Regenerative leadership

Understanding the possibilities of a new leadership paradigm for the corporate sector

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We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. – Albert Einstein

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Abstract

In the face of numerous environmental and social crises, leadership that connects people to themselves, each other, and nature is urgently needed. An emerging leadership strand that seems capable of doing so is regenerative leadership. Based on the interconnectedness of humans and nature, this field strives to increase the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems. Through an inductive multiple-case study with semi-structured interviews, this master's thesis explores how regenerative leadership is enabled or constrained in businesses. The results reveal that multiple interlinked organizational and personal aspects inform the possibilities for leadership that better connects people and nature. Seemingly, leaders hold convictions and enact approaches crucial for regenerative leadership. Still, corporate structure and culture are decisive and either support or hinder the endeavors of leaders. Moreover, people's urge to address global issues simultaneously enables and constrains regenerative leadership; despite having good intentions, they neglect to be sustainable with themselves. Thus, although connecting to nature and preserving it for its own sake seems complicated, this thesis contributes new knowledge of leaders' conviction that humans and nature are interconnected, providing a ground for regenerative leadership to take root.

Keywords: regenerative leadership, regenerative sustainability, inner sustainability, critical leadership studies, critical organization theory

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Abbreviations

CLS	Critical Leadership Studies
COT	Critical Organization Theory
RL	Regenerative Leadership
RS	Regenerative Sustainability
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TBL	Triple Bottom Line

1. Introduction

The first chapter introduces the research topic of this master's thesis, namely regenerative leadership (RL). This emerging leadership strand envisions approaches to leadership that strive to increase the health and well-being of people and the socio-ecological systems they engage in and with. Thus, RL is about having a regenerative impact on a world marked by numerous environmental and social crises. First, the problem background explains the broader context in which this leadership strand is emerging. Second, the author outlines RL as a new direction in the face of this problem background. Third, the problem statement clarifies the more specific focus of the thesis and is followed by the research aim and question. The study's delimitations are defined afterward. The chapter concludes with the outline of the remaining thesis.

1.1 Problem background

The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) shows that mitigation of climate change is progressing at a slower pace than previously projected. Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, recently called the report's findings "the damning indictment of failed climate leadership" (UN 2022), suggesting that contemporary leadership must drastically change to address the most urgent environmental issues of the 21st century.

   Increasingly more often, the present times are referred to as the Anthropocene, a geological epoch in which the Earth's natural processes are primarily shaped by human influences (e.g., Crutzen 2006; Latour 2014, 2018; Lewis & Maslin 2015; Calás et al. 2018; Dryzek & Pickering 2019). Anthropogenic environmental problems such as the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, and pollution of land, water (including oceans), and air raise the question of how life on Earth should continue now and in the future (IPCC 2018, 2022). As shown by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, five out of nine planetary boundaries have already been exceeded (Persson et al. 2022).

   However, not only environmental but also social issues contribute to the relevance and urgency of reconsidering how humanity should lead itself into the 21st century. A growing number of scholars argue that many of the environmental

and social crises society faces are interlinked and exacerbate each other (e.g., Capra 2002; Capra & Luisi 2014; Latour 2018; Klein 2020). Raworth's (2017) concept of 'Doughnut Economics', complementing the idea of planetary boundaries with social aspects, reveals a significant shortfall in the social foundation. Worldwide, social inequalities are increasing (UN 2020), and society is becoming more and more polarized (McCoy et al. 2018). Marginalization, discrimination, and racism are ubiquitous in the news (Walker 2020; Adams 2022; Oladipo 2022), civil wars are ongoing in different parts of the world (AFP 2022; Associated Press 2022; Wintour 2022), and recently the Russian military invaded Ukraine (Gall & Kramer 2022). All these events lead to a contemporary situation of the world that reaches a new level of dichotomizing society into left and right corners, conservative and liberal spectrums, and 'the West' and 'the East'. In addition, the war in Ukraine leaves global society in fear of a third world war (Gardner 2022; Madani 2022).

On the individual level, many people experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety (APA 2021; Deloitte 2021). Common reasons for this are, inter alia, related to global issues such as the climate crisis and people's jobs (ibid.). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified people's stress levels (van Tilburg et al. 2020). Various studies show that during the pandemic, people tended to work longer (Osborne 2021), although more working hours may not increase productivity (Collewet & Sauermann 2017). Instead, they may lead to heart disease and stroke (Pega et al. 2021).

Scholars argue that unless humans do not start caring for each other and themselves, they will not, and are not able to, care for the environment either (Parodi & Tamm 2018; Klein 2020). However, humanity's health and well-being depend on their surrounding natural systems (Whitmee et al. 2015; Myers 2017). Thus, some suggest that the health and well-being of all living beings are interlinked (Capra & Luisi 2014; Latour 2014, 2018; Lehtonen et al. 2018). Several studies show that being in nature can release stress, enhance human well-being, and improve social and cognitive abilities (Berman et al. 2008; Weinstein et al. 2009; Atchley et al. 2012; Russell et al. 2013; An et al. 2016; White et al. 2019).

Despite such synergies and connections between humans and nature – and the ongoing discussions about sustainability in politics, economics, and society – humankind continues to destroy natural ecosystems (IPCC 2018, 2022; IPBES 2019). Thus, it is frequently argued that humans have become separated from nature although they are part of it (Eisenstein 2013; Latour 2018). Research shows that even if individuals understand themselves as part of nature, the awareness of interconnections between them and their natural environment is missing (Vining et al. 2008).

To tackle the already mentioned multiple escalating crises, transformative change in how humans interact with each other and their natural environment is necessary (IPBES 2019; IPCC 2022). Some scholars even go as far as to argue that

humanity needs to rethink what its position in the world is and should be, meaning that humans also need to change how they understand themselves and their role on planet Earth (Braidotti 2013, 2016; Wahl 2016).

1.2 Regenerative leadership as a new direction

Against this problem background, some see a need for a different global worldview (Latour 2014, 2018; Calás et al. 2018) and leadership that brings about an according transformation in people's mindsets (Valk et al. 2011; Bendell et al. 2017). More specifically, current sustainability efforts to tackle society's environmental and social challenges are increasingly criticized for merely adapting policies, technologies, and processes rather than addressing people's fundamental convictions (Hulme 2009; Wamsler & Brink 2018). Sustainability is accused of being a 'buzzless buzzword' and add-on to otherwise unchanged procedures (McKibben 1996; Caradonna 2014). The rationale behind such statements is that contemporary understandings of sustainability do not challenge the current socio-economic system enough, although it is identified as a root cause of the global crises outlined before (Milne & Gray 2013; Abson et al. 2017). Hence, the neglect but importance of inner dimensions of sustainability addressing people's worldviews, beliefs, values, emotions, and feelings to reach transformative change is pointed out (Wamsler & Brink 2018; Wamsler 2019; Ives et al. 2020; Woiwode et al. 2021). In this context, regenerative sustainability (RS) has emerged. This field challenges the contemporary understandings of sustainability that do not demarcate the prevalent worldview and thus hinder humanity from discarding its society and nature destroying habits (Robinson & Cole 2015; Gibbons 2020b).

Destructive mindsets and manners are also criticized for being prevalent in the corporate sector and mainstream approaches to leadership, harming nature likewise society and contributing to the problems outlined in chapter 1.1 (Sayer 2005; Deloitte 2021). Some companies are powerful and highly influential in society and politics. Moreover, people spend a profound amount of time in organizations, and thus they constitute an essential part of their daily lives. Yet as mentioned before, people are often stressed and feel pressure from their work, leading to burnout and job resignations (Deloitte 2021). Several scholars voice that performance expectations are unrealistically high (Sutcliffe & Vogus 2003; Avolio & Luthans 2006; Luthans & Youssef 2007).

Due to the above, new forms of organizational management and leadership are increasingly emphasized within critical organization theory (COT) and critical leadership studies (CLS) (e.g., Alvesson 2003; Scharmer 2009; Schein 2010; Laloux 2014). Companies and particularly business leaders have a great responsibility and play a crucial role in tackling the challenges of the 21st century (Karp 2006; Epstein & Buhovac 2010; Schein 2010). Leaders shape organizational

life and drive change, generally but also in terms of environmental and social sustainability (ibid.). Hence, a broad range of the literature points out the urgency of leadership in addressing transformative change, constantly changing environments, interpersonal relationships, purpose and meaning, and the complexity of life (Ferdig 2007; Hamel 2007; Kotter 2012). Moreover, various studies underpin the importance of companies being agile and stress the already long-discussed paradigm shift from understanding organizations as machines to organizations as living organisms (Morgan 2006; McKinsey & Company 2017; IBM 2021). Likewise, more conscious approaches to leadership are emphasized as necessary to cope with organizational, environmental, and social challenges (Cook-Greuter 2004; Brown 2012; Boiral et al. 2014). However, complexity and change are difficult for business leaders to handle (IBM 2010). Additionally, they cannot be excluded from experiencing high-stress levels and suffering from burnout (Kwoh 2013; Sirén et al. 2018; Segal 2021). Therefore, a systemic transformation of leadership that requires fundamental changes in organizational understandings and business leaders' mindsets is urgently needed to alter old patterns, evolving them into something that better fits the present times and needs.

An emerging leadership strand that seems capable of doing so is RL. Applied to the corporate sector, RL is about leading organizations in a way that increases the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Within this leadership strand, organizations are perceived as living systems and constantly changing entities. Departing from indigenous epistemologies, the belief is that all life on Earth is interconnected and that humans need to take care of the planet (ibid.). Instead of primarily making organizations' products, services, and processes more environmentally friendly, RL constitutes a holistic understanding of leadership that includes people's inner worlds and broader ecosystemic impacts (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Great emphasis is on the intrapersonal development of business leaders and its relation to corporate processes and structures (Hardman 2012). Hence in this leadership strand, attention is paid to how the various intensifying crises outlined in chapter 1.1 may be mitigated through reconnecting to nature, each other, and oneself and the role of organizations and business leaders in this process (Hutchins 2022).

However, research on how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses and detailed investigation on how the ground for it to set root can be prepared are lacking. Thus, it is currently unclear whether RL can find broader recognition within the corporate sector; are business leaders aware of the importance of inner sustainability? Do they perceive humans and nature as interconnected? Do they, and if so, how do they engage with such awareness and perception in an organizational context? Exploring these questions is crucial as they help to understand the possibilities of this new leadership paradigm, as Hutchins and Storm (2019) refer to it, and extend the theoretical knowledge about it.

1.3 Problem statement

1.3.1 Empirical problem

Humankind is at a point where it needs to decide whether it can continue harming nature and society at large or needs to change its path to one that, to a greater extent, contributes to a brighter future for all life on Earth. As already outlined, the latter option is seemingly only viable with a profound shift in mindset. This is because the current sustainability efforts to tackle the environmental and social crises society faces are insufficient in addressing them properly (Gibbons 2020b). Hence the inner dimensions of sustainability, referring to people's worldviews, beliefs, values, emotions, and feelings, can no longer be ignored but need to be considered in sustainability discussions (Woiwode et al. 2021). Due to their significant power and far-reaching environmental and social impacts, organizations have a great responsibility toward nature and society and play an essential role in reaching such transformative change. Leaders, in particular, are considered change-makers and influential to corporate activities, organizational culture, and individuals working in firms (Schein 2010).

