b>	CEO of a product SME	22 min	14.3.2024
<b>3</b>	CEO of a service SME	32 min	21.3.2023
<b>4</b>	President of a basketball organization	32 min	7.3.2024
<b>5</b>	CEO of a football organization	26 min	7.3.2024
<b>6</b>	CEO of an ice hockey organization	15 min	25.3.2024

As one can see the interviews were conducted without exception remotely either on phone or videocall. First interview was conducted in November 2023, and it was used also in another project. Other interviews were conducted during March 2024. The reason for conducting the interviews remotely comes from the fact that interviewer tried to gain information from as wide range as possible in Finland. In this case it was not possible to travel around the country and it could not have been as efficient as well. If all sport organization managers were from one city, it is likely that they share more similar ideas and practices. To get interviewees from different sports and different cities the possibility for broader coverage data is gained. Also interviewing SME managers from service and product context gains more coverage. Video calls feel the same than face-to-face interviews and now that people have learned to use those after COVID it is simple for all parties. However especially sport managers were that busy that they felt it easier to conduct the interview on phone. The only downside of this is that interviewer can't see their reactions and gestures, but otherwise it is all the same.

All the possible participants were contacted by email directly by the interviewer. All the invited participants never answered but luckily enough people were happy to participate. The first contact message involved research topic and themes and it also the expected duration and the way which it would be carried out. The interview itself started with a reminder about the topic and general information such as the interviews will be recorded. It was also noted that this is not too serious situation and there are no right or wrong answers, every perspective is highly appreciated. During the interview, notes were written so that there would be something if the recorded material was unusable or failed and to help researcher to structure ideas. Nevertheless, clear recordings were obtained from all interviews for accurate transcription purposes.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Data analysis stands as a crucial step in the research process. Through the analysis of data, the researcher aims to interpret, organize, and articulate the research material, facilitating the discovery of solutions to research problems. Typically, this involves describing and categorizing the material to integrate and explain its pertinent components (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, pp. 209–211).

Content analysis is the primary method of analysis in qualitative research, and many other methods of analysis are based on it. In this thesis, the analysis was conducted using content analysis to attain a succinct and comprehensive description of the phenomenon under scrutiny. There are two approaches for content analysis. According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008) these two approaches are inductive and deductive. Inductive approach is recommended to be used when the purpose of the study is to provide new actual information about the topic as there is not enough former knowledge or the if the knowledge about phenomenon is fragmented. Deductive content analysis is applied when the analytical framework is operationalized based on existing knowledge, and the study aims to test a theory (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In my thesis it is presented that there is very little prior research, and the aim is to provide new information. On the other hand, I'm trying to test if the presented parts of theory are valid. That is why I cannot completely state that I'm using only inductive or deductive approach in the data analysis. That is why the themes come from both the theories presented and from the data gathered.

In this study, a thematic analysis is employed for data analysis, utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, which is subsequently examined. One of the advantages of thematic analysis is its flexibility: it is not as tightly bound to specific theoretical frameworks as many other methods of analysis in qualitative research, but it still allows for a rich and detailed analysis of the data. The aim of thematic analysis is to identify, analyze and ultimately report on the themes present in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 78-82). A theme aims to derive meaningful insights from the data related to the research question, reflecting a discernible pattern within the data. Generally, one theme encompasses multiple sets of ideas. In thematic analysis, it is the researcher's duty to determine the ultimate composition of a theme and assess its significance. This assessment is not related on the frequency of mentions in the material; rather, it hinges on whether the theme holds relevance to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Data was analyzed without presumptions. Also, the analyzing process was linked to the research questions. It was not that hard to make a decision about which themes I choose since there was commonly regularly certain themes rising from the data. At first it felt harder but when researcher had gone through the data and theory many times the decision was not that difficult. Next the thematic analysis process is discussed more in detail and Figure 2. shows how the process works.

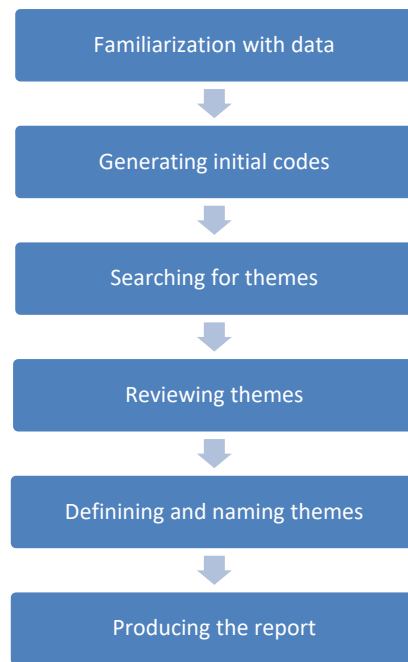


Figure 2 Thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 87)

The six phases Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) present are “familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing the report”. The initial stage of the analysis, familiarization with the data may start already during the data collection phase if the analyst starts to notice recurring patterns. All the interviews were recorded and during the interview notes were taken and observations were made. Researcher transcribed the interview recordings as it is part of the first phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Interviewer wrote the transcriptions almost verbatim and used Microsoft Teams transcription tool and Microsoft Word transcription tool as help in the process. There was a total of 57 pages transcribed texts at the end. After that it was time to read the interviews multiple times to get familiar with the data. As Braun and Clarke suggest (2006, p. 87) researcher continued to read the material many times and tried to find patterns each time taking notes at the same time.

After the familiarization process was the coding part. Codes serve the purpose of pinpointing and capturing aspects of the data that intrigue the analyst. In this stage, the emphasis was placed on coding the data as comprehensively and expansively as possible, encompassing even non-mainstream themes. Once all the data were coded, the third phase began, involving the organization and merging of codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke 2006, pp. 88-89). As talked previously the themes do not arise only from data or

theory but they arise from the mix of both. Theoretical framework has directed the creation of themes from the outset, even during the planning phase of semi-structured interviews. These interview themes have been consistently employed in shaping the themes for analysis. Themes and sub-themes were depicted in an initial thematic map following the suggestion of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 90).

After these phases it was time to review the themes found. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 91) suggest that the found themes should be examined if they are internally consistent and coherent and are different from one another. Here, the preliminary themes remained rather well, only one new theme raised. The material was re-examined once again to ensure that everything relevant had been taken into account (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Based on the used literature and the data from interviews there came up three themes: Leadership, employee engagement, practice implementation. These themes emerged both in theory and in the data gathered.

Table 8 Coded themes (Tulonen, 2024)

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Leadership	Trust
	Collaboration
	Co-creation
	Hybrid model
	Communication
	Space
	Coaching
Employee engagement	Guidance
	Job satisfaction
	Bonus
	Reward
	Benefit
	Salary
	Well-being
Work-life balance	

	Appreciation
	Development
Practice implementation	Adoption
	Communication
	Interfaces
	Challenge
	Co-creation

In brief, the data gathered from interviews was analyzed and compared with the used literature. Data analysis led to results where recurring themes were (1) leadership, (2) employee engagement and (3) practice implementation. These three themes are quite the same as the interview themes, but it seems to be that these themes are relevant related to the topic.

### 3.4 Evaluation of the study

This thesis uses the Lincoln and Guba (1985) evaluation criteria which is highly used in qualitative studies. According to the researchers there are four different criteria to assess the trustworthiness of the study: creditability, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300).

Credibility assesses a researcher's ability to produce research results that correspond to reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). For example, using operationalization table is considered to strengthen the creditability of a study. There are three questions that the researcher can ask oneself when evaluating the creditability of a study: is there sufficient understanding of the subject and adequate evidence supporting the observations drawn from the material, do the observations and categories exhibit robust logical connections and is it possible for another researcher to gain reasonably similar interpretations? (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294). This field is not highly studied at least from this perspective. SME business management is instead much studied and spot management in a sense too, but my point of view is new in the literature. As I mix and compare these contexts, I feel that there is enough theoretical background for this thesis. As I conducted six interviews in total including leadership consultant interview, two SME manager interviews and three sport organization manager interviews, I feel that these bring

comprehensive knowledge and information to the discussion. That being said I would say there is enough material for this kind of thesis. If another researcher studied the same subject, I am sure he would come relatively close to the result that I gained. It also enhances the credibility that the research approach, data collection and data analysis methods were carefully chosen and justified.

Transferability assesses the wider probability and relevance of research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 296-197). This means that the researcher must show that at least some of the findings are consistent with previous research. The basic idea of transferability is to indicate whether there might be similarities in other research contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294). Again, as there are no previous studies that examine the same thing, I do not think that there can be consistent research results but there can be consistent research results about SME and sport manager and their leadership and employee engagement practices. The final findings are presented through those results.

