

# Defining the core of successful millennial leadership

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## Abstract

A growing number of today's leaders represent millennial leaders who have their specific approach to leadership work. This was a phenomenographical study in which 28 Finnish leaders from Great Places to Work companies were interviewed. The purpose was to define the core of millennial leadership. The leadership dimensions of social, psychological, and cognitive-operational leadership were distinguished from the millennial leaders' perceptions. Social leadership comprised elements that highlighted interpersonal relations in leaders' work. Psychological leadership evidenced leaders' positive thinking about human growth and well-being. Successful leadership was seen through "human eyeglasses". The leader's strong service mentality, as well as practice time and work management, represented cognitive-operational leadership. The output of this study is a new perspective on millennial leadership. The developed definition of successful millennial leadership will help to understand young leaders' ideas about leadership and organisations to support their development in their work and when developing the sustainable workplaces of the future.

**Keywords:** Work engagement, grit, Millennial leader, content analysis, challenges, resources

## Introduction

Previous studies have found that today, four, soon even five, generations work simultaneously in working life (Lester, Standifer, Schultz, & Windsor, 2012; Lowe, Barry, & Grunberg, 2020). It means also that current changes taking place in workplaces are 1) changes in mindsets and practices, 2) technological change and work, 3) an aging and diversifying working population and 4) climate change and work are highlighted (Kokkinen et al., 2020). Typically, different generations may have different expectations regarding working life, as towards life in general.

In Finnish working life, too, people in their 30-40s, named as millennials, are the growing majority. In 2020, those born in Finland in 1983 were the largest birth cohort in the population (Statistics Finland, 2021). Anderson, Baur, Griffith, and Buckley (2017), after reviewing various studies of millennials, state that millennials have different expectations and attitudes toward working life from their predecessors. In addition, the younger generation has different expectations of its supervisor than previous generations. Millennials value and benefit from a coaching style of leadership that is seen to correlate with Generation Y's level of work engagement (Cates, Cojanu, & Pettine, 2013). Galdames and Guihen's (2020) systematic literature review verifies that there is a lack of empirical research concerned with leadership and the millennial generation. In the general debate on working life, leadership has been identified as one of the cornerstones of success (see e.g., Cheung, 2015; Uusiautti, 2015; 2016).

In this article, we present the study in which leadership was studied through Finnish millennial leaders' perceptions. It is important to understand how millennial leaders perceive themselves as leaders, and successful leadership in today's workplaces. This information will support leaders, organisations, and companies to gain new perspectives, and further to develop and create better and more effective processes and support models for leadership development.

## Positive Leadership Theories as the Basis of Modern and Successful Leadership

Leadership is a crucial factor in organisations, as it empowers a lot of potential, and it is tied with many definitions and expectations (Avey, Avolio, & Luthans, 2011). Leaders have a significant role to play in managing these future changes. According to Avolio (2007) leadership theory and research have progressed to a situation where the dynamic interaction between leaders and followers is considered. Today, leadership theories describe leadership broadly, considering together with the leader himself also followers, peers, supervisors, work setting, context and culture (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Leadership theories always reflect the phenomena of their era, and according to Abrahamson (1996), the various marketers of leadership doctrines compete over which fashions guide the development of leadership. Managers seem to rely on management styles that appear to be more effective, predictable, and better than previous practices (Abrahamson, 1996).

With the positive psychology movement, leadership has also begun to be viewed through a positive perspective (Gauthier, 2015). Positive leadership is much influenced by general leadership doctrines (Youssef & Luthans, 2012). Work and organisational psychologists began to focus more on well-being and supporting positive employee development through the positive psychological perspective. The focus of leadership discussion and research can be seen to have shifted, from an explanatory way to an understanding perspective.

According to Blanch, Francisco, Antino, and Rodriguez-Muñoz (2016), positive leadership has received a lot of interest, even though it is not a well-established concept. Malinga, Stander, and Nell (2019) also state that there is obscurity and varied opinions regarding the nature of the construct of positive leadership in the literature. Likewise, Antino, Gil-Rodríguez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, and Borzillo (2014) argue that there is a lack of relevant contributions relating to how to measure positive leadership. On the other hand, it has been questioned whether the positives and negatives should even be juxtaposed (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013).