RL is an emerging leadership strand that underlines a shift in mindset, focused on reconnecting to nature, each other, and oneself, and thus seems capable of addressing the environmental and social challenges society faces (Hardman 2012; Hutchins 2022). It reflects a holistic understanding of leadership that includes inner, outer, and ecosystemic levels (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Still, leading organizations in a way that provides for all these levels requires that they are supported by the organizational structure and culture and business leaders' personal convictions; RL may face multiple constraints. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate RL 'on the ground' and explore how this emerging leadership strand is enabled or constrained in businesses. In doing so, RL can be understood in detail.

Moreover, investigating the drivers and barriers of RL helps unravel how it can be implemented and fostered. Since RL inherits a specific understanding of leadership, organizations, and society at large, it is fundamental to investigate how this field is suitable for creating new approaches to business. Thus, the thesis provides insights into the field relevant to practitioners.

1.3.2 Theoretical problem

As the existing understandings of sustainability are facing growing criticism, for instance, due to their inadequacy in addressing environmental and social problems, RS finds more and more recognition in academia (e.g., Zhang et al. 2015; Sonetti et al. 2019; East 2020; Gibbons 2020b). Regenerative business is also an emerging strand of research, although still in its embryo phase (Hahn & Tampe 2021; Muñoz & Branzei 2021). RL, in particular, has not been studied much until now despite

being a promising reorientation of leadership focused on mitigating the various escalating crises outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Work by several authors forms the conceptual understanding of RL (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019; Hutchins 2022), and some academic journal articles take up the concept (Prigge & Whatley 2016; McKimm et al. 2020). Nevertheless, there is an apparent lack within the literature with regards to how RL plays out in detail within the corporate sector.

Some aspects of RL have been discussed within sustainability science, COT, and CLS before, for example, humanity's role on Earth and metaphors of organizations and their implications (Morgan 2006; Braidotti 2013, 2016). Also, the inner dimensions of sustainability get increasing attention within the literature as they have been mainly neglected in sustainability science until now (e.g., Horlings 2015; Wamsler & Brink 2018; Woiwode et al. 2021). Still, the need for more research in this field has recently been stressed (Wamsler 2019; Ives et al. 2020). Bradbury (2003) particularly highlights the relevance of inner dimensions of sustainability for managing corporations. Moreover, research regarding consciousness and self-development in leadership is suggested (Reichard & Johnson 2011; Nesbit 2012; Boiral et al. 2014). The thesis at hand builds upon these aspects as RL can be identified as a synthesizing concept of all these ideas and links them further to leading organizations in harmony with nature (Hutchins 2022). Thus, exploring RL in-depth is crucial to deepen the theoretical knowledge of how this new leadership paradigm is enacted.

Although one can make assumptions about enabling or constraining factors of RL from somewhat related literature, for instance, people's mindsets, behaviors, and backgrounds, and the broader structural and cultural circumstances (Barber & Eastaway 2010; Gibbons 2020a), no empirical investigation of such aspects within a business context exists. Notably, there is no detailed research on how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses. Therefore, the thesis explores this question precisely. Doing so helps to understand how this emerging leadership strand can be fostered and implemented, contributes to the theoretical knowledge on RL within the corporate sector, and generally adds to the academic literature within this field.

Furthermore, the study draws connections to RS, COT, and CLS and thus underlines the interlinkages between these research fields and RL. RS and RL are based on similar underlying beliefs and pursue the same bigger vision. Essentially, RL is concerned with how businesses can be run and led differently from mainstream approaches, which is the essence of COT and CLS. Hence, these concepts provide a suitable lens for contemplating RL.

1.4 Research aim and question

The research aim of this master's thesis is to explore how regenerative leadership is enabled or constrained in businesses. Consequently, the author will investigate the following research question: *How is regenerative leadership enabled or constrained in businesses?*

By answering this research question, the thesis contributes theoretical and pragmatical knowledge about RL; and how RL is enacted and can be cultivated. Thus, the thesis provides relevant insights into how organizations can be run and led in a way that improves the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems. Consequently, answering the research question develops new knowledge on how the intensifying global crises that society encounters can be approached.

1.5 Delimitations

Although RL is not bound to the corporate sector and organizational contexts (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019), this research concentrates on vocational organizations with business operations only. The author chose this delimitation because vocational organizations contribute to the issues delineated in the problem background and simultaneously have the potential to commit to their solution.

Conceptually, the thesis is delimited to RS, COT, CLS, and RL. While other concepts could have provided reasonable lenses to scrutinize the research topic, the ones chosen inform its fundamental characteristics and help explore the research question, mainly as RL has not been studied much until now.

1.6 Outline

The outline of the remaining thesis is as follows: the next section explains the conceptual framework that builds the foundation for the analysis. Afterward, the methodological choices and their implications are described in detail. The subsequent chapter presents and analyzes the empirical findings. Then, the results are discussed thoroughly. Eventually, a conclusion is given, summing up the theoretical contributions and practical implications, and delineating the thesis' limitations and suggestions for future research. Figure 1 visualizes the complete structure of the thesis.
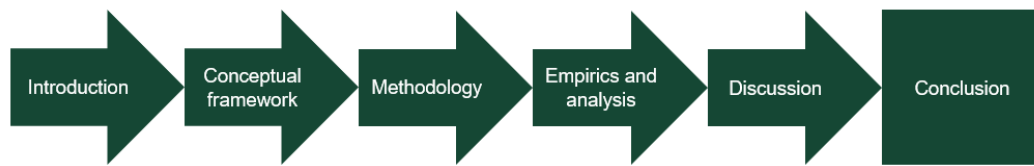
Figure 1. Structure of the thesis, own illustration

2. Conceptual framework

This chapter presents the concepts identified as central for explaining how the research topic is approached. Further, they are suited to fulfill the thesis aim and answer the research question stated in chapter 1.4. The first concept the author introduces is RS. This field provides relevant background knowledge on how and why RL emerged and thus helps understand the thesis topic. Afterward, COT and CLS are explained. Within RL, a critical perspective on organizations and leadership is taken, which underlines the relevance of COT and CLS to this study. The last concept outlined is the research's main topic, namely RL. RL has close links to RS, COT, and CLS elaborated on more closely in the conceptual synthesis at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Regenerative sustainability

The concept of RS is rooted in the critique of contemporary understandings of sustainability (Gibbons 2020b). Although sustainability can be classified into approaches with different endeavors and foci (Hopwood et al. 2005), a common idea in RS is that sustainability, in its current format, inadequately challenges the socio-economic system (Castro 2004; Nyberg & Wright 2013; Tulloch & Neilson 2014). It is further argued that current sustainability efforts are insufficient in bringing about transformational change (Abson et al. 2017; O'Brien 2018). Some scholars think that the undertaken efforts are primarily about not causing further harm, although approaches to increasing the health and well-being of people and the planet are needed (Reed 2007; Braungart & McDonough 2013; Wahl 2016).

In this context, RS can be understood as an *enhancement* of sustainability (Reed 2007). It does not imply that the concept of sustainability is insignificant but, in its contemporary approaches, insufficient in tackling the main reasons for today's environmental and social crises (East 2020). Instead, prevailing sustainability practices "[address] symptoms rather than causes" (Gibbons 2020b:1). Further, they do not discard the perspective that everything in the world, particularly nature, can be controlled by humans (Rees 1995; Capra 1996) but support a worldview that sees humans as separate from nature (Hopwood et al. 2005). In contrast, RS is based on the understanding that humans are part of nature and hence have a specific responsibility towards it (du Plessis 2012). This responsibility goes beyond the

consequences of humankind's environmental impacts by including nature's overall conditions (ibid.).

Moreover, the concept of RS recognizes humans' interconnectedness with the natural environment (du Plessis 2012). Instead of controlling nature, RS requires that society acts "with and as nature" (Reed 2007:677) and "aligns […] with [its] efforts" (du Plessis 2012:15). Some scholars describe this central aspect of RS as shifting from an anthropocentric and 'mechanistic' worldview to an ecocentric and 'ecological' one (du Plessis & Brandon 2015; Wahl 2016; Sonetti et al. 2019). Du Plessis (2012:15) emphasizes that it is "a rediscovery of an old [perspective]" that can be found in different indigenous, religious, and philosophical teachings.

Further, RS tries to *reshape* the understanding of people as destructive to the planet to one that recognizes their ability to "contribute [...] to both environmental and human well-being" (Robinson & Cole 2015:138). In doing so, RS strives to spread a positive message and portray today's challenges as opportunities rather than threats (ibid.). Mainstream sustainability discussions, in contrast, are criticized for being built around a rather negative and fear-based narrative, unable to engage people (Hes & du Plessis 2015; Gibbons 2020b).

Another key aspect of RS is that the concept is based on the understanding that the world is constantly changing and thus unpredictable (du Plessis 2012). Whereas Gonzáles-Márquez and Toldeo (2020) argue that sustainability fails in solving problems, Gibbons (2020b) explains that RS is not committed to finding solutions to problems because, in everchanging environments, that focus is inappropriate. Similarly, Wahl (2016:19) picks up an essential feature of critical thinking by stating that the attention should not be on finding answers but, "in the face of constant and rapid change and uncertainty", on "*asking the right questions*" (italics by author).

Aligned with Robinson and Cole (2015:137), the thesis author believes that RS, likewise sustainability, "cannot be defined […] in absolute terms but finds different expression in different times and places". Like Nightingale et al.'s (2019) understanding of sustainability and Robinson and Cole's (2015) approach to RS, she understands the concept as providing an overall goal to strive for, though always in need of revision, rather than being an achievable state.

2.2   Critical organization theory

COT is the critical examination of how organizations are designed and function (Alvesson 1984; Hatch 2018). Thus, critical thinking and inquiry are applied to what happens inside organizations and how they affect their outside world (Alvesson 2003). Within the scope of this thesis, what happens inside organizations relates to organizational life, including organizational structure, behavior, and culture. These fields pay attention to, among other things, corporate processes,

hierarchies, job satisfaction, social relations, personal development, stress, and well-being related to working environments (Acker 1990; Leana & Barry 2000; Alvesson 2003; Ravlin & Thomas 2005). How organizations affect their outside world involves, for example, a firm's production of goods and services, generation of pollution and waste, and adverse or beneficial social and political impacts (Alvesson 2003; van Zanten & van Tulder 2021).

In the context of this thesis, organizational behavior translates to how internal and external stakeholders and the corporate design shape companies' activities and values (Ivancevich et al. 2014). Generally, organizational behavior has a strong orientation towards people as they influence organizations with their individual and collective actions, attitudes, emotions, and feelings (Lord & Kanfer 2002). Likewise, organizational behavior impacts the thoughts and actions of people (Nahavandi et al. 2015). Hence, understanding and managing human behavior is essential for organizational behavior (ibid.). People's roles within companies are decisive (Child 1973; Collinson 2003). Ashforth and Fried (1988) criticize organizational behavior as routinized, meaning based on practices established throughout time instead of reflective and situational decision-making. Others highlight the positive aspects of organizational behavior (Luthans & Youssef 2007; Youssef & Luthans 2007).