Dependability pertains to the researcher's capacity to create an accurate and consistent representation of the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 299). It is the responsibility of the researcher to provide information on a logical, transferable and documented approach to the research process, thus strengthening the reliability of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294). The comprehensive explanation of the research process, six expert interviews and theoretical background material provide dependability for the study.

Last, confirmability assesses the researcher's objectivity towards the subject under investigation (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300). This implies that research findings and interpretations are integrated into the data in a way that is clear and understandable to the reader. This to make the reader understand that researcher's interpretations are not solely some fantasies made out of researcher's head (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294). In this thesis the interviews were recorded before writing them in a transcribed way, so that can be seen as an act to minimize obstacles regarding conformability.

According to Shaw (2003) naivety about ethics itself is unethical. That is why this research is also evaluated from ethical perspective. Shaw (2003) addresses two ethical problems regarding qualitative studies that are relevant in this thesis: informed consent



and confidentiality and privacy. Informed consent faces problems itself but the most radical difficulty in this might be that participants are not aware when they are under investigation, or they are not capable of raising issues due the process (Shaw, 2003). This all is taken care of by sending a consent form to all participants where it is structured which themes are under study and when it takes place. Also, it is informed that interviewees can stop the interview whenever they feel so and that the whole participation is voluntary. In interview situation it was clearly indicated that recording is used, and notes are made. Furthermore, it was clearly indicated that the interview ended.

The second ethical problem is confidentiality and privacy. Lincoln and Guba (1989) say that “confidentiality and anonymity obviously cannot be guaranteed” in qualitative research but this is quite an ethical risk. Certain answers and ideas might be risk or harmful for the interviewees and that is why their identity should only be known to the interviewer. Leaking their identity might also be harmful for their business (Shaw, 2003). This is why researcher conducted a data management plan and informed in consent form that interviewees identity will not be revealed. All the data is kept behind at least two passwords on researcher’s laptop. Laptop is always kept locked and in view in public places.

Ells (2011) addresses that part of ethical consideration is that researcher clearly and transparently discusses about the research process. This main chapter ‘Conducting research’ is to do so. First the research approach is discussed, followed by data collecting methods, after that the data analyzing process is dealt with and lastly the whole process is evaluated from many angles. All the research steps are transparently discussed and also justified properly.

When talking about the ethics of research, it is also worth mentioning the digital tools used and their purpose. Artificial intelligence is a very hot topic at the moment and thus also offers a whole new world of possibilities when writing a thesis. However, there is not much use of AI in this research. ChatGPT 3.5 has been used to help reformulate sentences. Nevertheless, there have not used any of the AI-generated sentences exactly as they come from the AI but have always modified them. Completely AI-generated sentences don't sound like self-produced text, which is why those have always been formulated to suit the style used. To be clear AI generated sentences have not been used

in all of the sentences, only in some more challenging parts and in conclusion section where the text is summarized. On top of using ChatGPT 3.5., DeepL has been used for translating. Both self-produced texts have been translated from Finnish to English and theoretical text have been translated from English to Finnish. It is also worth to mention that not every sentence was written to DeepL and copy pasted into the thesis, but it has been used as an assistant. What comes to transcribing the interviews, Microsoft Teams and Word transcription tools have been used during the interviews. After interviews those generated texts were went through while listening to the recordings and every mistake was corrected.

## 4 Findings

This chapter examines the empirical data collected in expert interviews, which targeted to survey both SME managers and sport organization managers attitudes and views about leadership and employee engagement. Also, the interviews aimed to get the managers' view on transferring leadership and employee engagement practices from context to another. This chapter was guided by three sub-questions that were introduced in introduction chapter to discover comprehensive response:

1. How leadership and employee engagement practices can be applied in the business context and in sport industry?
2. What leadership and employee engagement practices from sport management could benefit business organization managers?
3. What are the challenges of implementation when transferring leadership and employee engagement practices from one industry to another?

This chapter presents the results of the study. First, reviewing the leadership and employee engagement practices applied in SME business context and in sport context, followed by leadership and employee engagement practices that might be useful in SME context and finally challenges that might occur when transferring leadership and employee engagement practices from context to another. In an ideal situation these expert insights combined with theory used are enough to answer the main question of the thesis: **How SME business managers can benefit from the leadership and employee engagement practices used by sport industry managers?**

### 4.1 Leadership and employee engagement practices in SME and sport context

This chapter focuses on understanding the perceptions of both SME managers and sport managers on both leadership and employee engagement. It is crucial to understand the practical position on the above-mentioned themes in order to get a better picture of the whole phenomenon.

#### 4.1.1 Leadership in SMEs

The first theme, leadership, was designed to explore managers' personal perceptions of leadership and possibly to elicit assumptions about commonly known leadership practices in SME context. On the other hand, it was also intended to sketch a picture of the role that leadership might play in employee engagement. According to leadership consultant and SME manager, SMEs have need for better leadership and current state is not good enough. Leadership consultant also states that COVID had its own impact on leadership practices and furthermore to whole leadership landscape because of the adapted remote or hybrid models. Here is what they said:

*"... my impression is that leadership is to some extent quite weak at least it is the feedback that you get from people. [when talking about SME leadership in general not in any particular company]"* *"...bad leadership away, let's put it that way."*  
(CEO of a product company)

*"Overall, leadership is undergoing a really big change... If you think about trends of this kind, what are the big trends in working life, one of the trends is the change in values, and it comes with the generation change quite clearly, but also the COVID made this change in values... Before the COVID, it was taken for granted that, how shall I put it, you were at the service of your employer and in control. If I'm exaggerating a bit. But then the COVID came along and somehow it stopped people to think about values and the fact that there is more to life than this job and this job can be done in other ways than always go to work. [physically]."*  
(Leadership consultant)

Leadership consultant also discussed about the problems and challenges that they often face when they are called to some organisation to help. A common problem is that employer feels that they have lost the employees, and they need advice on how to in a way get them back. Organizations tend to fail in leadership so that they do not have a sense of community anymore and that is where the help is needed.

It was early discovered that SME managers had hard time to give exact answers about leadership and leadership practices and that is more than normal. It is unlikely that many

people in their day-to-day leadership role think about theories of leadership and implement leadership based on theory. Here are examples of SME managers' answers when asked about what kind of leadership practices are used in their companies:

*“Well of course I cannot say what is used in the SME sector [in general] ... Leadership is a profession. It's a skill it's a profession it's not something you do on the side, it's like a full-time job where you have to lead not only people but also things. You have to focus on leadership so that it's not like you're an expert and 'oh yeah' I'm the leader too, but rather that I'm the leader and then I have areas of strength where I can also be involved as an expert. But that my main task as the leader of any company must be to lead it, otherwise it won't work.”* (CEO of a product company)

*“I hope or at least I've tried to bring it to something that I think has been a culture of working together and that is of course especially important in start-ups and in the early stages it's kind of easy when you have a small team.”* (CEO of a service company)

As the question is so specific about leadership styles it is clear that these CEOs are not leadership-oriented theory wise, but rather lean more towards leading people to gain more potential on the commercial side. If they were asked about transformational, transactional or whatever leadership styles it would be probable that they would not recognize them. However, when they talked about leadership, they both rose things as coexistence, self-direction, shared responsibility and collectivity. That implicates the same that the interview with leadership consultant: Collective or shared leadership that is a known leadership practice in sport management already, is emerging more and more frequently in SME context as well. Here is what leadership consultant stated about collective leadership in SMEs:

*“Yes, you can see it. [The company represented by the interviewee] has also represented this direction to a certain extent. ... Others are also advocates of this way of thinking... The extreme end of the new way of thinking is that there are no managers at all, but that people organise themselves completely among themselves and are completely self-directed.”* (Leadership consultant)

However, the same interviewee said that collective leadership and that kind of a way of thinking is mostly in newer companies and also in the smaller end of companies in SME pool. When asked about leadership styles that emerged in the literature in SME context (transformational, transactional and passive-avoidant) leadership consultant identified the idea of them and talked about a “coaching leadership”. Interviewee said that it is nowadays the most common leadership style and the way it was described it sounded a lot like transformational leadership.

When it comes to how the SME managers feel about leadership and its role in engagement more comprehensive answers and results were gained. Service providing company’s manager stated that there needs to be a clear purpose behind the company. Same manager also said that the role of a leader is to protect the purpose and lead it so that the values and ideological background is in line with the practices. Product providing company’s manager said instead that leader and leadership play themselves a great role in the spirit of the whole company. Also, that manager stated that by winning people’s hearts they are more willing to put their whole potential into the work every day.

*“If all you get from people is their brains, you'll never get their deepest knowledge or commitment.”* (CEO of a product company)

Nevertheless, these expert interviews from SME managers did not give any specific answers to question ‘what leadership practices are used in SME context?’. The only remarkable take away is that there are clear leadership problems in SMEs and apparently collective/shared leadership is somehow used and/or at least perceived as something that would be suitable and desired.