Positive leadership theories can be considered to consist of five leadership theories, linked by a positive and humanistic approach (Blanch et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2014): Transformational (Bass, 1985), Authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), Servant (Greenleaf, 1997), Spiritual (Fry, 2003), and Ethical Leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006). The scientific strengths of these theoretical trends vary, but several similarities can be found in the theories. Common to these leadership styles is that the leader has strong awareness of oneself, values, thoughts, and feelings (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Positive leadership focuses on identifying and supporting people's strengths and abilities. Operations are driven by a positive attitude, and leadership is seen as an ongoing dynamic process. (Blanch et al., 2016). Positive psychology has been targeted to some criticism for, for example, underlying assumptions as well as alleged methodological and conceptual problems and lack of scientific validity (Lazarus, 2003; Miller, 2008; Malinga et al., 2019), but alongside the increase in positive psychological research, it has become clear that it is just one branch of psychological research (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Transformational leadership theory has evolved, from an analysis of the characteristics of political leaders (Burns, 1978,) to a more multidimensional leadership theory also applied to organisations. A transformational leader is a charismatic role model for his employees who inspires and encourages followers by his own example. Bass (1999) refined Burns' model and divided transformational leadership into four different components: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration of employees (Bass, 1985). Element of supporting people's growth and learning was also included in the transformational leadership later (Bass, 2000).

An authentic leader works genuinely in accordance with their beliefs and values and leads with his own example. Ethically sustainable operations guide the behaviour of an authentic leader. He is aware of both his own thoughts and their behaviours, and the values, moral perspectives, knowledge, and

strengths of others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic behaviour by the leaders is strongly inspired by ethical principles of the group (Blanch et al., 2016).

Servant and ethical leadership can also be considered close to authentic leadership style (Pälli, 2016). Greenleaf (1997) defined servant leader to be one who puts followers needs, aspirations and interests before own ones (see also Blanch et al., 2016). Coetzer, Bussin, and Geldenhuys (2017) in their systematic literature review found out that the qualities of a servant leader are defined by eight characteristics: authenticity, humility, compassion, accountability, courage, altruism, integrity, and listening. A serving leader ensures that the employee has the space and freedom to develop and find self-fulfilment.

Spiritual leadership theory was developed within the intrinsic motivation model, and it highlights employees' intrinsic motivation, vocation, and need to belong, as well as the learning of the organisation (Fry, 2003). In spiritual leadership, a leader strives to create a safe environment for his employees, in which he aims to intrinsically motivate with his values, attitudes, and behaviours, one's self and his employees. Intrinsic motivation is unified with better learning, creativity, and performance (Wang, Guo, Ni, Shang, & Tang, 2019). Spiritual leadership theory includes ethical aspects and hence closely aligns with ethical leadership (Wang et al., 2019).

Ethical leader seeks to influence employees with their own example through behaviours and actions. There is a lot of consistency with ethical leadership in the above-mentioned leadership trends and efforts have been made to create one's own theory of ethical leadership (Blanch et al., 2016). Transformational, spiritual, and authentic theories of leadership all include the moral potential of leadership in some way (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership can be considered as a broad entity which, in short, means acting in accordance with one's own ethical principles in everyday work and decision-making. In summary, it is about the culture of doing the right thing.

Those leadership viewpoints that combine leadership with the viewpoint of success have approached the topic from a variety of viewpoints. For example, Syväjärvi and Pietiläinen (2016) defined the principles of humane and efficient leadership. Uusiautti's definitions on success are more focused on a strengths-based approach, and the sense of meaningfulness at work, where personal features together with teamwork and leadership matter (see e.g., Karima & Uusiautti, 2018; Uusiautti, 2016ab) and can even predict sustainable success and flourishing (Uusiautti & Hyvärinen, 2020). It also contains the ideas of caring leadership (see Syväjärvi et al., 2014; Uusiautti, 2013; Uusiautti et al., 2012).

## Method

The purpose was to understand how millennial leaders describe their selves as leaders. This study is a part of a wider research analysing millennial leaders' paths of becoming and being a leader. The following question was set for this research: How do Great Places to Work leaders perceive successful millennial leadership?

The phenomenographical approach was chosen as the methodology for this study. In phenomenographical research, the content of perceptions and the relationship between perceptions are of interest. When investigating people's understanding of various phenomena, concepts, and principles, it can be repeatedly found that each phenomenon, concept, or principle can be understood in a limited number of qualitatively different ways (Marton, 1986). A special feature in the phenomenographical research is the division from a "first-order" and "second-order" perspective (Marton, 1981; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012). This division is intended to clarify the set-up of the second-level perspective brought by the researcher, in which the researcher creates interpretations from the chosen perspective.

For the purposes of this research, it was decided to concentrate on the companies who succeeded on the Great Place to Work (GPTW) scheme during 2020. With this selection, our aim was to reach extensively millennial leaders from different sizes of workplaces and organizational structures. GPTW is a private global consultation company which offers global measurement tools through their Trust Index survey and in addition evaluates the cultures of organisations, through a Culture Audit-programme. The company does research in sixty countries, and altogether these companies have over ten million employees (Great Place to Work, 2020a). Diversity of sectors being part of GPTW scheme, e.g., accounting firms, agricultural machinery import and sale company, staffing and recruitment company and digital service providers, confirmed the choice to select GPTW as a focus group for this study. Participation in GPTW certification is subject to a fee and it should be noted that it enables the participating company to gain public visibility and to create its own public image. This study provides information on the perceptions of leaders working in the private sector, and thus cannot, for example, identify the perceptions of those working in the public sector, or what the possible differences between the two are.