Organizational culture describes the common understanding of reality in organizations formed by social interaction (Frost et al. 1985; Schein 2010). This field is closely linked to meaning-making and expressed in organizational behavior, particularly communication (Alvesson 2011). According to Gardner et al. (2005), the organizational culture is essential to developing authentic individuals in firms. Similarly, Luthans and Youssef (2007:339) explain that "a supportive, developmental organizational climate" brings about authentic leaders. Frost et al. (1991) highlight that an organization's culture is subject to change rather than a fixed phenomenon.

The general association with COT is that it "focuses on the negative aspects of [organizations]" to challenge the dominant assumption that they are overall beneficial to society (Alvesson 2003:151). Thus, COT addresses the neglect of power dynamics, social and political influences, and the reproduction of ideological ideas (ibid.). Particular examples of organizational structures and behaviors that require critical examination include glorifying people in the C-suite, transferring social matters into "technological and bureaucratic" issues, discouraging "ethical reflections" by pre-defined rules and guidelines, and blindly following corporate and economic trends (Alvesson 2003:164). Also, the corporate sector largely favors masculine over feminine traits (Collinson & Hearn 1996; Ryan et al. 2011).

How organizations are perceived and referred to is another aspect frequently discussed within COT (Sackmann 1989; Morgan 2006). Common metaphors are the ones of organizations as machines and organizations as living organisms or

living systems (Barley & Kunda 1992; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers 1996; Morgan 2006). The machine metaphor implies that firms can be broken down "into [their] component parts, modified, and reassembled" (Barley & Kunda 1992:384). Morgan (2006:13) states that this metaphor does not only imply that companies "are designed like machines [but] their employees are […] expected to behave as if they were parts of machines", too. A different approach to understanding companies appears when organizations are perceived as living systems or organisms. Inspired by biology, Morgan (2006:35) states that organizations consist of individuals who "operate most efficiently […] when their needs are satisfied". Further, the understanding of organizations as living systems requires self-organization and that "the organization's ability and intelligence" is trusted rather than leaders controlling firms (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers 1996:24).

The author of this thesis agrees that it has to be questioned whether "organizations are mainly in the business of doing good" (Alvesson 2003:151). However, her approach to COT does not only focus on companies' adverse influences on individuals, society, and the environment but also their possible beneficial impacts. The author thinks that COT must show alternative modes to how organizations are designed and function. In this sense, she asks what is or should be the role of organizations and how it can be fulfilled. Thus, throughout this thesis, the primary focus is on what happens inside organizations, meaning in this context what their role and purpose are and how organizational life should look to align with these ideas.

2.3   Critical leadership studies

CLS is a subfield of COT (Alvesson 2003; Alvesson & Spicer 2012). Within CLS, leadership and its implications, power dynamics, and outcomes are questioned and considered critically (Collinson 2005, 2011; Zoller & Fairhurst 2007; Ford et al. 2008; Alvesson & Spicer 2012, 2014). Alvesson (2003:170), for example, claims that leadership "is frequently heavily loaded ideologically".

In contrast to 'mainstream' leadership studies, CLS pays special attention to the complexity of leadership (Collinson 2011). The question of what defines leadership and its purpose are contested issues (House et al. 1997; Winston & Patterson 2006; Silva 2016; Carroll et al. 2019; Western 2019). For instance, leadership is commonly understood as a process, outcome, or behavior (Stogdill 1950; Tannenbaum et al. 1961; Barker 2002). According to Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), communication about leadership profoundly influences how it is defined and enacted eventually. Grint (2005) believes that leadership is socially constructed, meaning that leaders shape situations so they can execute power or act in ways that suit their preferences. Whereas the thesis author agrees that leaders, consciously and unconsciously, influence the situations that they are in, leadership

to her must be decoupled from egocentric behaviors but be a means to serve a greater purpose, free from self-centered interests.

Moreover, CLS researchers discuss various leadership types and styles, covering, inter alia, directive, transactional, manipulative, transformational, authentic, and empowering leadership (Sims Jr et al. 2009; Gardner et al. 2011; Auvinen et al. 2013). Sims Jr et al. (2009) argue that the approach to leadership should be contingent on the particular situation instead of universal in all circumstances. Grint (2005:1492), however, claims that leadership is, in fact, "situated" rather than "situational".

Further, the literature debates leadership traits, their existence, and leadership development (Kirkpatick & Locke 1991; Day 2000; Amagoh 2009; Fairhurst & Grant 2010). Research by Luthans and Youssef (2007), for example, explains that authentic leaders are developed by "positive psychological states, and a supportive, developmental organizational climate". Bendell et al. (2017) argue that not only a few chosen ones but everyone can be a leader. Likewise, leadership does not have to be permanent but can be temporary (ibid.). In this sense, several articles discuss if and how leadership should be distributed (Bolden 2011; Crawford 2012). Within this thesis, the author considers leadership in organizational contexts and acknowledges that certain people hold leadership positions in firms. Still, it is understood as something anyone can enact if willing to take the responsibility that comes with it. Simultaneously, the author acknowledges the importance of situational contexts in leaders' development.

Moreover, scholars criticize leadership for being dualistic and dichotomic, although its dynamics are multifaceted and interwoven in real life (Fairhurst 2001; Collinson 2011). Neglecting this complexity and interlinkages promotes harmful black-or-white thinking (Collinson 2014). The perhaps most frequently debated dualism and dichotomy within CLS is the notion of leaders and followers (Fairhurst 2001; Gronn 2002; Collinson 2011). Alvesson (2003) claims that leadership implies that everyone working in a firm except leaders is a follower who lacks autonomy and depends on being led or managed. Hence, the terminology of leadership supports an asymmetric relationship with the leader creating and deciding on what is proper employee behavior (ibid.). He describes that leadership is less needed if everyone in a firm acts self-determined but at the same time points out that some degree of guidance and control must be enacted if the situation requires it. Similarly, Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) state that self-organized businesses need leadership, although in a different form. For example, they describe that leaders in such organizations should have "intentions" rather than "action plans" (24).

Still, scholars declare that leaders shape the values, feelings, thoughts, actions, and development of others (Alvesson 2003; Gardner et al. 2005). Likewise, leaders influence corporate processes and organizational culture (Alvesson & Spicer 2012).

According to Collinson (2011:37), leadership outcomes cannot always be predicted and thus sometimes lead to "unintended or contradictory consequences".

Against leadership studies being primarily leader-centric, a burgeoning literature on followers and followership has emerged (e.g., Howell & Shamir 2005; Collinson 2006; Zhu et al. 2009; Carsten et al. 2010; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). For instance, such studies focus on followers' influence on leaders (Oc & Bashshur 2013). Learmonth and Morrell (2017:257) fault that even CLS does not cover multiple "perspectives on the relationship between workers and their bosses" but replicates the leader-follower relationship that it tries to denounce.

According to Collinson (2005, 2014), dialectical approaches are needed to overcome dichotomies in leadership studies. He thinks that dialectics uncover and address leadership dilemmas such as "tensions and contradictions […] based on opposing but interdependent forces that produce conflict and change" (2014:41). Further, he describes dilemmas as "central, inescapable features of leadership" (47), indicating that not dealing with them has fatal consequences. Though, tackling them is difficult due to various structural and social constraints (Storey & Salaman 2009).

Grint (2005:1473) states that leaders must "ask the right *questions* rather than provide the right *answers*" (italics original) to address highly complex problems. Similarly, Bushe and Marshak (2016) think that solutions to problems are illusions since environments constantly change. Therefore, many scholars emphasize that leadership must adapt to complex, chaotic, and rapidly changing environments (Trethewey & Ashcraft 2004; Snowden & Boone 2007; Fairhurst & Connaughton 2014). As described in chapter 2.1, these considerations are also central to RS.

Furthermore, the CLS literature discusses leaders' responsibility for addressing sustainability issues (Metcalf & Benn 2013; Bendell et al. 2017). Bushe and Markshak (2016:1) think that "a different leadership narrative and mindset are needed". Collinson (2014:37–38) wonders "whether and if so why, how and with what consequences, leaders may engage in discourses of denial regarding the power effects, dilemmas and tensions of organizational life".

Since CLS mainly portrays leadership negatively without giving direction on possible improvements, several articles argue for a performative orientation (Spicer et al. 2009, 2016; Alvesson & Spicer 2012). According to Alvesson and Spicer (2012:369), critical performativity goes "beyond existing critical studies of leadership" by "[fostering] investigation of alternative modes". Doing so is crucial to the thesis author. Critique is important, but critique alone may not be sufficient to overcome the challenges raised within CLS. Within this thesis, a performative orientation is imperative as it hints at the possibilities of RL and how this new leadership paradigm can be approached in theory and practice.

2.4 Regenerative leadership

As stated earlier in this thesis, RL is an emerging leadership strand that envisions a reorientation of leadership to increase the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019). This vision is strived for as global society faces various escalating social and environmental crises. Within RL, leaders are understood as change-makers, paving the way to address these challenges. Thus, RL is deeply rooted in the notion of sustainability (ibid.). Hardman (2012) explains that regenerative leaders aim to improve environmental and social conditions beyond the here and now. Instead, they aim to enable sustainability-supporting qualities that are self-renewing (ibid). Hutchins and Storm (2019:100) describe this underlying principle of RL as "life-affirming". Next to outer sustainability, meaning sustainability that concentrates on changing policies, technologies, products, and processes, RL puts a strong emphasis on inner sustainability, which refers to what happens inside of people and includes, for example, health, well-being, compassion, and consciousness (Hutchins & Storm 2019). As sustainable actions are enacted by individuals, addressing their inner landscapes is crucial to reaching transformative change (Wamsler 2019; Ives et al. 2020).

Taking inspiration from indigenous epistemologies, Hutchins and Storm (2019) underline that regenerative leaders understand humans as part of nature and see it as their teacher. Thus, in a corporate context, RL implies that leaders apply nature's concepts to organizational processes and life (Hutchins 2022). Paletta (2019:350) states that nature can function "as a model, unit of measure, and [guide]". Hutchins and Storm (2019) explain that this means, for instance, working with design elements inspired by nature, for example, biomimicry or cradle-to-cradle, or learning from nature's cyclical flows. The latter refers to an understanding that fruitful ideas and innovations are not permanent states of affairs but instead, times of less productivity, resting, and restoring are normal and needed. In this sense, (re)-connecting with nature is essential (ibid.).

Another determinant of RL is shifting away from organizational behaviors that are "rigid, reductive, and mechanistic" to dynamic, energizing, and alive (Hutchins & Storm 2019:55). Instead of seeing organizations as machines, they are perceived as living systems (ibid.), metaphors that have already been discussed in academia for a long time (Barley & Kunda 1992; Morgan 2006). The organic metaphor is central to RL as it draws an overall picture of how organizations are discerned (Hutchins 2022). Further, it profoundly influences organizational life (Morgan 2006).

Further, regenerative leaders acknowledge that all employees bring unique characteristics, skills, needs, and experiences that, as a whole, constitute the company (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Hutchins (2020) states that diversity and authenticity are decisive to healthy organizations. Thus, regenerative leaders should

"encourage people to bring more of their whole selves to work" (Hutchins & Storm 2019:109). Organizational behavior and culture are essential, particularly profound listening and honest sharing (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019). Generally, regenerative leaders aim to create a collective higher purpose (Hardman 2012).