#### 4.1.2 Employee engagement in SME

The second theme, employee engagement, was designed to explore SME managers' assumptions and experiences of the engagement tools used in the SME context, but also of the tools they use themselves. This was clearly a more natural topic for SME leaders than leadership. However, surprisingly much of the talk remained on issues other than rewards and pay. Both SME managers said, as if on a side note, that of course we have

salaries and other annual bonuses linked to the success of the company, but you could read between the lines that they are not really that important anymore. Here is what they said about bonuses and other money related engagement practices:

*“It's easy to always start talking about shares and different bonus models and engagement models, but they are just tools.”* (CEO of a product company)

*“If you still look at the financial side, then of course different reward programs or so that it is possible to so as to get from the company even ownership or employee share can be one way to be able to acquire shares even with a monthly salary equivalent amount or anything of this type.”* (CEO of a service company)

*“...the new kind of benefits that people value more today, that it's not just the money but what else is there...”* (Leadership consultant)

This however indicates that money related rewarding is still highly used employee engagement practice in SME context, but the managers do not rely only on that anymore. As the consultant said, people are looking more and more for different kinds of benefits. Leadership consultant pointed out that these wide spectra of benefits are easier to implement in big companies as they have more resources for those and this is where SMEs cannot yet compete with MNCs.

*“Now we talk all the time about the employee market, that employees choose their employers, and this is a big thing from the point of view of retention and commitment, especially for SMEs because large companies are able to provide more benefits than SMEs. For this reason, small and medium-sized enterprises are in a very exciting phase with this issue, that is, how to tackle this issue.”* (Leadership consultant)

Both of these SMEs are under 10-year-old businesses, so they are in the beginning of their journey yet. That is good to get in consideration when analysing the answers. That is also why at least the service SMEs CEO talked about taking new engagement practices gradually in use. As the company grows, they are able to provide more benefits and rewards for the employees. In general, they can gain more these employee engagement

tools as the business grows. For instance, they are now starting to hand out these occasional financial commemorations for employees for a job well done. Nevertheless, it seems that in new and fast-growing companies an effective employee engagement practice is to apply share options as both of the managers mentioned that.

Both SME managers emphasise the importance of relevance and purpose of the company as an important factor in employee engagement. Service manager states that employer image itself is a factor that can engage employees as if the company is relevant either at community, socially or even at the global level employees are more likely to engage to the company. That is why service SME manager says that they are investing into that factor a lot. Product SME manager instead talked about that it is important to have meaningful job. If employees understand the relevance and can see the clear target it is easy to engage better. Product manager mentioned also that people like big stories and they want to be involved in success stories that is why managers role in engagement is to try to create a story with clear purpose and clear goals to engage employees. Being part of something bigger is also related to sense of belonging that can itself be seen as employee engagement practice. One thing that was also pointed out in this context was that it is important to be open about everything and that every employee is on the same page what is going on in the company. That gives a broader touch point to the company than that just knowing own are of responsibility and how that contributes to the common goal. When everyone knows what others are doing for the same goal it is easier to engage. Also, openness about why certain things are done and what the company is planning to achieve by doing so is part of the engagement process.

*“...the ultimate purpose has become more important than ever, and people are clearly looking more closely at where they go to work, what they want to be involved in, what kind of impactful activities they have.”* (CEO of service company)

*“People love like big stories and the kind of stories that they get to be part of conquering or part of making something bigger or newer, the company has to have like the purpose that you just can't exist.”* (CEO of product company)



*“However, one of the most important things in terms of engagement is a certain kind of openness that you open up why we need this and why we need to succeed because then when people understand the context, they become much more creative and try to find the solution in a completely different way, and through that they become engaged to the company.” (CEO of product company)*

A little related to the relevance and openness is promotion prospects. SME managers discussed about that it is important to talk with employees about their current status at the company but also about future. It is natural that employees want to go forward on their careers, and it is important that managers know about their expertise and their career expectations. It is seen crucial that people can take next steps within the company and gain more responsibility. If employees know that they have promotion possibilities within the company, they are more likely to engage there. So, talking openly and often enough about career and creating a career path is seen as a more tangible employee engagement practice in SME context.

#### 4.1.3 Leadership in sport organization

The first theme, leadership, was also discussed with the sport managers. All the sport managers have at least some experiences working in “normal” SMEs on top of their extensive experience in sport business. When asked about leadership styles that they use they approached the question from more practical angle. It can be seen that their theoretical knowledge is very limited as SME managers as well, but they do have practical leadership skills and ideas about leadership that are appreciated in the context. Every one of the sport managers mentioned that they want to give freedom to their employees to make decisions and that they want to lead by showing an example. Of course, they added that every important decision goes through their approval, but the main guideline is to take even bold decisions independently. As far as leadership by example is concerned, it was mentioned in the interviews that you don't look at the clock when you are working and often it goes so that you are the first to work and the last to leave.

One interesting theme that emerged from the interviews was that if clubs are owner-based (i.e. the sport organisation has some clear individual owners), restrictions can often be placed on their activities by the owners and those limitations might guide the leadership

as well. However, it is more familiar that clear organisational values are the guiding force in all decision-making and thus also in leadership. Collective/shared leadership is thus highly involved in sport management. Here is what they said about leadership style:

*“Of course, it means taking responsibility and being the last one there in many things, that when others turn off the lights, then you still have to be able to twist and turn... I always try to honestly tell them how to do it and also then let them use their own ideas and strengths. I'm not watching behind their backs so to speak... Of course, there are rules but I'm not telling you to do exactly this or that... Wisdom does not live in one head but there must be room for the ideas of others in decision-making.”* (President of a basketball organization)

*“Well, I'm probably a bit of representative of soft leadership style myself and I give a lot of freedom for self-management... I'm not always right, others can disagree, I can be wrong, and others can make counter-arguments, but I always hope that they are also justified as to why this is so... There (the owner) comes certain boundary conditions which the owner wanted to keep... everyone is responsible for their own actions up to a certain point.”* (CEO of a football organization)

*“In sports, especially when you go with your emotions, you have to lead from the front... you have to give responsibility but then you have to lead by example... We have created a culture of this kind; we have clear values on which all decision-making must be based. And then everyone has their own clear role, and then they make independent decisions at management group level... if there is an issue that they want to bring up to me, then it will be resolved there but we are very open, at management level everyone knows where we are.”* (CEO of an ice hockey organization)

When talking about the role of leadership in employee engagement, a few clear themes emerged from the interviews. The first and clearest theme that emerged in all the interviews was openness. The sport managers talked about how being open about the situation of the whole organization, both good and bad, is something in leadership that is valued by employees. That also makes employees feel that what they do at work has

relevance to the company. Another one was that employees value leadership as a way to lead themselves, implement their own dreams at work and in general fulfil themselves at work. Also, the hybrid model was mentioned here. One of the sport managers said that they feel that as employees are self-directed, they probably know the best where they are the most efficient working. When asked if the hybrid model was already in use before COVID, the answer was yes to some extent, but nowhere near as functional and on the same scale as now. In addition, one sport manager also mentioned the importance of praise among the leadership tools. He discussed about the importance of frequent praise for successful work, which increases the working atmosphere and thus efficiency.

*“Everyone knows where we're going whether it's positive or negative.”* (CEO of an ice hockey organization)

*“(Employees) are empowered to lead themselves and realise their dreams. And the hybrid model is in use, that you don't have to be in the office but it's good to know where your employees are going. Certain things can be done better in peace at home, that it is also quite understandable that if at least the customer calls and trying to get deals done so it is a bit difficult to do in the office, when always someone has something to do.”* (CEO of a football organization)

*“I try to go and cheer them on and praise them... here anyway the owner visits them to praise their work and and in the newspaper interview I remembered to thank them for a job well done so just things like that, like normal things.”* (President of a basketball organization)

Hereby the main leadership style seems to be collective/shared leadership that is based on openness. Values often play an important role in leadership and decision-making, and self-direction is encouraged in a sport business context. It can be seen that leaders in sport organizations have very tangible touch to the whole phenomenon of leadership and they can identify clear patterns. However, their knowledge about theory around leadership styles is almost non-existent but that is something that can be assumed.