GPTW started the research in Finland in 2002 and until now has listed eighteen times best workplaces in Finland. During 2020, all together 150 companies were researched which employ 30 000 employees. GPTW 2020 listing was published on February 14, 2020. Companies were divided into three (3) categories based on the number of their employees; small (20-49 employees), middle-sized (50-488 employees) and large companies (500 employees). GPTW released fifty best performing companies in their home pages. During February-March 2020, all together 47 (7 small, 30 middle-sized and 13 small companies) companies' Head of Human Resources (HR) or equivalent person were contacted via e-mail and their interest to participate to this study was asked. For the three remaining companies,

necessary contact information was not found, and hence they were left out from this study (Great Place to Work, 2020b).

As a result, eleven companies were willing to join to this study, and their HR department supported by providing the detailed contact information of their millennial leaders. The HR department was instructed to identify individuals having a leadership or supervisor position, and representing millennials as born between the years of 1978-1995. HR departments were given the full freedom to select the leaders and provide the contact information to the researcher. Followed by this, all together forty millennial leaders were contacted via e-mail from which twenty-eight shared their willingness to join to a casual interview. Eventually, 15 men and 13 women were interviewed, from which 19 were born between the years 1978-1985 and remaining nine (9) between 1986-1991. The majority of study participants were from the beginning of the millennial generation, a few born in the late 70s. Millennial leaders educational background distributed as follows: three (3) of the interviewees had doctoral degree, 15 had master's degree education including university and university of applied sciences level degrees, one (1) had candidate degree, three (3) had polytechnic degree and six (6) had vocational level degree from which two of these with double degrees.

The interviews were conducted between March–August 2020. The first interview was done face-to-face, but all the rest were done remotely over Microsoft Teams, due to the Covid-19 pandemic necessitating remote work in Finland. The interviews were recorded with the acceptance of the interviewee.

Interviews followed the semi-structured nature as some of the interview aspects were defined beforehand and open-ended type of questions were used as suggested by Marton (1986; see also Yates et al., 2012). Interviews started with the introduction of the study, followed up with warming up type of questions related to interviewee's background (gender, age, education, working years in total and description of current position). After this, interviews continued to discuss the characteristics of leadership and leadership experiences. Leaders were asked to freely tell what kind of thoughts and values they have about leadership in general, in what type of situations they have felt successful and vice versa, in what type of situations they have failed, continuing then further to ask what strengths they believe have contributed to success and vice versa, whether there is something in their own practices or traits that they would like to change.

In this study, the goal was to classify different perceptions of how GPTW leaders perceive successful millennial leadership. Analysis followed the traditional four stage model of phenomenographical analysis (Yates et al., 2012). The analysis work began with an introduction to the interview material and was read and listened to several times. After getting acquainted, we started to look for and interpret, with the help of analytical questions, relevant expressions and concepts. These included, for example, individual words, utterances, and sets of ideas. In the case of these expressions, its purpose was considered, and meanings were formed, "pools of meanings" (Stage 1). Subsequently, units of meaning

began to be grouped into broader subcategories, which explained and described the differences in perceptions (Stage 2). The analysis proceeded by describing the subcategories at a more abstract level, whereby the subcategories were combined into theoretical results to form broader result categories (Stage 3). In the last stage of the analysis, the result categories were combined from the theoretical point of view with the main categories of the analysis, and finally the result space was obtained, which describes the research results (Stage 4).

## Results

Three leadership dimensions from the millennial leaders' perceptions could be distinguished as the main perspectives to view successful millennial leadership. These were the social, psychological, and cognitive-operational leadership.

### Social leadership

The category of social leadership comprised elements that highlighted interpersonal relations in leaders' work. Three subcategories comprised social leadership: humane values, social skills, and equality.

#### Humane values

This category included *positive attitude, values and interest towards people as well as importance of the work-life balance*. When discussing the values of leadership, humane values were emphasised in the leaders' speeches. Leaders were united by a positive attitude towards people, as well as an interest and kindness towards employees and colleagues. Caring, respecting others, and trust clearly stood out in the way leaders talk about what is felt motivational in leadership.

*"I like to delegate a lot and I like to share responsibilities with people and guide them in it and maybe even through them get them such successes..."* (Leader 12)

*"I like to work with the people, I'm a team player to the hilt."* (Leader 14)

Caring also appeared to be a detrimental feature in a situation where the manager found it difficult to give negative feedback. One of the interviewees expressed how difficult it was for him to address the performance problem of his employees in a timely manner, due to his own excessive empathy.