Moreover, firms understood through the organic metaphor are characterized by flexibility and agility to adapt to internal needs and external circumstances (Morgan 2006; Hutchins 2022). Within RL, change is understood as omnipresent and offers an opportunity for learning and development (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Firms perceived from the grounds of an organic metaphor further emphasize self-management and distributed leadership (Laloux 2014). Hence, RL requires non-hierarchical structures and a "[horizontal] and [collaborative]" enactment of leadership (Hardman 2013:3). Synergistic approaches to organizing are supported whereby leaders facilitate processes and allow the space for different opinions and possible tensions (Hutchins & Storm 2019). This is closely related to the role of leaders in self-organized businesses described by Wheatly and Kellner-Rogers (1996). Thus, the point of departure for this thesis is not to explore leadership as a leader-follower-based but as a synergistic phenomenon in which people's intentions are more significant than their formal roles. Further, to the thesis author, this is linked to Collinson's (2014) consideration of whether and with which implications and consequences leaders should deal with difficulties and tensions in organizations.

Besides that, a fundamental aspect of RL is the awareness that all life on Earth is interconnected (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019). Consequently, RL is based on systems thinking, meaning understanding the interconnections, interrelationships, and interdependencies of parts that constitute a system and considering it as a whole (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Recognizing that the system as a whole is more significant than its single parts is essential (Holliday 2016). This understanding requires a shift in how leaders engage in the system, in this case, the organization; they must understand the dynamics of people and processes (Hutchins 2020). Hutchins and Storm (2019:67) describe this as an "ecosystemic awareness".

Furthermore, self-awareness and personal development are highlighted as decisive for RL (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019; Hutchins 2020). This perception is aligned with other literature that stresses the relevance of inner transformation to reach sustainability (Wamsler 2019, 2020; Woiwode et al. 2021).

Generally, the thesis author approaches RL like she approaches RS; it is context-dependent and best understood as an overall vision and guideline of what leadership should be like.

2.5 Conceptual synthesis

All concepts outlined in the previous subchapters deal with environmental and social issues in one way or another. While they represent minor aspects within COT and CLS, they are central to RS and RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019; Gibbons 2020b). Elements of critical thinking exist in all concepts, such as considering whether identified problems are valid before solutions to them are sought (Grint 2005; Wahl 2016).

Further, RS and RL are grounded in the same fundamental belief that humans' role on Earth is to increase the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems (Hutchins & Storm 2019; Gibbons 2020b). Further, both concepts emerged from the critique of their mainstream understandings not being capable of adequately addressing the intensifying social and environmental crises. Whereas RS deals with the broader societal picture, RL provides a possible way forward for the corporate sector that contributes to the many intensifying social and environmental challenges (ibid.). As Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014:24) state, "leadership is […] a timeless concept that must simultaneously reflect the times yet stay ahead of them". Thus, RL tries to provide a new way of leading companies that fits the present and future (Hardman 2012).

RL entails strong links to COT and CLS, especially critical performativity. In all three concepts, the role of organizations and leaders is fundamentally revised, and alternative modes are suggested (Alvesson 2003; Hutchins & Storm 2019). Further, they underline that organizations have a specific responsibility to foster sustainable transformations and that leaders drive social change (Karp 2006; Epstein & Buhovac 2010; Schein 2010; Hutchins & Storm 2019). Significantly, RL is based on the understanding of organizations as living systems (Hutchins & Storm 2019), a metaphor already discussed within COT for a long time (Sackmann 1989; Morgan 2006). CLS states that leaders influence organizational behavior and culture (Alvesson 2003; Alvesson & Spicer 2012), an assumption that can also be identified in RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Hence, the thesis author explores RL as dependent on corporate life and shaping it likewise.

Further, RL addresses dualisms, dichotomies, and dialectics frequently discussed within CLS by, for instance, rejecting typical leader-follower relationships and advocating distributed leadership (Fairhurst 2001; Hardman 2012; Collinson 2014; Hutchins & Storm 2019). Moreover, RL emphasizes bearing tensions and converging different opinions and thus, tackles leadership dilemmas raised within CLS (Collinson 2014; Hutchins & Storm 2019).

Still, RL differs from CLS because it emphasizes leading organizations in harmony with nature (Hutchins 2022). Humans are understood as part of nature, or rather, all life on Earth is seen as interconnected (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Similar perceptions are present in RS (du Plessis 2012). Figure 2 visualizes the conceptual synthesis.
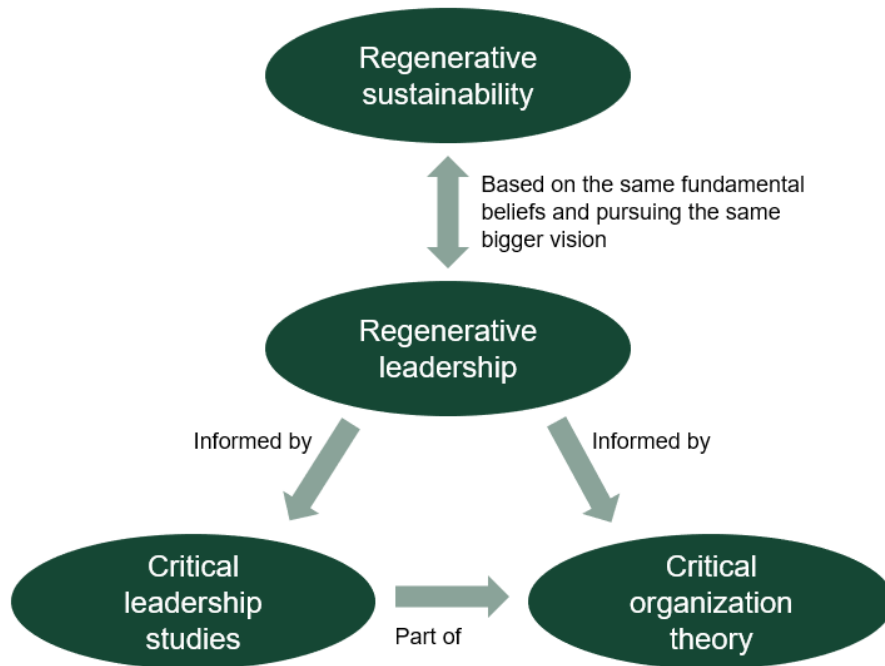
Figure 2. Conceptual synthesis, own illustration

3. Methodology

Chapter three presents the research's methodology. First, the research philosophy is clarified, followed by the research strategy. Afterward, the research design and methods are disclosed. Then, the author explains the approaches to data collection and analysis. Moreover, she provides some reflective comments on choosing and engaging with the research topic. Subsequently, she describes how the quality of her study is ensured. Eventually, she demonstrates her ethical considerations regarding the conduction of her research.

3.1 Research philosophy

An author's research philosophy, meaning the consideration of ontological, epistemological, and axiological approaches to research, is decisive for finding a suitable methodology (Guba & Lincoln 1994; Biedenbach & Jacobsson 2016). Further, the philosophical assumptions influence a study's outcomes (Bell et al. 2019).

The thesis author holds the ontological position that reality is a human-made construct dependent on subjective interpretations of social phenomena (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Searle 1995). Departing from the perspective that reality is created by human interaction, constructionism argues that not only one true reality exists but multiple, changeable ones (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009; Bell et al. 2019). The author was aware that she gave meaning to her thesis topic by conducting her research, consequently making the studied social phenomenon real (Bell et al. 2019). Further, she employed a constructionist view of reality when she engaged with interview partners, meaning that she was aware that they reflected their subjective perspective of reality likewise. To the author, constructionism aligned with the research topic; RL implies acknowledging change as continual and respecting different opinions.

As the epistemology of a research study is predicated on its ontology, the thesis author applied interpretivism as the mean of how knowledge is understood and can be obtained (Bell et al. 2019). This epistemological position is based on the assumption that knowledge is the subjective interpretation of social phenomena. As interpretivism tries to answer how and why human actions occur, the thesis was concerned with understanding rather than explaining human behavior. This

approach was suitable for the research project since it investigated how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses. However, being aware of subjective and context-dependent perspectives is decisive for arriving at valid findings when having an interpretive stance as a researcher. Thus, the particular circumstances of the interviewer, interviewees, and situation had to be considered while analyzing the collected material (ibid.).

Aligned with Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the thesis author considers axiology a decisive aspect of the research philosophy. Research is not free from but informed by values (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). Consequently, the author knew that her values, ethical and spiritual beliefs influenced the choice of the research topic and other decisions during the thesis writing process. The author's conviction that the health and well-being of all life on Earth are interconnected was decisive for writing about RL. Additionally, the author's belief that sustainability starts with oneself and her journey to incorporate that understanding into her lifestyle influenced the thesis topic.

3.2 Research strategy

According to Edmondson and McManus (2007), all elements of a research project need to be aligned and fit together. Hence, the methodology must be chosen to match an author's underlying philosophical assumptions that build the foundation of the research. Furthermore, the methodology must be suitable to adequately address the research aim and question (ibid.).

Against the author's research philosophy outlined in chapter 3.1, induction was the suitable approach for reasoning (Creswell 2003; Mackenzie & Knipe 2006). Moreover, employing an inductive research strategy was appropriate for this thesis since conclusions were drawn from the empirical examination in order to revise the existing theory instead of hypotheses deduced and tested (Bell et al. 2019). The final research aim and question emerged during the writing process. At the beginning of the process, the author had an initial idea, but it developed further while writing the thesis. Besides, she applied inductive logic since this approach to reasoning is suitable when conducting exploratory research (Jebb et al. 2017; Bell et al. 2019). According to Stebbins (2001), studies should be explorative when they aim to give insights into a relatively new and unstudied topic, which is the case for RL.

The explorative character of the thesis and the fact that it did not intend to provide quantitative or quantifiable data justified that the author conducted qualitative research (Bell et al. 2019). Additionally, qualitative research should be done when individuals' points of view and the establishment of meaning in their behaviors are of interest (Creswell & Creswell 2018). As this has been the purpose of this study, a qualitative research strategy was identified as suitable even though

it is at risk of generating an overwhelming and unstructured amount of data (Bell et al. 2019). In addition, the author's outlined ontological and epistemological positions validated exercising a qualitative research strategy (Mackenzie & Knipe 2006). How she dealt with the issues of subjectivity and lack of transparency associated with qualitative research are explained in chapter 3.6 (Bell et al. 2019). Lastly, an inductive, explorative, and qualitative research strategy fit the thesis topic because this approach represents aspects such as change and emergence that align with RL.

3.3 Research design and methods

3.3.1 Literature review

The thesis author conducted a narrative literature review to find relevant academic work concerning the thesis topic. This type of literature review fit because she engaged with an interpretive and inductive research logic throughout the thesis (Bell et al. 2019). The literature review was based on an initial assessment of academic journal articles and books that the author did for her research proposal in the spring of 2021.