#### 4.1.4 Employee engagement in sport organizations

The second theme, employee engagement, aimed to delve into the assumptions and experiences of sport managers regarding both the employee engagement tools utilized within the sport management setting and those they employ themselves. In SME context this was more natural subject to discuss about with the managers and so it was in sport managers as well. When it comes to employee engagement, all the sports managers interviewed talk about the need to have the organisation in order. Firstly, they say that it is easier to attract and retain employees in a sports club when the organisation has a good image. They say that the reputation of sports clubs moves very quickly through players, their agents and other stakeholders to the world, so it is important to keep it in good shape. What influences the reputation of an organisation is its faculties, community spirit, the way things are done, supporters (fans) and the general atmosphere. Here is what sport managers discussed about the topic:

*“First of all, that the organisation is in order, that it works. We have at least now received praise from the players who have been with us... the reputation has now gone through the grapevine that we have a well-functioning and solid organisation... that is engagement too, that the conditions are right on top. And then our supporters are one, I don't think there are any (fans) in this country with anywhere near the style that we have... that community would be one reason and that kind of doing together thing.”* (President of a basketball organization)

*“...that there is a good working atmosphere and you have the right tools and equipment... anyway, the thing is that we are a reliable employer... anyway, the players talk to each other, always someone knows someone and can ask what it was like there and what kind of coach and whether the team is good and whether they do their job as they should and so on.”* (CEO of a football organization)

When talking about the sport context, one area can be considered very important. The relevance and purpose of the work and a clear common goal. Sport organisations always aim to achieve the best possible sporting success. Of course, there is also a background of achieving financial results, but sporting success is often at least partly the key to this

problem too. So, in sport, too, there is an opportunity to be part of winning something and doing something meaningful.

*“if you apply for a job in sport, you already know that you have a chance to be involved in something significant. How then (Organization X) is meaningful, for example, not just by winning and lifting the championship trophy, but by doing something good for the whole (City X area) and we do youth work, we develop sports and content for young people and do something good for society as a whole.”* (CEO of an ice hockey organization)

*“Usually, sports organizations are populated by their own kind of people always aiming for the one and only thing, to win championships and do well, and then it's pretty engaged.”* (CEO of a football organization)

Another thing the sports leaders talked about was the amount of financial compensation and rewards. As Finland is a very small sports market, but known worldwide for its quality, players and other employees use Finnish clubs as a springboard to bigger markets, where they can then move on to better earnings. Sport managers said that a monthly salary is not a matter of one or two grand in the end if the organisation is otherwise running smoothly. Finnish clubs cannot afford to pay giant salaries (especially in basketball and football), but the shortfall is often compensated for by other means, such as club partners and reciprocity.

*“...for some it's not always the money... we are such a club that we still have such a large number of foreign players. Many have then moved to bigger European clubs for the money, so to speak so we have kind of been a springboard for them for their further career development. There is a possibility to get to play abroad “through us.”* (President of a basketball organization)

*“...we often pay for housing and possibly food allowance for a foreign player... at the end of the day, money may not be the most important thing, whether you get three grands or four grands, but we have always been able to negotiate our way forward... assist as much as possible and seek contacts.”* (CEO of a football organization)

*“... for the player, it's also that they feel they're getting a place that will further their own career. Of course, the player comes to develop to go further to achieve something, but we create the elements of an environment where that is possible.”*

(CEO of an ice hockey organization)

Interviewees also found that meeting people as people, regardless of their background, is a good engagement tool. In general, being polite and friendly to everyone helps employees to engage with the organization. Many Finnish sport organizations are located in small towns and cities. It is therefore also seen as very important to make even small towns an attractive place for employees. However, if the town itself is not an attraction, a variety of activities outside work can be organized for them. Also, being extra polite helps people from elsewhere to integrate and engage to both the place and the organization. Some of the sport organizations that were interviewed come from bigger cities and some from smaller ones.

*“The conditions must be created in such a way that people feel comfortable. on the free time side there are snowmobile rides and a water scooter thing for the guys and sauna nights in the smoke sauna and all sorts of activities. How you want to be treated, so you treat your employees and the work community in that way, then you win those people over and they like to come to work, and they like to work for you. You greet them, that's the first thing that you greet people.”* (CEO of a basketball organization)

*“...important things anyway, that if you come from somewhere in Africa that you have something else to do than having a practice once a day or two times a day...fair, friendly, treats them like a human being no matter where they come from in the world. Maybe it's based on that human contact and humanity to a large extent.”* (CEO of a football organization)

It can therefore be said that engagement in a sporting context is influenced by several factors. It was felt important that the organization was in order. This meant being reliable and doing things as agreed. This also helps to maintain a good reputation for the organization, which contributes to employee commitment. The meaningfulness of the

work and a clear common goal for the whole organization were emphasized in the interviews. It turned out that Finnish clubs are not cash cows for the players and the people behind them, but they are good steppingstones to better leagues in bigger markets. The opportunity for self-development was thus seen as a good engagement tool. Creating meaning in leisure time outside working hours and making everyday life easier through partners were also felt to help with engagement.

## **4.2 Benefitting leadership and employee engagement practices for SME managers**

This chapter focuses on exploring the views of both SME managers and sport managers on what leadership and engagement practices used in the sport context would be useful in the SME context. Furthermore, in this section SME managers were asked what kind of a needs they have regarding leadership and employee engagement. In order to get a comprehensive picture of the topic and a more complete answer to the main question, it is useful to know what SME managers and sports managers think about the topic. In general, the issue of transferring and implementing certain leadership or engagement practices was not an easy one for the managers. However, there were a few ideas that were interesting.

When talking about the needs of SMEs in terms of leadership and employee engagement, it must be remembered that everyone has different needs, and these cannot be generalised. Product SME CEO said that in general it seems as if SMEs talk a lot, but only do part of what they say. Also, the leadership consultant talked about this that there are a lot of talks but only little effort. By talking much and doing little was meant that SMEs lack a certain courage to take decisions. Courage in decision-making was particularly related to boldly deciding what the company wants to be and why, in order to make it easier to manage and engage employees. In this context, the same interview raised the point that continuous rewarding and increasing it is also not a particularly effective means of employee engagement in the long term. As a result, SMEs should explore and develop ways other than rewards to improve employee engagement.

*“I would call for something like a certain courage...you get something like you know that this extra and then like it's like an endless well. With endless rewards, well, I wouldn't say it's very long-term.” (CEO of product company)*

Another need that emerged from the SME managers' interviews was to bring in “outsiders”. Service company CEO discussed about that it might be that SMEs have their founders in the main leader roles in the company and then the idea often revolves too much around the business idea or the ability of the business rather than the people in the company. This is the situation especially in startups. When bringing an “outsider” to the company as CEO or other important leadership role then there is focus also on other things more easily.

*“...the founders continue but (founder of service company) now has a different role...so in a way there are some ways or ways to bring something new to the management of the company and on the other hand strengthen it through management by being ready to hire people from outside.” (CEO of service company)*

CEO of a service SME mentions that SMEs share some similar ideas with sports organizations, in particular on target periods. Both have clear target periods. What he sees as a difference and a useful tool in sports organizations, which is not yet so much used in the SME context, is building on strengths. He mentions that in SME side the focus is too much on weaknesses and he thinks that employees are already more or less aware of their weaknesses and themselves understand their development needs, but building on their strengths is more challenging and should be invested in. Furthermore, the focus should be there if one can utilize their strengths better in other project or teach others about their strengths. A more coaching approach to management is also seen as a good thing. By coaching, the interviewee specifically refers to the importance of giving feedback and developing strengths.

*“On the business side, too much focus on trying to find the weaknesses in the development discussion. Okay that's what you're really good at can you use it even better in another project can you help others can you teach others what you're particularly good at?” (CEO of service company)*



Another thing he mentions is wellbeing. He believes that because athletes' tool is their body and mind, they must be in the best shape all the time and wellbeing is nurtured. In other words, an athlete cannot do their job if they are not doing well overall. He feels that in business context it is often forgotten. When the base is well balanced then normal performance should be enough as in sports as well. Of course, employees should try their best but the normal is enough and no one has to be a superhero. He is not a fan of an idea where your working career is compared to a marathon. In marathon you push your hardest every second. He sees the career as endurance training, sometimes you push yourself to the limits and sometimes it is very slow paced.

*“At one point there was a bit of talk about how it was great that we were working there all the time. A normal day at work or a normal amount of exercise should be enough for both and you kind of believe that it will lead to the best outcome as opposed to burning yourself out or overexerting yourself in sports.”* (CEO of a service company)

One thing that is mentioned is the practical day-to-day relief. The CEO of product company mentions that in a big company where she used to work, you could get a nanny at home for free if your child was ill, so that you could do your own work better. He suggests that the means to make everyday life easier could also be applied, at least at some level, in SMEs.