*"My weakness, which is also on the flip side, is that I care about people, I find it hard to give people negative feedback directly... when one team member was not performing well, I somehow tried too much and was optimistic and in the end I had to admit that nothing would come true... that I should have been able to make those boring decisions faster, because now it was sad for everyone..."*(Leader 18)

The emphasis on humanity also came to the fore in the way leaders spoke about the importance of their own time, family, and work balance. Some leaders strongly emphasised the importance of leisure time supporting coping at work. Seeing human life as a whole was also evident when talking about taking motivation into account in leadership. For a few leaders, it was especially important to remember and consider the life of the employee as a whole.

*"... they are the kind of stuff I appreciate and want to take care of. That I have like food and rest and workout in balance. Of course, people, friends and pets around, will bring a lot of joy and balance..."* (Leader 26)

*"... (As a leader) notes how it goes there in private life. If there is such a hassle, you either encourage to be off or if it's better to work, then encourage to work, but react on those situations and be aware..."* (Leader 15)

*"You are interested in what is happening in their (employees) lives. One of our team members, for example, had a divorce on, so I was really pleased when I happened to ask, "how the summer went?" That probably wouldn't otherwise turned out because he was a bit kind of shy."* (Leader 18)

### **Social skills**

When discussing the factors that support the success of leaders, social skills rose to a significant proportion. Leaders felt successful when their team was doing well, and teams were succeeding together. Social skills emerged repeatedly, and it was clear from the material that they contributed to many successes and accelerated leadership development. This category consisted of *co-operation and interaction skills, working in a group, human knowledge, empathy and listening*.

The importance of *co-operation and interaction skills* came to the fore when discussing which issues have been significant as leaders in their growth. Also, when discussing the qualities of a good leader, understanding the importance of interaction skills was emphasised.

*"...it (conflict situation) maybe taught to me the meaning of co-operation, everything you do (as a leader) affect everyone around you that there's always certainly one or two perspectives that you haven't come to think it's worth being careful about."* (Leader 21)

*"... Then the other is interaction skills...because people are busy, no matter how good the ideas are, but if you can't communicate or get people involved or can't build trust, those things will not be done."* (Leader 1)

The importance of co-operation skills was emphasised when discussing managers' experiences of failure, and co-operation skills were essential, especially in conflict resolution.

*"...there has been this kind of frozen conflict between someone or some people. When it's kind of a conflict freezes there in a team or organization then it throws sticks in the cart for all development projects...if you don't actively break down the frozen conflicts you will see that you won't achieve anything with those other activities either."* (Leader 21)



When discussing what kind of expectations leaders had in their peers, they felt it was important to work effectively with other leaders. Through the co-operation, they received support and, if necessary, advice.

*"Yes, that kind of overall understanding and interest towards things, it's maybe what I'm looking forward to and then of course cooperation. Co-operation between colleagues."* (Leader 10)

Throughout the material, whether we talk about the experiences of success or failure of leaders, the importance of working as a team and seeing oneself as a strong part of it was significant. Leaders saw themselves as an active part of the team and realised that their activities have value.

I'm not the type (of leader) who wants to do solo work and only benefit from it myself. Feels good when you can do as a team or in a group. I'm more the kind of leader that I love that others are involved. (Leader 17)

The research participants perceived that their good *human knowledge* and *empathic skills* had helped them achieve successful experiences. Human knowledge and empathic skills have perhaps helped leaders find a deeper connection to their employees, which in turn has strengthened trust in the leader-employee relationship.

*"Well, I'm sure that I can somehow read people well and I'm empathetic and I just understand that people are different so it's probably what's been my most important tool."* (Leader 25)

*"... yes, it leaves you if you want to take advantage of someone's latent potential, then you must get to know those people and see those strengths."* (Leader 10)

The importance of *listening* became the hallmarks of good leadership, as evidenced by the discussion of good leadership. One interviewee raised the skill of listening when considering the transition from an expert position to a supervisory position. As a result of the transition, he understood the important importance of listening in leadership.

*"Listening would certainly be emphasised. I hope I would have more time on it ... And it might be that for me, as a leader, it is not looking so essential, but for him (employee) it might be very relevant, and I need to be keen into his topics."* (Leader 15)

*"...and then, of course, the fact that when I was doing those expert tasks and now (as leader) my job includes listening, it has felt weird."* (Leader 19)

## Equality

This category included equality. Leaders felt they were an important part of the team, and the interviews highlighted the will of the leaders to be equal members of the team. The desire to be close to people, to develop people and to be encouraging was especially emphasised. When describing, for example, decision-making situations, managers mentioned that they were primarily considering the interests of the team and aimed to gather the needed information for the decision making together.

*"Perhaps I see myself more as a member of the team than that I am their leader."* (Leader 8)

*"I try to be very approachable as a supervisor and as a leader - I like to delegate and share responsibility... and be present..."* (Leader 12)

*"I want to be there as if to go with it in a way, like together on the same team at the forefront."* (Leader 11)

## Psychological leadership

The category of psychological leadership referred to those perceptions of millennial leaders that resembled how they valued their work, the nature of leadership, and their development as leaders. This category included subcategories of leadership attitude, orientation to well-being at work, and openness to change and reflection.