   She primarily used Google Scholar to find literature while ensuring that the articles she decided to use were peer-reviewed. The literature search was based on keywords such as 'regenerative leadership', 'regenerative business', regenerative sustainability', 'inner sustainability', 'critical organization theory', and 'critical leadership studies'. Further, the author looked for academic journal articles based on the names of people at the forefront of regenerative principles. Ideas for who published research on the topic came, for instance, from watching a YouTube video series called Voices of ReGeneration by Daniel Christian Wahl, author of Designing Regenerative Cultures. Also, she gained inspiration for articles to include that a fellow course member of a non-university course on RL that the author is taking suggested. Moreover, she used the course literature from several university courses in the author's master's program in Environmental Economics and Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. The supervisor of the thesis author, Erik Melin, gave her tips for literature to look into as well.

3.3.2 Multiple-case study

The research design must allow inductive and qualitative exploration of the thesis topic. Hence, the author conducted a multiple-case study to investigate how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses. This research design is suited to study social phenomena in detail (Bell et al. 2019), which was the aim of the thesis. She further

selected this research design as it allows analyzing and comparing several cases while accentuating their particular characteristics and "unique contexts" (Bell et al. 2019:67). Usually, the generation of theory out of the findings of qualitative case studies is difficult (Mitchell 1983; Yin 1989). Comparing the results of different cases helps with the "theoretical reflection" (Bell et al. 2019:67).

The units of analysis were vocational organizations with business operations, whereas the units of observation were individuals, namely people in leadership positions coming from these organizations.

3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

The author conducted semi-structured interviews to explore her research question. This research method was suitable for her inductive and qualitative study as it allows "concepts and theories [to] emerge out of the [collected] data" (Bell et al. 2019:11). Semi-structured interviewing further enables the in-depth exploration of interviewees' points of view due to the flexible order and possible adaption or addition of questions dependent on received answers. Still, the method ensures getting information about the topics of interest. Additionally, the author needed a certain degree of structure to compare the findings of the different cases with each other (ibid.). She decided on this method despite it being "less naturalistic" than, for example, participant observation as it "enables the researcher to maintain a specific focus" (Bell et al. 2019:458). Further, observing her studied phenomenon would have been difficult as personal perceptions and experiences inform it. Hence, conversations in the form of qualitative interviews provided adequate exploration.

A drawback of qualitative interviewing is that the interviewer needs to rely on the respondents' answers to be genuine, which, given the fact that qualitative interviews "tend to produce over-rationalistic accounts of the self" and leave out social interactions, is to some extent questionable (Bell et al. 2019:458). Against this critique, qualitative case studies and thus qualitative interviewing are imperative for scientific research as they provide the necessary in-depth exploration that quantitative studies cannot provide (Flyvbjerg 2006). The thesis author did not share her questions with the interviewees before the interview to minimize the risk of distorted answers. Choosing to conduct semi-structured interviews was further justified as they reflect essential characteristics of RL, such as flexibility and agility.

3.4 Data collection

The author applied the critical sampling strategy for selecting organizations for her multiple-case study. This sampling strategy focuses on unique case characteristics relevant to the studied phenomenon (Flyvbjerg 2006; Neergaard 2007). Further, it is suitable when one tries to challenge existing theory which the author aimed to do

(Yin 1989). Hence, she only considered organizations with a clear social or environmental purpose which is a precondition for RL. Potential interviewees were people in leadership positions working in these organizations. They could be either founders or co-founders with active tasks within the organizations, chief executive officers, or chairpersons. Also, project, team, or department leaders were possible interviewees. She tried to interview people that are, to some extent, responsible for others within the organization as she wanted to include team dynamics in her analysis.

The author used her own network to find cases and eventually interviewed three companies to which a friend and fellow course participants from the RL course that she is taking suggested or linked her. She also received suggestions of organizations to contact from her supervisor and conducted interviews with two of them. Before getting in touch with organizations, she studied their webpage or informed herself else how about them to assess whether they would fit into her study. Moreover, she informed herself about her possible interviewees' positions. Due to the financial restrictions, they had to agree to an interview without getting monetary compensation. All respondents were asked in advance for permission to record the conversation.

The thesis author conducted four interviews in English and one in German. All of them were held via a video call platform; three on Zoom, one on Google Meet, and one on Microsoft Teams. Two of her interviewees preferred the latter two platforms, and hence the interviews with them were held via those. Video call platforms, particularly Zoom, are satisfactory tools for conducting qualitative research (Archibald et al. 2019; Gray et al. 2020). Due to long distances between the interviewer's and interviewees' locations and time and financial restrictions, video calls provided "a cost-effective and convenient alternative to in-person interviews" (Gray et al. 2020:1292). Despite being asynchronous in place, it was still possible to see each other, which was a precondition to an interview for the thesis author since non-verbal communication reveals valuable information (Duncan Jr 1969). For instance, the interviewer saw how respondents reacted to her questions. Thus, it was easier to assess whether she interviewed in a comfortable way for her interview partners. Overall, online video conversations were the most personal option for her qualitative study.

She developed an interview guide that helped her keep track of relevant themes to talk about and provided a guideline for the conversation while allowing it to flow as naturally as possible (Bell et al. 2019). She decided to design two versions, one for non-founders (Appendix 1) and one for founders (Appendix 2). The themes were the same, but the formulations were shaped to how the respondent was related to the firm. After the first few interviews, she made minor adjustments to the guide(s). For the conversation in German, she translated the according version of the interview guide into German.

According to Eisenhardt (1989), the number of interviews should depend on how many are needed until the data is saturated. After five conversations, the author concluded that no novel, strong themes were emerging; and thus that she collected enough material to answer her research question. In addition, she decided to stop the interview process due to time restrictions.

3.5 Data analysis

To facilitate the analysis process, the author applied memoing while transcribing and re-reading the conducted interviews to remember thoughts coming to her mind and identify connections between what respondents said (Birks et al. 2008). She used thematic analysis to analyze the interview transcripts. Although thematic analysis "lacks clearly specified procedures", the author employed this qualitative data analysis approach as it helps manage and interpret the collected material in regards to the research question and conceptual framework in a flexible manner (Bell et al. 2019:520). Moreover, Braun and Clarke (2006:94) state that thematic analysis "does not require the same detailed theoretical and technical knowledge" as other qualitative data analysis techniques.

Departing from Braun and Clarke's (2006) understanding of the identification of themes following the initial coding process, the author applied inductive (open) coding to narrow down and receive an overview of the collected material (Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019). Despite being less structured, she decided on this way of coding since it is suitable for exploratory studies (ibid.). Moreover, she did not know how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses before completing her research. Thus, no pre-defined codes could be created but had to be generated during the analysis (Creswell & Poth 2016). The author wrote memos while coding the material.

The coding was done in two cycles using Microsoft Word. Thereafter, she compared the codes of the different interviews with each other. After that, she typed up the analysis, which she structured according to the conceptual framework. The author generated themes for all of her concepts. She was inspired by Ryan and Bernard's (2003) suggestions on approaching the theme search. For instance, she looked out for repetitions, metaphors, similarities, differences, and missing data (ibid.). The theme identification process was supported by re-reading the interview transcriptions, codes, conceptual framework, and written down analysis. Throughout this process, she kept in mind that not all themes that emerged during the analysis were necessarily relevant to answering her research question (Bell et al. 2019).

While analyzing her collected material, the author found that a division had to be made into organizational and personal aspects to answer her research question. She decided to do so as it became apparent that corporate structure and culture and

aspects relating to leaders' and employees' personal conditions were important to how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses. Still, the organizational and personal aspects discovered through the research were interlinked and influenced each other.

3.6 Reflective comments regarding the research

The author's interest in inner sustainability and regenerative business models profoundly impacted the choice of topic for her thesis. Before starting her independent degree project, she engaged with issues related to these fields. For example, she read Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of life-affirming 21st century organizations by Giles Hutchins and Laura Storm and frequently listened to talks related to her later on chosen research topic. Also, she attended an online event on RL capacities by a collective called Regenerators.

Shortly after starting her thesis, the author joined a one-year online course called Regenerative Leadership Journey offered by the Regenerators Academy. She gained inspiration and ideas for literature and aspects to include in her thesis from participating in the course and engaging with fellow course participants, particularly her smaller 'Home Circle' group. At the end of April, she attended the Inner Development Goals Summit 2022 in Stockholm, introducing a framework complementing the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

The author's understanding of RL was primarily based on the book Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of life-affirming 21st century organizations, firstly as she read that book before starting her research project, and secondly, as literature on RL is rare. Participation in the Regenerative Leadership Journey provided another risk for a biased perspective on the research topic as the course is hosted by one of the book's authors. Therefore, the thesis author tried to reduce her bias by actively reflecting on this possible risk and extending her knowledge on the topic from other sources (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009).

As RL is not only concerned with a regenerative way of working, managing, and leading but also living and being, the author attempted to have a regenerative writing and research process and lifestyle. For example, she tried to include flexibility and 'going with the flow' into her writing process. Further, she tried to have restorative breaks throughout the 20-week working period. Interestingly, the author realized that she frequently struggled with these aspects and often reached high-stress levels. Alongside her independent degree project, she tried to engage in several practices that support self-reflection and consciousness, such as journaling and meditation. Also, she went for walks in nature frequently. These walks were intended to take in nature and connect to it.

Another aspect of the research that requires critical reflection is that the interview guide, among other things, covered questions regarding corporate

structure, culture, and leadership approaches. These factors relate to the conceptual framework, providing the lens through which the thesis topic is examined. Hence, it might not be surprising that a division into organizational and personal aspects, as explained in chapter 3.5, seemed helpful when answering the research question of how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses.

3.7 Quality assurance

In qualitative studies, rigor, meaning the overall quality and trustworthiness of research, is determined by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Krefting 1991; Guba & Lincoln 1994). Moreover, the literature highlights the need for reflexivity to improve rigor in qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009; Alvesson et al. 2022). The thesis author's reflexivity seemed particularly important as she engaged with a constructionist perspective of reality and applied an interpretive understanding of knowledge to her thesis.

The study's credibility was increased through prolonged, thorough, and intense engagement with the research topic, as outlined in chapter 3.6 (Lincoln & Guba 1985). This engagement allowed the author to extend and deepen her knowledge about RL before and during the thesis writing. However, due to the fixed and limited timeframe and overall scope of master theses, she did not use multiple methods for the empirical investigation, although this would have made the research even more credible (ibid). Due to time restrictions, she did not send her interpretations of the collected material for verification to her interview partners. Instead, the chosen coding technique, namely inductive coding, strengthened the research's credibility and transparency (Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019). To provide transferability, the author attempted to generate a 'thick description' of her studied phenomenon, enabling other researchers to compare her findings to their work (Geertz 1973).

Reoccurring meetings with her supervisor tested the author's biases and whether her findings were clear and understandable to others. The meetings also ensured that she pursued "proper procedures" (Bell et al. 2019:365) throughout her research. In addition, the author's supervisor organized joint supervision meetings for all master students under his supervision during the spring semester of 2022. The purpose of these meetings was to exchange thoughts about the thesis writing process and give critical feedback on each other's work. Peer debriefing was done twice. Additionally, one person from the thesis author's 'Home Circle' group and her sister, two people knowledgeable about regenerative principles, read (parts of) her thesis and gave feedback on the text's correctness and clarity. These activities fostered the author's reflexivity and contributed to the thesis's credibility, dependability, and transparency.