*“in my opinion, practical things that could be done much more in the SME sector... all sort of humanizing stuff.”* (CEO of product company)

Interviews with sports managers revealed that they do not really have many ideas to share with SME managers. They shared a lot of their knowledge and insights earlier, so the question of the transferability of these practices seemed to be a little overwhelming. All interviewees have also had a career in a sports organization for some time, so their understanding of SME leadership and employee engagement practices and needs may not be fully up to date. Nevertheless, sports managers were able to mention at least some suggestions that could be considered by SME managers. The president of the basketball club talked about the fact that in their club, the social media professional brings the hard work of the hard workers out into the open every day for others to see and feels that it is also a way of showing gratitude to the players and thus a means of engagement, which

could also be transferred to the SME context. As the same interviewee also mentioned earlier that they also actively organize activities for their employees outside work, this could equally well be an engagement tool in the SME context.

*“...they bring them out all the time, our guys, where are our warriors who work for the club and for success. You can do it in your normal business, it's no big deal, you can organize activities for them outside of their normal work.”*

(President of a basketball organization)

CEO of an ice hockey organization discussed about the passion and bringing it to the business SMEs as well. However, he didn't have an idea how that should be done but he said that the passion in sport is something that keeps employees interested and engaged in for long times. Furthermore, CEO of a football organization talked about diversity of a professionals and that their expertise should be appreciated, and they should be given the opportunity and room to improve their selves.

*“The team is made up of experts from many different fields so respect them for their expertise... everyone is given space to present their own stuff and also then develop themselves and their own skills.”* (CEO of a football organization)

The subject area was clearly not the easiest for SME managers and sports managers. However, the interviews were able to identify needs and provide ideas on what might be good leadership and engagement tools for SMEs in a sport context. The interviews revealed that the needs relate to courage and bringing in outsiders for better leadership and employee engagement. Practices that were cited as useful by both sport managers and SME managers were precise target cycles, building on and utilizing employees' strengths, ensuring overall employee wellbeing, showcasing employees, organizing activities outside working hours and adding passion and emotion to the working atmosphere.

### **4.3 Implementation challenges**

In order to get a realistic picture of how SME managers and sport managers deal with the idea of transferring practices from one context to another in practice, we also asked about possible challenges in the interviews. Not many ideas came from the leaders, which is understandable, as it is difficult to put yourself in someone else's shoes so suddenly. Also, if it has already been difficult to come up with some of the ways used by sports managers

that could benefit SME managers, this topic is no easier. Moreover, when asked about leadership and employee engagement tools that would benefit SME managers, one might already have thought about what could be transferred almost as such from one context to another. When discussing these challenges of transferring practices with interviewees, they almost invariably either evaded the issue or simply replied with words that did not really answer the question.

*“Well, that's a difficult question and I can't really say whether there are any challenges in it. Of course, you can't copy everything, but the things are largely the same. The job of the athlete, the long jumper, is long jump. A builder's job is to build partition walls in a house, the job description is just different... I don't think the laws are any different.”* (President of a basketball organization)

However, the CEO of a football organization had a clear but short answer for this. He talked about that the problem/challenge would be that things have been done in a certain way for years, so it is hard to change anything those patterns. The second thing that comes out is that it's challenging to generalize about this transfer situation. It may well be that the transfer is to a very similar type of company to a sports organization, but the example of the industrial sector was raised. The CEO of a football organization does not see that a transfer to an industrial sector, for example, where the employees are fundamentally quite different from those in the sports sector, can be challenging.

*“Well, I think the problem is the way the company has been run in the past. This is how it has always been done and how it will be done. It's hard to apply something that works in sports environment to apply it directly to someone in the industrial sector. They are so different types of people, there are experts who are in their own bubble sometimes.”* (CEO of a football organization)

High hopes were laid on leadership consultant to get more comprehensive answer for the question about the challenges. However, because there have not been any relevant situations where that consultant could compare the situation, the answer is not too broad. It should also be borne in mind that the role of a leadership consultant is to successfully implement various leadership changes, so why would it be reasonable to say that it is very challenging to transfer some practices. In any case, according to the consultant, the

challenge may be that individuals do not understand that their input is needed to make the change happen. Interfaces are also mentioned as a challenge, meaning interfaces between people, teams and hierarchies, where problems often arise. This is because people only see the situation from their own point of view and do not know how to put themselves in other people's shoes.

*“The individual needs to understand their role as part of the bigger picture and the impact of their own work on other areas of the organization. The most challenging parts of the organization are all the interfaces. That means interfaces between people, interfaces between teams, interfaces between units, interfaces between hierarchical levels. Those are the ones where most of the challenges and problems happen.”* (Leadership consultant)

In the end, however, the consultant does not see a major problem in transferring the means from one context to another but says that once everyone has contributed to the project, and it has been jointly refined and adapted to fit everyone's thinking, the implementation should go off without a hitch. The important thing here is that everyone is already committed to this change, so there is no need to start selling it separately when it is time to implement it.

*“That if they have been made and built, or if people have been involved in making them and they are already important to people in some way, and it can be shown that you have been involved in making them and you have created them and on the basis of these we have built them. So I think that in a way there will no longer be a so-called implementation phase in the strategy. I say that when people have gotten to the point where they already understand what it is all about, they no longer need to understand the strategy when it is already in some way understood.”* (Leadership consultant)

In short, it can be said that the challenges of implementation are not easy, as there are hardly any comparable situations and sport, or SME managers in particular have no previous experience in this field. However, the CEO of a football organization mentions that the traditional resistance to change, where people resist change by arguing that a certain way of doing things has always worked and will continue to do so, is likely to be

a challenge, especially in the more "traditional" SME sectors, such as manufacturing. The leadership consultant mentions that as long as you get everyone involved in the project with their own input and get them to understand the background and the perspective of others in the organization, challenges can be avoided.

## **5 Conclusions and Discussion**

This section presents the empirical research findings in relation to the academic literature and theoretical framework. This section also includes discussion about theoretical and empirical conclusions. This chapter is divided into three parts accordingly. First it goes through theoretical contributions where the empirical results are mirrored to the theoretical framework of the SME benefitting leadership and employee engagement practices used in sport context. Furthermore, the impact of the findings on existing research literature are explored. The managerial implications present the leadership and employee engagement practices for SME managers that they may find useful through the key findings. Finally, the limitations of this thesis will be presented, and possible future studies will be discussed.

### **5.1 Theoretical contribution**

This chapter presents this thesis' theoretical contribution in the light of the empirical part. This section is divided into three parts: leadership and employee engagement in SME business organization, leadership and employee engagement in sport organizations and challenges of implementation.

#### **5.1.1 Leadership and employee engagement in SME business organization**

Theory suggests that transactional, transformational and passive-avoidant leadership styles are three main leadership styles used in SME business context (Franco & Matos, 2015). Some authors also state that there is no leader that strictly uses only one of those styles and that it is situational what style manager uses. To revisit the concept previously discussed in the theoretical framework transactional leadership is based on the exchanges that occur between managers and subordinates (Bass, 2000). These transactions fulfill subordinates' needs through clear tasks and roles, enabling managers, some to mention, to achieve performance objectives and efficiency while subordinates focus on their self-seeking and organizational goals (McCleskey 2014; Sadeghi & Pihie, 2012, p. 188). This leadership style aligns managers and subordinates towards shared organizational goals while minimizing workplace anxiety (Franco & Matos, 2015, p. 429). The second leadership style is transformational where manager takes initiative to encourage subordinates to participate in the change process and supports their collective identity and efficacy (Burns, 2003, p. 26). Employees feel empowered and perform beyond

expectations when managers utilize “idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration” (Burns, 2003, p. 26; McCleskey, 2014, p. 120). These approaches enable managers to mentor subordinates and inspire them through meaningful challenges, optimism and enthusiasm, and personal support (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The third leadership style is passive-avoidant where there are two components: laissez-faire and management-by-exception (Avolio et al., 1999). Laissez-faire leadership involves passive indifference toward subordinates and tasks, while passive management-by-exception uses punishment and corrections for deviations from standards (Avolio & Bass, 1999). In passive-avoidant leadership, managers fail to provide clear expectations and feedback which leads to disempowered employees, in contrast to transformational leadership.

From the SME manager interviews it can be identified that the managers of a product and service SME have no knowledge of these theories or at least their knowledge was not revealed in the interviews. However, it can be said based on the interviews that what theory suggests is partially correct and partially not even close to reality. Interviews revealed that SME business managers want to give space to their employees and that they trust on their professional mindset and skills. How else they described their leadership style sounded a lot like transformational leadership. Nevertheless, theory suggest also transactional and passive-avoidant leadership styles for SME business organizations. When interviewing these SME managers there was not even a slight talk about these kinds of leadership styles. Especially passive-avoidant style sounds rather old fashioned so it can be hoped that it is not too widely used anymore. However, there was some marks about collective leadership style that is already in use in sport context. Leadership consultant discussed that it is considered as emerging leadership style in SME context and that it is more and more used in the SME context as well.