### Leadership attitude

This category consisted of *seeing work as valuable, a high work mentality, and an ambition to develop himself at work*. As leaders described their journey as leaders, their speech reflected a positive attitude toward work and way of doing work. The positive attitude towards work was manifested in the goal-orientation of leaders, in their attitude towards natural adversities and in seeing working life as an important self-developer.

*"...I appreciate the work itself, whether it's really cleaning chores or seed planting, or that kind of managerial job."* (Leader 4)

*"...maybe it's an ambition that you really want to make for example this job the best job in the world, so this is the type of mindset I'm having..."* (Leader 21)

*"...perhaps the development and advancement of things has become things developed and they have moved forward, and they have been good things and through it perhaps the management has found that talents, or perhaps skills, are enough to be able to manage even a more demanding field."* (Leader 14)

### Orientation to well-being at work

Leaders showed a dedication to caring for the well-being of their employees, which was particularly evident in leaders' appreciation of well-being at work and their ability to be aware of the uncertainty brought about by covid-19. Hence, this category included *empowerment* and *leaders' own well-being*.

The speech of several leaders conveyed a holistic conception of the human, which in this context means an understanding of the human as a holistic being. For example, leaders realised that employee private life events may have an impact on working life and vice versa. Considering changes in life situations, supporting a sense of security and stability were perceived as important areas of expertise.

*"Yes, I appreciate that people feel good...I appreciate that in practice they have it all good and that is yes, all that matters for me..."* (Leader 2)

*"... that human well-being is both a whole, you don't have a separate work well-being and well-being somewhere else."* (Leader 6)

*"...in my opinion, indeed, the well-being of employees is the most important thing and after that customer satisfaction becomes the second most important thing..."* (Leader 12)

*"Well now maybe the latest is not quite a concrete situation but in a way the corona era, so it is important to create security and stability, stability in the team..."* (Leader 11)

One of the leaders used the term mental sparring, in which he described his way of striving to sense the mental well-being of a team and support his employees holistically, for example, by talking about things that are important to them.

*"It (mental sparring) is about talking about life and important things, what's important to you and what's important to me and so on. But of course, also the fact that there can be awkward situations in your own team, or you feel that something is harassing or not going well with a team member or something like that you don't get it kind of patch..."* (Leader 28)

Empowerment manifested itself in the goal of leaders to support the internal strengthening of employees. Leaders felt it was important to support employees to understand and achieve the goals set. It was essential for leaders that their employees felt in control of their own work and that they had confidence in achieving their goals as this was believed to be linked with employee's well-being.

*"...to give others self-confidence so they are the kind, they are the kind of things that are as always pleasing..."* (Leader 6)

*"...it's (meaning of leadership) like encouraging people's initiative..."* (Leader 11)

*“Because I want to encourage them, most of these twenty-four are working on a project and that project will end at some point. They need to move on from there and I want that they trust themselves and believe that they can succeed in the future as well.” (Leader 20)*

The importance of promoting well-being was also evident in the willingness of leaders to take care of their own well-being. When discussing the areas of leadership development, balancing work and personal life and setting your own boundaries were brought up.

*“Hmmm ... (thinks) ... pretty much I've been working on my own graciousness that I thought which are the things I can work on, and which are the ones I can't, that those which I've failed relates to those ones.” (Leader 9)*

*“Some limit has to be drawn...I live this job and in between I probably body too much, so I try to have enough free time and exercise and change myself through those consciously. A clear boundary for work more and more.” (Leader 15)*

### **Openness to change and reflection**

A third important element of psychological leadership was the *ability and will to self-reflect*. According to the research participants' perceptions, an open attitude towards one's own activities was evident when talking about leadership values, motivation and one's own areas for development. Leaders were willing to do self-reflection and understood it to be necessary for the success of their own development and operation.

*“Yeah, therefore, it seems that this reflection is a big part of this job ... I am grateful that I've been trained and have been given the opportunity to self-reflection...It is really important thing...” (Leader 21)*

*“That's what I had to say that a leader needs to do self-reflection... If you are patching your eyes and you do not see any of your own limitations, as we all have limitations, then you are holding your organization and that organization is your prisoner. That in a certain way then it may be that organization at some point will grow over me and then I need to be willing to let go of it. (Leader 28)*

### **Cognitive-operational leadership**

The category of cognitive-operational leadership consisted of elements that illustrate how the leaders organised their work in practice and perceived their role in relation to other employees. This category consisted of three sub-categories: time management, work management, and leadership as a service task.

## Time management

Most experiences of managerial failure were related to the use of time. Leaders' workdays were busy, and their stories were combined with experience of lack of time. The ability to prioritise and delegate skills were emphasised as leaders pondered the things, they would be willing to develop to avoid the same failures occurring. This category consisted of *time prioritisation* and *delegating*.