Considering confirmability, Bell et al. (2019) confess that qualitative research is neither neutral nor non-biased. Thus, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) emphasize critical self-reflection. The thesis author tried not to let her personal biases influence the research project too much by actively thinking about them and keeping a research journal. She used the same journal to write down notes during the Regenerative Leadership Journey course sessions and continuously reflected upon how her participation in the course influenced her thesis. Further, she reflected upon how everyone directly or indirectly involved in her research project affected her work.

3.8 Ethical considerations

Generally, the four central areas important for ethics in business research identified by Diener and Crandall (1978) guided the thesis author throughout her study. They include avoiding direct and indirect harm toward respondents or participants, ensuring their privacy, not deceiving them, and ensuring informed consent (ibid.).

The thesis author offered detailed information about the project, its aim, and usage when requesting interview partners and encouraged potential interviewees to ask questions when they lacked clarity. Further, she gave them time to decide whether they wanted to participate in her study. If someone agreed to be interviewed, the person had to sign a consent form about processing personal data. The author used her university's standard letter of consent. Since she collected personal data, she had to follow the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union.

Each respondent was treated with great care and emphasis on the individual by trying to sense and respond to their specific needs. For instance, the thesis author had a short video call a few days before the interview with one of them. This person also asked for the questions she would ask in advance, but as this could have led to predefined answers, the author told him that she could not provide them beforehand. As she assumed that he felt he did not have enough information on the research topic, she explained more in detail in which direction the questions would go.

The respondents' well-being was vital to the thesis author throughout the interviews. She was aware that perceptions of what people experience as harmful or violating their privacy differ. During one interview, the interviewer was concerned about unsettling her respondent. She tried to adjust her interview style to be more careful and empathetic in the interaction when she noticed while still talking about the themes in her interview guide. Furthermore, the author decided to keep the names of the organizations and respondents anonymous throughout her thesis as she thought that some of her interview questions were quite personal and covered sensitive topics. Still, these questions were relevant to explore her research question adequately.

Following the suggestion of several scholars (Bell & Bryman 2007; Bell & Wray-Bliss 2009), the author strived for reciprocity of her research's benefits for herself and her interviewees. She primarily tried to conduct interviews with people she thought looked forward to a conversation about her research topic. Further, she will send her final thesis to all her interview partners, hoping they will gain value from reading it, a common activity enabling reciprocity in research projects done by students (Bell et al. 2019). Two respondents particularly expressed the wish to read her study's results. Before conducting one of the interviews, one person asked whether his organization could publish the interview recording itself. Although such an agreement would have led to mutual benefits for the interviewer and interviewee, the author had to decline this request. It possibly could have led to distorted answers and thus less credibility of the overall research (Bell et al. 2019).

Having Gorard (2002) in mind, she also undertook ethical considerations toward non-respondents and non-participants. Especially the colleagues of her interview partners could indirectly be influenced by her research. As her interview questions were designed to explore how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses, the author assumed that her interviewees' colleagues would not be influenced negatively. Instead, she hoped that the interviews encouraged her respondents to reflect on how people's health, well-being, feelings, and emotions are taken into account in their organizations.

4. Empirics and analysis

This chapter introduces the case organizations and explains why the thesis author selected them for her research. The positions of her interview partners within the organizations are mentioned shortly. Afterward, the empirical findings are presented and analyzed through the lens of the conceptual framework presented in chapter 2.

4.1 Case organizations

4.1.1 Non-profit consultancy for cooperative and social entrepreneurship

One of the case companies chosen for the research project was a Swedish non-profit organization that advises cooperative start-ups and not-for-profit entrepreneurs free of charge. The Swedish state, regional municipalities, and other authorities finance these costless consultations. Further, the non-profit consultancy offers educational activities on cooperative and social entrepreneurship, innovation, business development, and sustainability. The organization exclusively works with cooperatives and businesses that pursue a social or environmental purpose. Its overall aim is to steer "social progress" (interviewee 1). Thus, the thesis author identified the organization as a relevant case for her research. With 25 regional and independent offices, the non-profit consultancy is represented all around Sweden. The organization also has a national representative, a cooperative in which all regional offices are members. The thesis author conducted an interview with the organization's chairman.

4.1.2 Purpose-driven professional matching platform

A Dutch start-up that developed a platform that matches people in optimized teams together was chosen to include in the study. These (temporary) group constellations are created with the help of Artificial Intelligence and are based on people's intrinsic motivation, ambitions, and convictions. Further, the start-up offers support for matched teams. As self-development, personal growth, and connections between people, are at the company's heart, the author identified a great social purpose and

selected the firm to contribute to her research. She conducted an interview with its founder.

4.1.3 Social business incubator

The author chose a German company that supports the establishment and development of social businesses as a case for her multiple-case study. Following the principle of "locally rooted and globally connected" (interviewee 3), the about three-year-old company belongs to a global network of impact-steering business incubators. All firms in this network are independent but "share the same vision [and] values" (interviewee 3). Next to community building and offering the necessary infrastructure for social entrepreneurs to develop themselves and their ventures, the company offers impact innovation programs that support bringing about and realizing ideas. Its mission is to "support [..] purpose driven people on their journeys of building businesses for positive change" (interviewee 3). Thus, the thesis author identified the company as a relevant case for her study and interviewed one of its co-founders.

4.1.4 Environmentally-friendly homes seller

The author selected a Swedish company that designs climate-positive houses to include in her study. The firm is a subsidiary of a large corporation operating in the media and construction industry and the energy sector. The case company is closely linked to one of the parent company's other subsidiaries that primarily builds rental apartments. The idea of establishing a separate company that focuses on climate-smart houses developed less than five years ago. By mainly working with natural building materials and sustainable building techniques, the firm strives to design homes beneficial for the environment and people. Bringing carbon emissions down is one of its primary purposes. Due to solar panels, the houses produce more electricity than they use, going into the energy grid. Hence, the company has a clear environmental purpose and provides a relevant case for this research. The thesis author interviewed the firm's construction project manager.

4.1.5 Non-profit organization for promoting the circular economy

The author chose a non-profit organization that promotes the circular economy as a case for her research project. The recently established organization was founded in Switzerland by an upcycling consultancy and a brewery that operates circularly. The organization describes itself as a forum and focuses its work on different themes around sustainability, for instance, sustainable consumption and production. "Fostering the circular economy in Switzerland" (interviewee 5, translation by author) by networking and educating is its primary purpose. Thus, the author

identified an environmental purpose in the organization's operations. She interviewed its chief executive officer.

4.2 Empirical findings and analysis

4.2.1 Regenerative sustainability in the studied cases

Though some interviewees connected sustainability to its most common contemporary interpretations, for instance, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most of them also expressed critique against them. Here the author detected similarities to RS in which contemporary understandings of sustainability are criticized for not addressing the main reasons for environmental and social issues and not leading to transformative change (Gibbons 2020b). More specifically, one respondent thought that too much focus was on the economic pillar of the TBL. He stated that this needs to change and was frustrated that shifting toward an equal consideration of the three pillars had not occurred yet. In his opinion, the three elements of the TBL, representing economic, social, and environmental sustainability, should not affect each other negatively. Another respondent named balance in relation to sustainability as well. Interviewee 3 said that the SDGs are a good way of communicating impact. However, his company "tried to go […] one level deeper" as the SDGs are "rigid" if considered separately. These formulations expressed dislike towards reductionist approaches, often criticized within RS (du Plessis 2012; Gibbons 2020b). Instead, he believed that the SDGs are interlinked, a conviction that another respondent shared.

Explaining his understanding of sustainability, one of the interviewees said that to him, it is related to "recognizing [his] own connection to nature and [living] with it" (interviewee 5, translation by author). Generally, respondents agreed that humans and nature are dependent on each other and connected. Interviewee 5 further highlighted that humans are not superior to nature. He explained that humanity started thinking it could control nature as it learned to transform the natural environment according to its ideas and preferences. Many respondents agreed that humans could not "conquer [...] nature" (interviewee 1). These convictions are central to RS as the concept presents an ecocentric worldview that acknowledges humans' interconnectedness to the natural environment (Reed 2007; du Plessis 2012; du Plessis & Brandon 2015).

A few interviewees also mentioned that humans could learn from nature which, in the author's interpretation, suggests that humans should try to include its teachings in socially constructed life, meaning in the way they behave and do things (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Searle 1995). One respondent said that "[humans could] endlessly learn of how nature solves things [...]" (interviewee 2), an

assumption held by RS in which nature is seen as a teacher and source of inspiration (du Plessis 2012).

However, respondents also conceded that modern society is not living in harmony with nature. Whereas one thought humans could recreate a harmonic coexistence with it under certain circumstances, another claimed it is impossible due to contemporary living standards. Similarly, interviewee 3 felt that living in cities leads to a disconnection between humans and nature. He described that in his daily life, "[he does not do] anything to harm but [also] not [...] anything [...] to feel [...] to sync to it". Another respondent believed that people have an inherent connection to nature, although they live in cities. He said:

> "Even [...] if you're [...] a city person, you go to the park, and you take off your shoes, and you put your feet in the grass – there's a reason why you do that. I think to [...] get connected with [...] nature [...]. [...] I don't think you would [...] take off your shoes and put your feet on asphalt." (interviewee 4)

Interviewee 5 believed that people have to ask questions to bring humanity back to harmony with nature, which he described as a "generation project" (translation by author). However, in his understanding, this task is about "self-preservation" (translation by author) of humanity, whereby humans need to understand that they are dependent on other living beings. This point of view differs from RS as, in this field, humans are responsible for nature's health and well-being due to their interconnectedness rather than sustaining themselves (du Plessis 2012; du Plessis & Brandon 2015).

One respondent emphasized that it is fundamental not to blame people for their sustainability efforts. Instead, one should motivate them to improve further. This approach reflects a critical aspect of RS that tries to spread a positive narrative about sustainability and engage people by showing how they can contribute to a more flourishing future (Hes & du Plessis 2015; Gibbons 2020a). Further, he said that it is essential to "convince [...] people [...] that they matter as humans simply because they exist" (interviewee 5, translation by author). Another respondent mentioned something similar by saying that "everybody has a role to fulfill" (interviewee 2). Here, parallels to the idea of RS that people can foster the health and well-being of people and the environment can be drawn (Robinson & Cole 2015). Table 1 summarizes the empirical findings regarding RS.