Which affects the responses received from the interviews is that both SME companies are under seven years old. It can be clearly seen that those companies and those managers feel that old fashioned strict discipline is not empowering employees for their maximum performance. However, when thinking about a traditional metal workshop that has functioned hundred years already, it is not hard to believe that transactional or passive-avoidant leadership styles might be in use. Also, both SMEs that were interviewed consist of specialists that further consist of highly educated professionals. It can be assumed that

it is not the same to lead people that are highly educated professionals and people that are working with no education in “performing” work. Thus, it can be said that theory is not right or wrong about this, but it can be said that SMEs are leaning towards transformational and collective leadership based on these interviews.

As said previously, SMEs success relies on their employees and that is why they are the most valuable capital of the companies and that is why engaging them on the company is important (Smolarek & Sulkowski, 2020, p. 182). Existing literature states that work satisfaction, rewarding and leader member exchange (LMX) have positive impact on employee engagement in SMEs (Sugandini et al., 2018, p. 3). Work satisfaction can be seen as the divergence between what a worker receives and what they believe they should receive from a job. Three satisfaction factor groups influencing job satisfaction are organizational (e.g. pay and promotion prospects), social (e.g. organizational climate and respect towards employees), and personal (e.g. individual characteristics and other factors that company cannot influence) (Gros, 2012, pp. 115-116). In SME context, employee training, clear roles, fairness, feedback, involvement, good communication and good working conditions are seen to boost work satisfaction (Smolarek & Sulkowski, 2020, p. 189). These factors help employees achieve goals and reach their full potential.

Rewarding employees is one of the three methods of engaging them in SMEs. According to Daft (2008, p. 506) rewards can be intrinsic (internal rewards like satisfaction from task completion) or extrinsic (tangible rewards like promotions or bonuses). Many Businesses now use “total reward” system that combines financial and non-financial rewards due to rising costs and increasing employee preference for non-financial rewards (Brown, 2005). This system includes individual (pay, bonuses, shares), relational (training and career development), transactional (pension, holidays, health care) and communal rewards (recognition and work-life balance) to boost employee engagement (Armstrong & Brown, 2006).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) enhances manager and worker performance by improving the relationship between them (Morrow, 2005). Managers form two employee groups: the in-group, which is receives broader responsibilities and rewards, and the out-group, which is managed more strictly (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2). A large in-group with many high-quality relationships leads to more engaged workers. To maintain



productivity, it is crucial to avoid a strict line between the groups and to minimize the size of the out-group (George & Jones, 2008).

In the light of the interviews, employee engagement was a more pleasant discussion topic with the SME managers. Even though they did not clearly mention these employee engagement practices that are suggested in theory, it was not hard to note those characteristics from their talks. Rewarding was mentioned as it is but job satisfaction and LMX not so much. About rewarding they said that they do not believe in financial over rewarding and they recognize the situation that employees are motivated from non-financial rewards more and more. Furthermore, the leadership consultant also stated that employment benefits are things that employees are more interested in the companies than the salary itself even it is important as well. However, it can be said that at least the companies interviewed for this thesis are using that “total reward” system quite broadly because things such as employee well-being, work-life balance, bonuses and shares and employee development were mentioned multiple times. What comes to job satisfaction it can be said that the factors that were mentioned in theory are mostly true. Total reward system and job satisfaction overlap a bit with each other on some aspects, but job satisfaction seems to be an important factor for SME managers. They mentioned for example that work is nowadays not only to get a living but to enjoy the process and be part something bigger. It can be understood that in that case they want employees to feel that satisfaction while working. LMX is a bit different because it is rather complex in real life. The concept of it is not really something that a manager would say out loud, but it happens naturally. That is why interviews did not reveal anything about it.

In employee engagement the gap between theory and practice is narrower than in leadership. That comes from the fact that except for LMX the engaging is more tangible concept than leadership. It is easier to say that companies do this and that regarding engagement. For example, it can be said that they have certain bonus system, or they have invested in well-being and nice work environment. It is much harder to say anything tangible about their leadership styles since it is most likely something that everyone experiences it a bit differentially. Nevertheless, the empirical part of this thesis confirms mostly what theory suggests related to SME employee engagement practices.

### 5.1.2 Leadership and employee engagement in sport organization

Theory suggests three leadership styles for sport organizations as well. These are shared/collective leadership, transformational leadership and servant leadership. It needs to be remembered that these leadership styles are mentioned in GM/CEO level of the sport organization not so much on pitch level. There are a couple of different words for the shared leadership in the existing literature, but collaborative and collective leadership are the most common after shared leadership. This style includes processes and systems where several people are involved in making the leadership happen (Lemay, 2009). Collective leadership emphasizes teamwork over individual achievements, focusing on shared goals and group collaboration. This approach divides leadership into formal (managers, coaches, team captains) and informal (influential organization members) (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 56). Shared leadership is an emerging concept where leadership is a collective phenomenon, promoting cohesion and unified effort (Kang, 2018). SMEs and sport organizations share transformational leadership style as that is one that emerges in both contexts. The elements of transformational leadership (leaders, followers and common goal or purpose) can be easily found from sport organizations as well (Gomes, 2014, p. 28). The third leadership style is servant leadership. This is referred to as an emerging leadership style due to its unique approach. Servant leadership prioritizes the growth and development of followers over solely achieving organizational goals (Peachey et al., 2015, p. 575). However, it needs to be noted that this does not mean that organizational objectives are neglected, but the focus is on follower development which may lead to improved organizational performance (Peachey et al., 2015, p. 575). The theory includes six dimensions: “humility, interpersonal acceptance, empowering and developing people, stewardship, authenticity and providing direction” (Dierendonk, 2011). In sport organizations, especially with young talents, focusing on their development might enhance performance on many fields and so the overall organizational success.

Based on the interviews with sport managers from wide range in team sports, it can be concluded that shared, transformational and servant leadership are indeed the ones that occur in sport context. However, it can also be concluded that the managers are not that into theory that they would have known these styles if asked. As discussed in the findings section, they had highly practical point of view to whole leadership phenomenon and aspects related to it. Managers in sport context characterized leadership with things such

as leading from front, giving a lot of freedom for self-management, honesty, everyone is responsible for their own actions, independent decisions and value-based decisions. This all refers to what shared leadership, transformational leadership and servant leadership represents. Nevertheless, it is needed to mention that sport managers did not clearly mention any of the above-mentioned leadership styles, so these are conclusions based on the interviews.

It is interesting that even though SMEs and SME leadership is more researched area in general, the existing literature about sport organization leadership was more accurate. Again, it is worth to mention that SMEs interviewed for this thesis do not necessarily form an adequately broad dataset for such conclusions. It could possibly give a more accurate and truthful account on the leadership practices used in SMEs, if one would follow and observe the managers for a longer time. In interviews, managers are able to say anything they like although things may be different in real life.

What comes to employee engagement in sport organization based on existing literature is interesting and versatile. As athletes are free to move globally seeking a best place for them to develop and gain assets in fast paced world where career can end whenever, it is not a simple task to engage employees to the organization. Job satisfaction, rewarding and LMX are present in sport organization context as well, but the perspective is a little different and there are some specific factors affecting it in sport context (Sugandini et al., 2020, p. 3).

According to authors, motivation and organizational culture determine job satisfaction in sport organizations. According to Mitchell and Daniels (2003, p. 226) call motivation as “inner desire to make an effort” that positively impacts individual performance in organization. Taylor et al. (2008) explain that motivation arises from fulfilling unmet needs like personal challenges or needing money. Content theories define motivation as arising from various needs such as Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy or McClelland’s (1961) needs theory, while process theories like Adam’s equity theory and Vroom’s expectancy theory explain how motivation can be fostered (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 162). Same authors suggests that the strengths of the need are the one that determines individual’s effort to be motivated and engaged. What comes to organizational culture, it consists of common values, beliefs, and assumptions that guide member’s behavior (Schein, 1991). These

values often reflect the priorities of the founders and leaders, shaping the organization's purpose and vision. Strong cultures, where these values are widely understood and accepted, create job satisfaction, commitment and decreased turnover (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005; McKenna & Beech, 2002). In contrast, weak cultures lack this cohesive guidance, impacting employee engagement and desirability to new and existing members (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 103).

Intrinsic rewarding and extrinsic financial and nonfinancial rewarding are in use in sport organizations (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 165). Especially meaningful intrinsic rewards in sport context are sense of achievement and personal growth, for example (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 165). With job design managers can create more chances for employees to achieve these rewards that are otherwise out of reach for managers to give. In the light of the literature job design can be seen as a key method in sport context. Direct and indirect financial rewards are used in sport context as well (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 166). Cost-of-living adjustments is the component that makes the biggest difference to SME context based on theory.