Experiences of failure emerged in a variety of time management challenges. A few leaders highlighted their tendency to fail in their own use of time. The challenges of time planning came to the fore as leaders shared experiences in which they felt that *"time flowed from their own hands"*. Too big teams also caused time management difficulties.

*"I am a bit of a time optimist and I tend to hug myself more work and projects when I have time to complete it on time. Then sometimes it has been difficult for me to delineate the time between work and leisure. Sometimes I have put my work as a priority for my family. I get excited it's a good thing but it's also a burden in between."* (Leader 4)

*"I find out a little late myself that my own time is no longer in my own gloves...before this last organizational change was definitely at least a year that such a time you don't have but the calendar is too full..."* (Leader 12)

*"...situations like that where they might have involved quite a lot of my own use of time ... when I had it closer to 20 direct employees so I couldn't possibly give one person as much time as I should have..."* (Leader 25)

A few interviewees perceived learning delegation skills as an important stage in their growth as leader. Understanding delegation as part of a leader's duties streamlined his or her own use of time. The lack of delegation, on the other hand, led to situations where leaders experienced failure.

*"I can kind of give tasks or this delegation so that I don't have to do like all myself and what I said earlier so it was a step too that I can give a task and give responsibility..."* (Leader 5)

*"But yes, as far as I know, the one thing that shows up more to me, than to the team, is the delegation...and especially the fact that in a tight situation, I easily leave those things to myself...but at the same time I know that I have a place to develop in it as well."* (Leader 6)

*"...also, the delegation, the fact that I do it myself and I don't know how; delegation is difficult and something which I need to work on..."* (Leader 19)

## Work Management

Good job management has helped leaders succeed at work. Good job management was combined with efficient work organisation, the ability to manage large areas of responsibility, and the ability to lead toward goals. Unclear roles and too fast decision-making have posed challenges to work

management and produced experiences of failure for a few interviewees. This category consisted of *work organisation, management of a large area of responsibility and decision making*.

Good job management was evidenced by the ability of managers to plan work and team activities. Leaders were aware of the importance of clear goals and roles. This became clear from the data, as the clarity of roles appeared both as an enabler of success and as a cause of failure. When discussing the role of motivation in leadership, the importance of reasoning came to the fore.

*"... I feel that I have learned to give space and that everyone has clear roles, and we have a common understanding of the fact that where we go and who we are. And we have that classic common goal. We know why we are doing this and for what and what we should accomplish. And on top of that, we each have clear roles..."* (Leader 19)

*"... I always aim for the matter to be well planned and justified. I mean, I'll tell you why it's worth doing this, what are its pros or cons or benefits or risks, or so away so I that is how I can move things forward..."* (Leader 13)

*"Then when you don't know who does and what and then that style of communication was pretty different..."* (Leader 19)

*"It has also been quite unclear the roles that who does and what..."* (Leader 17)

The ability to manage large areas of responsibility was demonstrated when discussing the successes of leaders. One of the interviewees emphasised her ability to perceive wholes, which helped her to understand situations in broader contexts and thus, for example, to make the right decisions at the right time. One leader saw the implementation of large practice projects as the culmination of successes. Managing and implementing policy changes had required the ability to manage and lead a large area of responsibility.

*"Well maybe as a researcher I can see those entities (work community) that I don't choose the easiest path, but I try to look in the long run at what's best...not just to the moment and the situation, but to where it leads and what the result is..."* (Leader 20)

*"I am quite often successful in situations where we have been changed radically mode of operation, which is even for 20 or 30 or 70 (person) for quite challenging...because there is always resistance...so systematic changes I have managed to make number of times..."* (Leader 15)

Several interviewees were united by a similar way of making decisions. Leaders described how, in the pre-decision period, they seek to gather the necessary information and individuals to support decision-making. Decision-making situations were not feared, on the contrary, they were a natural part of leadership. Too fast decision-making and disregard for the big picture had led to experiences of failure.

*"...when I have not thought about two times, and I have not looked at the whole picture and I then wondered afterwards, that how I have to run into the fact I learned afterwards that is not worth that in that moment it might seem like a very simple solution, but it never is." (Leader 20)*

*"But perhaps bigger failures come from situations that I have made some decision too quickly and recklessly. And then it becomes a deservedly harsh criticism, but then it has to be corrected and you say to yourself that "okay, sorry, I messed up, it all went wrong, I need to re-think this and try again" (Leader 26)*

This category included *the direction* and *ultimate responsibility*. Although the leaders felt like an equal member with the team, they were clearly aware of their own responsibilities. This manifested itself in their way of talking about their own role as a responsible trend setter and final decision maker.