Table 1. Regenerative sustainability in the studied cases

Theme	Example quote
Understandings of sustainability informed by contemporary approaches; simultaneously critique towards them	"It's a triple bottom line" (interviewee 1) "Sustainability has nothing to do with SDGs, really nothing." (interviewee 2)

Humans and nature are interconnected	"Sustainability is to me to recognize [...] my own connection to nature and to live with it" (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Humans are not superior to nature	"We can't conquer [...] nature." (interviewee 1)
Learning from nature	"We can endlessly learn of how nature solves things [...]." (interviewee 2)
Humans do not live in harmony with nature due to modern living standards	"We do not live in harmony with nature. That is not possible. [...] That is nothing to discuss for us anymore. Our standard is too far away for that." (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Self-preservation of the human species	"It is simply about self-preservation." (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Spreading positive messages	"But it is not [our] way […] to give the message [...] 'You are bad [...], the way you are living now is bad [...]. What we are doing is right.' [...] That does not work. But we want to give orientation [...], rather say 'You are already doing it well the way you are doing it [...], but maybe by next month, we will manage to do it better." (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Humankind can play a meaningful role on planet Earth	"Everybody has a role to fulfill." (interviewee 2)

4.2.2 Critical organization theory in the studied cases

All organizations the author chose to include in her thesis had an environmental or social purpose. Consequently, respondents' general understanding of the role of organizations was creating a positive impact on the environment or society by either fostering or working with sustainable production techniques, social entrepreneurship, or personal development. Hence, all interviewees also expressed a critical perspective on how organizations should be designed, typical for COT (Alvesson 2003; Hatch 2018). A few of them voiced discontentment with past work experiences and how they felt during previous jobs. Generally, they signified displeasure with mainstream corporate activities that harm the environment and people within and outside companies. Here, the thesis author identified parallels to COT that question organizations' beneficial impacts on their stakeholders and the environment (Alvesson 2003). One interviewee articulated his frustration and lack of understanding by saying:

"I'm convinced that we have to change the way that we are doing things. In my point of view, I'm rather surprised that we haven't really done that. I'm really surprised that the cooperative

way of running businesses is not actually the mainstream way. [...] I don't understand people saying that no, we should destroy the environment. Nobody's saying that, but they are doing it. They're still running [businesses] ruining the environment, and they're still running businesses where people [are] really suffering." (interviewee 1)

He also provided an alternative to the harmful way of doing business within this expression. In his opinion, cooperative enterprises are favorable as they prevent destructive structures for society and the environment. Further, he explained that his organization implemented formats and work practices different from traditional ones. For example, the organization was characterized by bottom-up leadership, flat hierarchies, and local and demand-driven work, resonating with elements of COT that criticize leadership approaches in which leaders undermine employees' agency and organizational behavior that does not consider situational circumstances (Ashforth & Fried 1988; Alvesson 2003).

Further, one respondent stated that his company implemented teal practices, proving that it is possible that "[organizations work] in a different way" (interviewee 3). Teal organizations are characterized by self-management and decentralized decision-making (Laloux 2014). The case company, for instance, followed the advice process, which means that two experts and two people affected by a possible decision get involved in the decision-making process.

Generally, all case organizations were committed to either running their own corporate activities differently than the mainstream way that is top-down and harms people and the environment or supporting others to change their approaches. One respondent stated that the company he was employed at might serve as a positive example to others in the same industry. Another one said that his firm strived to support the "[creation of] a new economy, a more sustainable and inclusive economy" (interviewee 3).

Generally, a friendly, inclusive, and open organizational culture that everyone agrees on seemed crucial to the author's interviewees. Two of them stated that internal discrepancies and competitiveness are harmful to the corporate culture. One linked such issues to the involvement of people's egos. Instead, compassion and sympathy for each other were essential to many. One respondent declared that "real connection [between people] is for [him] the real deal" (interviewee 2). He continued by saying:

> "Real connection makes things work, makes things happen. If you cannot be transparent or vulnerable [...], then it's never going to happen." (interviewee 2)

Thus, the author identified links to COT literature, particularly organizational behavior and culture, emphasizing how people's individual and collective actions influence the corporation (Lord & Kanfer 2002; Gardner et al. 2005; Youssef & Luthans 2007).

Almost all interviewees did not have much 'real life' contact with their colleagues and team members, which partly increased by the Covid-19 pandemic. To some, this was an aspect to criticize. One respondent said that he "[misses] having someone to sit at the coffee break and talk about other stuff as well" (interviewee 4). Interviewee 5, however, thought that primarily email contact made communication "efficient" and did not seem to miss more personal interactions. Table 2 sums up what the author discovered regarding COT.

Table 2. Critical organization theory in the studied cases

Theme	Example quote
Organizations should have a positive impact on the environment and society	"I'm convinced that we have to change the way that we are doing things. In my point of view, I'm rather surprised that we haven't really done that." (interviewee 1)
Displeasure with mainstream ways of running businesses	"They're still running [businesses] ruining the environment, and they're still running businesses where people [are] really suffering." (interviewee 1)
Alternative ways of running businesses are possible	"Of course, you have certain responsibilities, […] but decisions can be made differently, and the organization works in a different way." (interviewee 3)
Changing the corporate sector	"So basically, we curate and select community members that are either solopreneurs or start-ups or intrapreneurs from organizations that have a similar mindset and are, let's say, innovating towards this direction of creating a new economy, a more sustainable and inclusive economy." (interviewee 3)
Importance of a shared and open organizational culture	"We have done an internal reflection and a co-creation effort with the team to try to crystallize what are the key elements of our culture." (interviewee 3)

4.2.3 Critical leadership studies in the studied cases

Almost all respondents expressed an understanding of leadership to serve people, which the author identified as people-oriented leadership. Only one did not indicate an emphasis on this, perhaps as he did not have a high responsibility for other people in his current position. Interviewee 1 said that he is "not leading but coordinating" and connected leadership with helping others to "[reach] consensus"

by providing them with information. He used the following metaphor to explain his role in the organization:

> "I'm the one who [is] trying to get the organization to walk the same line, to dance the same dance." (interviewee 1)

This expression parallels CLS as he intended not to strip off the employees' agency and autonomy but saw himself supporting their decision-making (Alvesson 2003). To the thesis authors, this also indicated that leadership must not be based on unsymmetrical power relations (Collinson 2005).

This interviewee's organization also worked with a bottom-up leadership approach. However, he mentioned that he "learned […] the hard way" and "by mistake" that "[he could not] tell [others] what to do". This sentence reflected that he apparently tried to execute a more top-down approach but failed to do so. Later on, he said that "[he is] convinced that the bottom-up approach is the right way".

Another respondent picked up central aspects of CLS by saying that leadership is not about telling others what to do, executing pressure, or manipulating employees to reach company goals (Sims Jr et al. 2009; Auvinen et al. 2013). Instead, he described leadership as "giving [someone] the opportunity to go into a direction with [him]" (interviewee 5, translation by author) and that they would figure out that direction together. He further highlighted that leaders should not "leave the other [person] alone" (translation by author). Moreover, one respondent mentioned that providing a certain level of stability is essential as "if everything is always up in the air, it [would create] too much stress on people", which would hinder them from doing and enjoying their work (interviewee 3). To the thesis author, these descriptions of leadership implied that leaders should provide guidance.

Interviewee 5 saw his responsibility as a leader in how he could help others to "unfold" (translation by author). Similarly, another interviewee explained his journey from a more traditional way of leadership to one that is more focused on how he could "facilitate the team to [grow] personally" (interviewee 3). Whereas Alvesson (2003) claims that employees' growth is predetermined by leaders, in the interviewees' expressions, the autonomy and agency of employees are focal. For example, the formulations of 'facilitating' and 'figuring out the direction together' indicate that it is not the leader who determines employees' development, but instead, the leader *supports* the process. However, both respondents also mentioned that it is relevant and sometimes challenging to find a balance between fulfilling organizational needs and leading in a way that supports employees' well-being and development.

Although one respondent conceded that he likes to implement his ideas, he underlined that respecting different perspectives is crucial and that it is not about "prestige" (interviewee 4). Educating himself about the various topics under his

responsibility was essential to him. Generally, personal values such as equality, compassion, and trust guided many interviewees in their leadership approaches. Often, respondents emphasized that leadership entails humans interacting with each other. Thus, interviewee 3 said:

> "Even if you are leading the department or just coworkers; [...] compassion [always makes] sense." (interviewee 3)

'Leading by example' also appeared to be crucial for interviewees, especially when sharing feelings and emotions and being vulnerable at work. Many interviewees were aware that their behavior influences the organizational culture and how employees show up at the workplace (Alvesson 2003; Gardner et al. 2005; Alvesson & Spicer 2012).

Further, the author found a parallel between her interviewees' expressions and Learmonth and Morrel's (2017) claim that CLS recreates leader-follower relationships despite criticizing them. Although sometimes, typical leader-follower relationships seemed to come through in what interviewees said, most likely due to the responsibilities linked to their roles in the organization, they portrayed an understanding of meeting others on an eye-to-eye level. One said:

> "There has to be a certain equality, a balance [in the relationship]." (interviewee 5, translation by author)

Further, some respondents did not like the notion of 'leader' or 'leading' regarding themselves. Interviewee 2 said twice that he thinks leadership is "overpitched", which sounded like he disliked power dynamics and ideologies associated with the term (Alvesson 2003). To him, "leadership [was] everywhere" and "everybody [was] a leader of their own". He further connected leadership closely to personal alignment and conscious decision-making, which also related to his understanding of sustainability. Many aspects he expressed can be linked to CLS, which claims that everyone can be a leader and that leadership must be freed from its association with specific personality traits (Bendell et al. 2017). Further, his understanding of leadership was not influenced by dualisms and dichotomies often discussed within CLS (Fairhurst 2001; Collinson 2011). Table 3 summarizes the findings concerning CLS.

Table 3. Critical leadership studies in the studied cases

Theme	Example quote
People-oriented leadership	"For me, leadership is the responsibility, not only the corporate responsibility but also the human responsibility towards my employees to ensure that they can develop and find their bearings." (interviewee 5, translation by author)

Providing guidance	„Leadership is […] I give you the opportunity to go into a direction with me. [...] We figure out together which direction this is." (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Finding common ground for the organization	"And try to get to consensus" (interviewee 1) "From there, you create your complementary story." (interviewee 2)
Supporting the personal development of employees	"[…] Now, I think [it] is shifting a little bit more towards how can I facilitate the team to growth personally." (interviewee 3)
Guiding personal values	"For me, it's equality." (interviewee 1) "[...] Compassion [always makes] sense." (interviewee 3)
Leading by example	"I think especially with those topics, you can do more, like leading by example. So like, try to do it yourself and try [also to see] others that follow." (interviewee 3)
Everyone is a leader	"Everybody is a leader of their own." (interviewee 2)

4.2.4 Regenerative leadership in the studied cases

To the thesis author's understanding, all respondents were in their current leadership position since they were unsatisfied with one or another aspect of the global situation, mainly environmental or social ones, and wanted to create positive change regarding these issues. RL is based on the same ground (Hutchins & Storm 2019). The interviewees also strived for a collective higher purpose, typical for regenerative leaders (Hardman 2012). However, some did so more intensely than others. One respondent, for example, considered his work meaningful for the environment and people. He said that he would continue his job "even though [humanity] [would not] have to save the world" (interviewee 4), referring to the climate crisis, since working with natural and sustainable building materials is beneficial for people's health and well-being. However, the notion of collective endeavors seemed to be missing in his expressions, perhaps as he mainly worked alone.