The significance of LMX is highlighted in sport organizations and the differential treatment is likely visible to team members (Martin, 1984; Sias & Jablin, 1995). The highlighted significance of it is since it is likely to be visible for organization members (Martin, 1984; Sias & Jablin, 1995). Van Hooper and Martin (2008) found that in team sports, effectiveness and harmony improve when rewards, particularly social rewards like feedback and attention are distributed equally. However, research also shows that unequal distribution of rewards may not cause internal conflicts if the disparity is perceived justified based on factors such as status, seniority or individual needs (Leventhal, 1980).

Based on interviews theory is partially right but some new things were discovered. To start about the job satisfaction that comes from motivation and organizational culture in sport organizations according to authors, it can be confirmed by interviews. interviewees talked about organizational culture, common goal, values and the emotion that is in the business. This needs to be added that they talked a lot about having the organization in order so that they are considered as trusted employer and seen as organization that has everything right for the employees. They did not discuss directly about motivation and needs but it can be understood that for example team members are in the organization for

certain reasons. For example, president of a basketball organization talked about them being a good springboard for players to better leagues and that their social media manager pushes content about their players to social media to highlight them. So, the players motivation or need can be that they need to be seen so that they can take the next step. Financial and non-financial rewards come from a wider range based on the interviews. The bonus systems are more individual, and every player might have their own targets that lead to bonuses. On top of that there are organization level bonuses. What is common in sport organizations are also cost-of-living adjustments through partners, so organizations get team members apartments and cars that are included in the deal they make. What was also discovered is that especially in smaller cities is that sport organizations may arrange spare time activities to employees. These might happen through partners or not, but they want people to feel like home even though they might be far from real home. On top of this it was emphasized that sport organizations want to see people as people and treat them the best way they can to make them feel welcome. LMX did not gain much attention in the interviews, and it might also be more present on pitch level than the manager and CEO level in real life.

### 5.1.3 Challenges of implementation

Challenges of implementation is important consideration regarding the thesis since every good thing from context to another might not be possible to be transferred as they are. Theory suggests that these challenges could be related to resource limitations, skill and knowledge transferability issues, different organizational cultures and communication problems. Resource limitations may be related to time, specialist skills and lack of financial resources experts (Brinkschröder, 2014). Transferability of skills and knowledge may be challenge since practices developed in specialized contexts might need unique expertise and perception of issues that are unknown in the other context. Furthermore, different expectations, processes and organizational structures may require management practices to be adapted or tailored to the new context (Szulanski, 2000). Leadership and employee engagement practices can be tied to certain organizational culture. As organizational culture consists of values, beliefs, norms and assumptions that are leading and shaping the mindset of an organization it is easy to understand that practices that work on some context might not work in another (Cote, 2023). In the light of literature communication style and language are possible challenges. This issue is more related to the leadership practice transfer than employee engagement. It is important to

ensure that communication is effective and understandable within the target organization (Jones et al., 2004). Kroll et al. (2016) mention that it is important to have sound documentation about information transfer.

Interviews did not give much information about this topic since situation is new to managers. It is natural that managers have not been in this kind of a situation where they should think about their management practices in another context or that they should think about others practices in their context. Even though they did not clearly talk about those challenges that theory suggest it can be assumed that those are not at least completely wrong, they just did not happen to think those kinds of things when asked. CEO of a football organization discussed about an issue where there might be classic change resistance. There the current people would fight against new ideas just because things have been done in certain way for a long time and they do not want to change anything. Another thing that was mentioned in that interview was that in different kind of organizations work different kind of people. That is partially related to the differential organizational cultures that were mentioned in existing literature too. In some organizations the most of workers could be specialists and in the other where changes would be made might consist of performing workers that are not highly educated. That can cause a big problem when transferring practices from field to another. Leadership consultant noted that challenges are most likely to happen between interfaces of people, teams and hierarchies. It was mentioned that individuals need to understand their role in change and also understand others perspective as well so that such a change can happen. Additionally, leadership consultant did not see any major challenges with the transfers if everyone just understands their role, other's role and are committed to the change.

## **5.2 Managerial implications**

For SMEs and their managers, this research provides useful insights about leadership and employee engagement that are the cornerstones of success. This section goes through leadership practices and employee engagement practices that can be seen as SME manager benefitting based on theory and interviews. All that is suggested here are not based on both theory and empirical findings but are still seen as ideas that could be benefitting.

First suggestion regarding leadership would be collective/shared/collaborative leadership. According to both, existing literature and interviews, collective leadership is highly used in sport context already, but it could work in SME context as well. Through interviews especially leadership consultant interview it can be assumed that collective leadership will gain more relevance on upcoming years. Also, SME managers interviewed for this thesis also talked about leadership in a way that this collectivity is increasing. Collective leadership would suit SMEs well since the number of workers allow this leadership style to possibly work and the informal leaders are easier to notice. Also, it is likely that especially into specialist organizations include more informal leaders it could be efficient to share the responsibility and so let everyone gain relevant experience.

In a sense servant leadership could be efficient leadership style in SME context as well. Even though interviews did not fully confirm that it is used in sport context it could work in both specialist oriented and performing work oriented companies. As the main thing there is to concentrate on follower development to gain organizational result through them it sounds like a good opportunity for SMEs. Also, SME managers discussed about developing followers and redirecting them through their career, this leadership style could be efficient.

Organizational culture is something that every company has. However, it is a fact that sport business utilizes more emotion in their operations and emotions are an important aspect of their organizational culture. With emotion things like passion and indulgence are meant. That is something that could be good to get into SMEs as well. This is hard task for SME managers and even sport managers could not give any advice how they could accomplish that, but it is worth to think. It is easier for employees to attach and engage to the company if they have such emotions regarding it. Product SME manager also talked that people love big success stories and creating one so here could be an example how to add emotion into the work. This could also add more winning culture to the company and so forth increase employee engagement. One small victory at a time moving forward kind of mentality.

Refreshing rewarding systems could improve employee engagement in SMEs. When interviewing SME managers they talked only a little about rewarding. They said for

example that rewarding too much does not make any difference since people get used to it and so forth. It can be assumed that the rewarding system allows getting used to it and that the rewards are too traditional, maybe related to quartiles and company success. Renewing the whole rewarding system could be a way to enhance employee engagement. Suggestion would be that rewarding plans would be more personal and not so general. Especially in smaller end of SME pool this could be especially efficient and easier to implement. First part of this more personalized rewarding system could be job design where the job in organization would be more fitted for the employee. Then employee could do tasks that they feel comfortable and interested and so be more efficient. For financial rewards there could be cost-of-living adjustments that work in sport context already. There these kinds of rewards are implemented through partners except housing related adjustments might also happen through company investments if they have properties. These kinds of partnerships are not possible always but should be implemented if possible. For another financial reward there could be implemented more personalized bonus systems. Bonus systems where each employee could have personalized targets and bonus levels could be highly efficient to some point.

In addition, from interviews there rose an idea about spare time activities. Company could arrange more time together with colleagues or without colleagues but outside working hours. This is a bit problematic approach since everyone do not want to see or associate with work colleagues outside working hours but some want. However, there could be a solution where company arranges let's say twice a month some kind of activity for employees. These activities should not be mandatory for anyone. On top of that it is fun to do something else than lay on the couch after work it is a nice possibility for socializing and increasing team atmosphere. This would work in some organizations and in some organizations, this would be a very bad idea.

What comes to implementation challenges and dodging them, this study did not achieve such results as hoped. It tried to get more insights about possible challenges so that there could be more suggestions to solving them. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the implementation process is documented well so that managers can always go back and see what happened on which dates. Also, as leadership consultant mentioned, major problems happen on interfaces. That is why there should be extra concentration on those when implementing new practices. Last, managers should make everyone's role in the change



clear and also explain other's role to all so that there will not be misunderstandings. On top of that everyone should understand their role in change and make them committed to the project. Based on existing literature and interviews these should help the implementation process.

Table 9 Managerial implications (Tulonen, 2024)

<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Employee engagement</b>	<b>Implementation challenges</b>
Collective/shared/collaborative	Concentration on organizational culture	Interfaces
Servant	Passion to the work environment	Roles
	Refreshing rewarding system on both financial and non-financial levels	Commitment to change

To conclude, certain suggestions about leadership and employee engagement practices can be made. This thesis suggests that collective leadership and servant leadership practices could be efficient in SME context as well. Maybe the change should not be radical but at least some practices or ideas could be implemented. Employee engagement got more attention and concentrating on organizational culture and adding passion to the work environment. Refreshing rewarding systems on non-financial and financial level towards more personalized entity partly through possible partners could engage employees to the organization. Additionally, it was suggested that outside working hours activities could enhance employee engagement in some situations. About dodging implementation challenges a couple of suggestions were made. Concentrating on interfaces, making everyone's role clear and committing employees to the change should help the process.