*"... I like to take responsibility for things, I usually take more responsibility than I should take, I bear the burden of responsibility on my shoulders even if the job role was not so responsible..." (Leader 28)*

*"... one has to get an explanation for why something is being done as it is done, and I think it is up to the leaders to make sure that this is the case..." (Leader 12)*

*"Well, of course, it is important that there are clear goals to be pursued. That you manage to share your goals with others, and everyone is working towards it. There would be no situation where one pulls there and the other the other way around..." (Leader 17)*

### **Leadership as a service task**

Leaders valued being a leader, which was reflected in their way of showing respect and a positive attitude towards those they lead in a conscious manner. This category included *service attitude*. Leaders saw themselves as enablers whose main job was to help employees succeed and empower well, and this was represented as a very cognitive-operational element of leadership. The management style was combined with a service attitude. Leaders felt they were for their team, and their way of narrating conveyed an effort to break away from command-type leadership.

*"Well yes, it will probably return in a certain way to those core values and sources of motivation, that it is great if you can help people move forward and the service attitude in a certain way is close to my heart." (Leader 1)*

*"Not commanded but asked to do." (Leader 15)*

*"...so that own attitude is not the boss-type of attitude, but it is more the kind of enabler, a certain kind of enabler and then the experts will be able to perform better when someone takes care of those conditions..." (Leader 16)*

*“Personally, I experience it in my own work in such a way that my job is to create opportunities for others. That others can succeed, that I am the kind that allows for their success, I'll help if they ask, and I ask about the course, but most I want to be kind of encourager.” (Leader 22)*

*“... in practice, the main prerequisite for a leader is to create the elements to be managed to succeed and to enable success, because if there are no so-called tools to do it in one's own work or lack of competence, then no results can be expected...” (Leader 27)*

## Discussion

This study looked at how GPTW leaders perceive successful millennial leadership. The main result of the study can be shown that the leadership appeared to be human. The humane approach to leadership was highlighted in the leaders' speech and is a significant unifying factor for GPTW leaders. Results largely follow Syväjärvi and Pietiläinen's definition (2016) of leadership being *adaptive in nature, constantly changing, up-to-date and, in all respects, imperfect*. This result was examined through three different levels which are the social, psychological, and cognitive-operational perspectives.

In the speeches of the leaders, several commonalities could be found for the different theories of positive leadership, which was clearly seen as human-friendly as well as a strong incentive for continuous learning. Leaders were able to observe their own actions, values, thoughts, and feelings, which can be seen to unite theories of positive leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Leaders realised that the way they acted and communicated had a big impact on the positive performance of the team, the achievement of goals, and growth.

From a social perspective, successful millennial leadership has many similarities to Goleman's (2006) concept of social intelligence, in which he divides social intelligence into two distinct areas: social awareness and social capacity. In social consciousness, a person can read complex social situations and can position oneself as well as to sense another person's thoughts and feelings. Social ability is built on social awareness and enables smooth interaction, considering all parties involved. Goleman's concept has been criticised as not having academic background, but it makes intuitive sense and has been widely acknowledged by practitioners (see e.g., Luthans, Luthans, Hodgetts, & Luthans, 2001). Leaders' interest and caring for those they led was strongly reflected in their social intelligence. Collaborative skills had a positive impact on coping with social situations and developing as a leader. The strong social game eye of leaders has helped leaders succeed and develop in social situations.

From a psychological perspective, human leadership manifested itself in the way leaders perceive leadership and themselves as leaders. Leadership was examined through “human eyeglasses,” as evidenced by the leaders' positive thinking about human growth and the difference between people. The traits of the leaders were united by openness. Leaders were open to different experiences, new



ways of acting and changing, and evolving. Leaders' appreciation and positive thinking about work proved strong, which can be seen to reflect the psychological dimension of successful millennial leadership. Also, based on previous research, the desire to develop oneself, use one's own strengths and feel relevant to one's work is an expression of success (see e.g., Karima & Uusiautti, 2018; Uusiautti, 2016ab). Leaders believed that caring for well-being and seeing employees holistically contributed to their job satisfaction and achieving goals.

Cognitive-operational leadership reflects the functions of a leader in processing information: perceiving, thinking, and remembering, and doing oneself. The leader's strong service mentality represented cognitive-operational element of leadership. Leaders realised that adequate time for employees was paramount. Service thinking, seeing oneself as an equal team member and enabler reflects service-minded thinking and action from leadership. The service-mindedness of leaders has been found to strengthen trust between a leader and an employee (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017), and thus, for example, leaders wanted to devote sufficient time and effort to the affairs of employees. Leaders said they are motivated to help others, which is in line with Luthans and Avolio's (2003) view that power and position, for example, are not a sufficient motivator for a leader's work but a desire to serve which in this case verify that millennial leader's leadership style includes the elements of serving and spiritual leadership. In addition, according to Yousaf, Yang, and Sanders (2015), intrinsically motivated individuals engage in tasks primarily because the task itself is satisfying, and hence we can argue that millennial leaders feel satisfied when having the possibility to fulfil their needs.

This study has described the perceptions of successful millennial leadership in a unique context: the research material was collected from the GPTW in Finland 2020. Therefore, it is important to ask how the results might be different if the material had been obtained from somewhere else, from other kinds of workplaces. For example, we can assume that GPTW companies invest in, measure, and rely on external consulting to improve employee well-being and leadership. The companies involved were growth companies and the leaders were united by a prompt progress in their careers. Interest towards growth companies, their culture and drive were uniting leaders which could be associated with their positive attitude towards work and development in general. GPTW companies turned out to be so-called high-investment, high-involvement companies, where employees are e.g., involved in decision-making and where operations are humane. Such companies have been reported to cope better with crises such as COVID-19 (see e.g., Eurofound 2021, 63) which will certainly create a strong foundation for successful leadership.

For quality assurance, research analysis and interpretation were done together by all the researchers as phenomenographical analysis and interpretation is a complex and demanding process, and among them was one novice researcher (Sin, 2010). The aim was to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process by explaining how the subjects were selected and how the research material was analysed, highlighting material samples. Sin (2010) emphasises that the researcher's voice in reporting results is inevitable and thus special emphasis must be placed on reflexivity.

It is also essential to consider whether we can even interpret whether the interviewees were successful leaders. Defining success as a sense of competence, achievement, and excellence, coupled with the experience of well-being as well as purpose and relevance (see Uusiautti, 2015), we can find many similarities with the perceptions of the leaders interviewed. Defining success in this way, we can state that millennial leaders can be defined as successful, because they seemingly enjoyed their work and accomplishments as leaders, even though they brought up also challenging moments. More important is to realize that they had found solutions and coped, and they perceived their work important. It is also important to realise that producing a picture of millennial leadership also produces a new kind of leadership concept according to Abrahamson's (1996) theory, which naturally reflects the values of the era such as humanity, self-direction, and lifelong learning in working life. According to Nahavandi (2019, 3) the core idea of the next stage of industrial development, industry 5.0, is "*synergy between humans and autonomous machines*" so the need for human capabilities now and in the future is essential for success.

## Conclusion

What then is special in successful millennial leadership? As stated, many commonalities were found with theories of positive leadership. Strong belief in learning and growth, knowing oneself and acting ethically sustainably came to the fore. The data obtained among millennial leaders reflected also sustainable values of work, which is in line with the current developments in working life (see also Eiffe, 2021). Abrahamsson (2021) points out that sustainable work consists good job qualities, that are, among others, collaboration and plenty of opportunities to influence, enjoy work, and strong relationships at the workplace. Indeed, in our research, human-respecting values seemed to play a bigger role than the traditional idea of leadership's focus on results and customers. Positive attitude towards leadership, people and growth described leaders' thoughts, while paying attention also to the success of the company they were leading (see also Uusiautti & Hyvärinen, 2020). Sustainability at work resembled psychological safety in workplaces, allowing people to flourish and learn, try new ideas that lead to innovations, but it also was connected with work satisfaction and performance (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017; Nguyen & Slater, 2010).

Humanity strongly typified millennial leaders, emphasising humane values, uniqueness, creativity, and self-realisation. Successful leadership appeared to be combined with good and unhurried interaction and enough time between the leader and the employee. Perhaps leaders' genuine interest in people and desire to support, act as the backbone of all interaction, enables human leadership. Leading people is interaction, listening, discussion and being presence. When these actions take place, we can talk about successful millennial leadership aiming at sustainable work outcomes (see also Eiffe, 2021).

The contribution of this research is in the fresh perspective on successful millennial leadership. An aging and diversifying working population leads naturally to a situation where most leaders will be

millennial leaders (see also Eiffe, 2021). The better we understand their thoughts about successful leadership, the better organisations and different communities will be able to support them.

On the other hand, the acceleration of working life, as well as the difficulties of breaking away from work brought about by work independent of place and time, are challenging organisations, making it even more important to take care of the well-being of employees. Humane, person-centered, and service-oriented leadership can maintain a strong connection between the leader and the employee, enabling a positive charge in the work atmosphere of organisations. Furthermore, studies have shown a positive relation between increased work attendance and working in units increasing respect and trust a positive work climate and open discussion (Dellve, Skagert, & Vilhelmsson, 2007). In their research, Böckerman, Bryson, and Ilmakunnas (2012) have found that management practices that support employee participation, such as teamwork, training, and knowledge sharing, generally improve the well-being experienced by employees. In addition, positive functions and financial capacity have been linked to the work atmosphere, staff turnover and organizational efficiency (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011). Moreover, this type of job quality seems to predict high innovation in workplaces and organizations (Mathieu & Boethius, 2021).

It is essential to note that positive leadership theories alone do not support or solve leadership challenges or areas for development and success. Positive leadership with its theories and applications offers new perspectives and concepts that can be utilised alongside other leadership theories and when developing the sustainable workplaces of the future.

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