### **5.3 Limitations and future research suggestions**

This research followed a qualitative study method where data was gathered by semi-structured interviews from SME and sport organization managers. The choice of these methods can be considered successful on the basis of the results as the study helped to

solve the research problem and its answer. As thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and it produced expected results it can be considered as successful choice likewise. Even though results were not as radical as expected they were able to both confirm what theory suggested and produce new information and practical suggestions.

Even though this thesis provides both theoretical and managerial implications, it faces several limitations as well. By limitations are meant factors that affect research truthfulness and reliability. First, as leadership and employee engagement seemed not to be the most natural conversation topic to the SME and sport organization leaders, it is hard to know if they were truthful in interviews. As well, leadership practices and some of the employee engagement practices are things that can be experienced differentially by different persons. That is why the managers may have spoken about their perspective and idea of their leadership and engagement practices. Therefore, also subordinates should be interviewed to some extent to get a more comprehensive picture of these phenomena.

Another limitation is that only Finnish SMEs and sport organizations were interviewed. This thesis somewhat talks about worldwide phenomenon that could be implemented basically anywhere. However, things can be very different in different places around the world, so it needs to be taken into consideration. What comes to this limitation as well is that there were only three sport organizations, two SME companies and one leadership consultant interviewed which is not big enough data to confirm that the results are completely relevant. And to be more specific, the SMEs interviewed for this study are both rather young companies yet. This affects to the results significantly as the companies think about things like a young company thinks. More youthful and advanced mindset in the company leads to them being at the forefront of the development in leadership and employee engagement practices which affect to the results not being as radical as expected.

To gain more specific and relevant answers for this kind of a research it would be better to conduct the study by getting into the organizations and observe how the leadership and employee engagement practices happen in real life. On top of that it would be interesting to get interview results from both organizations and compare the observations and manager perceptions. Also, it would be easier to compare theory and real-life touchpoints

if the research was more in-depth. This thesis relies completely on manager interviews and thus the relevancy can be argued.

As another future research suggestion, it would be interesting to research that if SMEs are seen more as springboards to employees getting into bigger companies or as if there are problems in SME employee engagement. This thesis has a perspective where SMEs are seen to some extent fail in employee engagement, but it would be nice to know if employees just pursue more to MNCs or other bigger companies and there is no reason for employees leaving from SMEs.

## 6 Summary

The world of work is changing as development evolve and commercial operations become increasingly international. Thus, employees have more opportunities regarding their career and SMEs cannot keep up with the pace of globalization leading to a situation where they need to fight for the best employees. SMEs are in a key role in Finnish and worldwide economy. They create jobs, account for more than half of Finland's turnover and over 40% of GDP. The role of SMEs in the economy is therefore undeniable and skilled employees should be retained in SMEs even though markets are getting more global. Sport industry is known for its forerunner status in internationalizing their operations due to free player markets and thus are compared with SMEs. Leadership and employee engagement practices are seen as a key factor in retaining good employees in SMEs. That is why this research examined and compared leadership and employee engagement practices with sport organizations.

Because of sport industry forerunner status in internationalized business, it was concluded that they have advanced leadership and employee engagement practices. The purpose of this study was to analyze how small and mid-sized enterprises can benefit from leadership and employee engagement that are practiced in the context of sport management. This purpose was approached with research problem; how SME business managers can benefit from the leadership and employee engagement practices used by sport industry managers and three sub-questions; how leadership and employee engagement practices can be applied in the business context and in sport industry, what leadership and employee engagement practices from sport management could benefit business organization managers and what are the challenges of implementation when transferring leadership and employee engagement practices from one industry to another. The basis of this study was built on existing literature about SME management and sport management since there is no similar studies available. collective leadership, highlighted organizational culture and more advanced rewarding systems could be applied to SME management based on theory.

This study was an empirical and it followed qualitative approach. The data was gathered through six semi-structured expert interviews, where three sport managers, two SME managers and one leadership consultant was interviewed based on the theoretical

framework. All the interviews were recorded that made them possible to be transcribed. Thematic analysis was utilized in the data analysis to the themes rose from the interviews and theory.

Theory and empirical part clearly indicate that there are leadership and employee engagement practices in sport context that are applicable to SME context. The empirical section broadly supported the theoretical findings but additionally provided new insights about leadership and employee engagement practices that are used in SMEs and sport organizations and what could be applied to the SME context. The results revealed that employee engagement and especially leadership is complex topic for both SME and sport organization managers to discuss about. They have only a little knowledge about these in theory and naturally have rather practical approach to both. They clearly indicate that those are important aspects but a bit hard to describe in words. However, the final conclusions suggest that collective and servant leadership could be efficient in SME context. These leadership styles consist of ideas where individuals take responsibility and development of individual employees are concentrated. Employee engagement practices got a little more attention, and it was suggested that concentrating on organizational culture, adding passion to the work environment, refreshing the rewarding systems and arranging activities outside working hours might enhance the employee engagement. As one aspect of this research was implementation challenges, it was suggested that concentrating on interfaces, making everyone's role clear and committing employees to the change should help the implementation process go smoother.

The results of this thesis are beneficial to SME managers especially in Finland since the interviews did not have international participants. It provides both theoretical contributions and managerial implications that can help SME managers to implement new leadership and employee engagement practices into their companies. If the practices are not straight applicable to some companies, at least food for thought and new ideas where to inspire. On the other hand, also sport organization managers may find the results interesting and get inspiration to their leadership and employee engagement practices to develop their systems.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Interview guide SME and sport managers

Tausta (sama sekä urheilujohtajille, että pk-johtajille)

- Kerro kokemuksestasi pk-kontekstissa?
- Mitä kuuluu päivittäisiin työtehtäviisi?

Johtajuus

- Miten suhtaudut johtamiseen ja johtajuuteen?
- Miten koet johtajuuden roolin työntekijöiden sitoutumisessa?
- Miten kuvailisit johtamistyyliä teidän yrityksessänne?

Sitouttaminen

- Miten sitoudut sitouttamiseen?
- Millaisena koet sitouttamisen roolin?
- Miten sitouttamista toteutetaan teidän yrityksessänne?
- Tunnetko urheiluorganisaatioiden sitouttamiskeinoja? (ei kysytä urheilujohtajilta)

Keinojen siirtäminen

- Urheiluorganisaatioissa on havaittu XXXXX keinoja, miten uskot, että ne toimisivat teidän yrityksessänne? (Urheilujohtajilta: Miten uskot teidän käyttämien keinojen toimivan pk-kontekstissa?)
- Millaisia haasteita näet tällaisten keinojen mahdollisessa siirtämisessä pk-kontekstiin?

Jatkokysymykset

- Millaisia tarpeita teillä on liittyen johtajuus- ja sitouttamiskeinoihin? (Urheilujohtajilta: Mitkä johtajuus- ja sitouttamiskeinot mainitsisit toimivimpina?)

- Millaisia odotuksia ja vaatimuksia asetatte johtajuus- ja sitouttamiskeinoihin liittyen? (ei kysytä urheilujohtajilta)
- Miten uskot, että voisitte hyötyä urheiluorganisaatioiden käyttämistä johtajuus- ja sitouttamiskeinoista? (ei kysytä urheilujohtajilta)
- Kuinka paljon teillä on sidosryhmiä/yhteistyökumppaneita?
- Heräsikö uusia ideoita, miten urheilukontekstista voitaisiin ottaa mallia pk-kontekstiin?

## **Appendix 2 Interview guide leadership consultant**

### Tausta

- Kerro kokemuksestasi pk-kontekstista?
- Mitä kuuluu päivittäisiin työtehtäviisi?

### Johtajuus

- Miten näet, että pk-yrityksissä suhtaudutaan johtajuuteen?
- Onko pk-yrityksissä ongelmana heikko johtajuus tai johtajuuden tunnistamattomuus? Miten ilmenee?
- Millaiset johtajuusmallit ja käytännöt näkyvät pk-kontekstissa?

### Sitouttaminen

- Miten näet, että pk-yrityksissä suhtaudutaan työntekijöiden sitouttamiseen?
- Onko pk-kontekstissa ollut ongelmana hyvien työntekijöiden sitoutuminen? Miten ilmenee?
- Millaisia sitouttamiskeinoja pk-yrityksissä käytetään?

### Keinojen siirtäminen

- Onko mahdollista siirtää johtajuus- ja sitouttamismalleja kontekstista toiseen?
- Miten uusia johtajuus- ja sitouttamiskeinoja ajetaan sisään?
- Millaisia haasteita tällaisissa siirroissa tulee vastaan? Miten haasteita kohdataan?

- Heräsikö uusia ideoita, miten urheilukontekstista voitaisiin ottaa mallia pk-kontekstiin?