Another respondent described that he tried to develop shared goals and a common culture in his organization but struggled with bringing different perspectives and opinions together and finding the time "to build [up] a structure embedding the [...] culture" (interviewee 1). Though, he also said:

> "[...] When you get [people with clashing opinions] into [a] room, and you present one challenge for them, they can always work with that challenge out from their perspective. We can [...] reach a common ground." (interviewee 1)

To him, it was crucial to talk about problems and issues and get into a discussion, trying to understand the perspectives of others. This perspective resonates with dialectical approaches highlighted by Collinson (2014) and is central to RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Similarly, another respondent stressed speaking up if one does not feel comfortable in a particular situation. He said one needs to trust its "gut feeling" (interviewee 5, translation by author), which relates to listening to one's intuition emphasized for RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019).

Several respondents mentioned how important it is to listen to oneself, pause, and reflect. RL and inner sustainability, in particular, put great emphasis on such behaviors (Hutchins & Storm 2019). One respondent revealed that he sometimes struggled to get his head off work in the evenings or during the weekends. He explained that it is challenging due to his high passion for his work. In his opinion, it helped to actively tell oneself not to read work emails at certain times but to be present in other activities. Another respondent experienced something similar in his organization and expressed how difficult it is for him to bring people to stop working. He said:

> "I used to say that none [...] of the workers or employees [...] [are] working with the brain; they're working with their heart. They're doing this because they believe in it. And when you [...] believe so much in something, you don't really have that [understanding] that you need to stop working now." (interviewee 1)

He further explained that "people are not looking into their own well-being when they [try] to help other people [...]". To him, people's well-being and mental health were essential, and thus, he seemed frustrated about not being able to bring employees to take more care of their mental conditions. He explained that he tried to implement work-life balance practices into the organization, but people were unwilling to accept those. He said that "[it is] their personal choice to work 24/7" and that they would think that "[he] should not come and [tell them] that [they] need to pause and reflect on [their lives]".

Another respondent described how his company tried to create "safe spaces" (interviewee 3) for employees to be more vulnerable and share their feelings and emotions at the workplace. These aspects relate to bringing the whole self to work in RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Aligned with that, the case company identified 'wholeness' as part of the corporate culture. The interviewee explained that the company implemented several measures and practices to encourage that. Next to fixed team interactions such as a weekly joint lunch, check-ins, and check-outs, the company had team well-being, mental health, and sparring sessions. The interviewee explained that employees could share as much as they wanted during these meetings. He emphasized that it is crucial to "make [the] space as [...] comfortable as possible" (interviewee 3) and "[lead] by example" (interviewee 3) so people would feel safe and encouraged to open up.

Another respondent highlighted 'leading by example' by saying that allowing himself to be "transparent or vulnerable" (interviewee 2) also would bring such aspects into the organizational culture. However, he also mentioned that it is an individual journey for people to get to this point. Here, the thesis author identified similarities to literature that underline the importance of inner transformation enacted by individuals (Wamsler 2019, 2020; Woiwode et al. 2021).

One respondent reflected on how the feelings and emotions of employees were not a big topic within the company. When asked whether he thought that such aspects were considered in interactions between colleagues, he said:

> "No, I don't think so. [...] We're more like nerds that try to find [...] better [...] and smarter solutions." (interviewee 4)

To the author, this sounded like people were not keen to talk about their feelings and emotions at their workplace. Further, the organizational culture seemed not to be encouraging to do so.

As outlined in chapter 4.2.3, interviewee 2 closely connected leadership to his understanding of sustainability. In his view, both were about taking responsibility for one's actions and making conscious decisions, a perspective also relevant to another respondent. Furthermore, personal alignment was essential to interviewee 2. He said that "sustainability is an inside job" which resonates with self-development and inner sustainability in RL (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019). He shortly mentioned RL himself and said it means to him " [to be] aware of [one's] own conviction [and] where it comes from, [to be] aware of [one's] own coping mechanisms, and [still choosing] to do differently". What he expressed is closely linked to inner transformation (Hardman 2012; Wamsler 2020).

One respondent admitted that it is challenging to be continuously conscious of his behavior and compassionate with others in day-to-day activities. He mentioned high workloads and multiple open topics to deal with as reasons. He and another respondent also said that there must be a balance between meeting the organization's requirements and employees' needs. One described it as a "struggle between being compassionate with team members and helping them on their development but also pushing them to [...] meet the [...] needs of the [company]" (interviewee 3). Another respondent mentioned that his expectations of the business' development and success provided a challenge.

As explained in chapter 4.2.3, most case organizations did not have a typical leader-follower relationship, although occasionally, interviewees' expressions slightly hinted at such dynamics. Some respondents' expressions sounded like leadership is executed jointly and at flat levels, which is typical for RL (Hardman 2012).

One respondent expressed something relevant to the aspect of life-affirming in RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019). He said that one should "not go to work but wake up

early and start living [its] life" (interviewee 5, translation by author), indicating that one's job should not undermine the joy of life.

Also, several respondents expressed the importance of cooperation. One said:

> "If you work alone, you get far very quickly. If we work together [and] with each other, we get farther." (interviewee 5, translation by author)

Two other respondents stated that they worked with an ecosystem approach, meaning that their organizations created networks of companies working together and supporting each other. The assumption is that the companies' joint value creation is expected to be greater than the sum of their individual value creations, aligning with the notion of the whole system being more significant than its single parts (Holliday 2016). According to Hutchins and Storm (2019), regenerative leaders have an ecosystemic awareness, which means they are trying to tap into the potential of the ecosystem they are engaging in and with.

As discussed in chapter Regenerative sustainability in the studied cases4.2.1, all interviewees portrayed an understanding of the interconnectedness of humans and nature, an assumption that is central to RL (Hutchins & Storm 2019). One person thought that humans are nature. Others explained how humans depend on their natural environment. Interviewee 1 was sure that humans "had to change [the] way of understanding [...] nature" but that they "[could] have a positive impact on [...]" and "[...] live in harmony with [it]". Many said that there is much to learn from nature. Seeing nature as a source of inspiration and guide is highlighted by Paletta (2019).

Further, most interviewees were sure that their perception of humans and nature influenced their leadership approach. They primarily mentioned that it plays out in the notion of balance and making conscious decisions. One respondent seemed to be following his intuition. When asked about how his perception of humans and natures comes into play in his leadership approach, he said:

> "I'm not sure. I'm just trying to do what I think is best." (interviewee 4)

Table 4 summarizes the empirical finding concerning RL.

Table 4. Regenerative leadership in the studied cases

Theme	Example quote
Personal desire to create positive change	"I see a world [that], in my belief, really [needs] solutions that like mine and other solutions as well. I don't have the unicorn. But I think we have an essential step to bring meaningful people together. And I see this world is changing and changing, and wow – it's happening so much and the war in Russia and Ukraine […]. We really need new awareness levels." (interviewee 2)

Dialectical approaches	"But then when you get them into [a] room, and you present one challenge for them, they can always work with that challenge out from their perspective. We can […] reach a common ground." (interviewee 1)
Self-reflection	"One needs to have an understanding of oneself to find this balance." (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Intuition	"I'm just trying to do what I think is best." (interviewee 4)
Organizational structure and culture supporting inner sustainability	"And [the] second is […] to try to put the mechanism [in place] to […] make [the] spaces […] as comfortable as possible so people can […] share." (interviewee 3)
Personal development/inner-transformation	"Sustainability is an inside job." (interviewee 2)
Cooperation	"If you work alone, you get far very quickly. If we work together [and] with each other, we get farther." (interviewee 5, translation by author)
Perceptions of humans and nature influences leadership	"We need to work in harmony with nature." (interviewee 1)

4.2.5 Summary and connections of the empirical findings

The analysis revealed that some interviewees understood sustainability based on its most common contemporary approaches, such as the TBL (Milne & Gray 2013). Simultaneously, interviewees expressed critique toward these approaches. Interviewee 1, for example, said to him, "[sustainability is] a triple bottom line", but later on criticized that the economic pillar of the TBL received too much attention. Generally, all respondents held ideas in line with RS, although not all of their convictions matched that concept. The interviewees' perceptions of humans and nature as interconnected and that humans are not superior to nature but can learn from it were in line with the concept of RS (Reed 2007). However, one interviewee also thought living in harmony with nature was impossible. To him, it was about self-preservation, which represents an understanding different from RS. Most of the findings regarding RS are also applicable to RL as both concepts are based on the same fundamental beliefs and pursue the same bigger vision (Reed 2007; Hutchins & Storm 2019; Gibbons 2020b). Though in RL, these assumptions are related and applied to organizational contexts (Hutchins & Storm 2019).

The author's overall impression throughout the interviews was that her respondents were not only dissatisfied with the dominant way in which corporations were run but also wanted to transform the corporate sector in one way or another. Next to business models and organizational structures supporting environmental and social progress, organizational behavior and culture seemed to be a central

leverage point for transformational change. With a few exceptions, the respondents held leadership ideas different from mainstream approaches and a performative orientation (Alvesson & Spicer 2012). Their understanding of leadership was people-oriented, and they wanted to provide guidance and support for their employees' personal development. These findings concerning COT and CLS are also crucial to RL, as RL addresses many aspects brought up by these two concepts (Alvesson 2003; Hutchins & Storm 2019). Generally, many assumptions held within COT and CLS provide the base for RL to emerge. Hence, the empirical findings are in some sense relevant to all concepts.

When analyzing the collected material regarding RL, the thesis author recognized multiple central aspects brought up in the literature, for instance, the desire to create positive change regarding environmental and social issues, which again relates to RS (Gibbons 2020b). Also, self-reflection, following one's intuition, and personal development appeared. These are aspects discussed in CLS (Cook-Greuter 2004; Scharmer 2009; Brown 2012). Dialectical approaches, cooperation, and an organizational structure and culture supporting inner sustainability were critical to respondents, too. Here, further links to COT and CLS can be made (Alvesson 2003). Moreover, a central finding concerning RL was that interviewees' perceptions of humans and nature influenced their leadership.

5. Discussion

Based on the thematic analysis, the author found that several organizational and personal aspects must be considered when exploring the research question of how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses. The organizational aspects are related to corporate structure and culture; the personal aspects are linked with people's beliefs, convictions, and behaviors. Though, all elements are interlinked and influence each other. As stated in chapter 1.3.2, other authors' research that is somewhat related to RL hints at the relevance of peoples' mindsets and structural and cultural circumstances. Table 5 provides an overview of the main organizational and personal aspects discovered through the study at hand, which are explained in detail in the following.

Table 5. Main organizational and personal aspects enabling and constraining regenerative leadership in businesses

	Enabling	Constraining
Organizational aspects	Implemented measures and practices 'Safe spaces' Shared vision and common goals Organizational culture supporting inner sustainability 'Leading by example'	Time restrictions High workload Organizational requirements Physical distances/Limited personal contact Internal discrepancies and competitiveness
Personal aspects	Desire to create positive environmental and social change Leadership based on personal convictions and values Personal reflectiveness and development Awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and nature Leadership informed by perceptions of humans and nature	Urge to address environmental and social issues; combined with a high passion and personal involvement in work topics People's individual choices and own responsibility for themselves Modern living standards and not taking the time to be in nature Self-preservation of the human species

Leaders' dissatisfaction with contemporary approaches to sustainability and their personal endeavors to create positive change regarding environmental and social issues provide the foundation for RL to set roots. On the basis of the study's findings, the disagreement with the status quo makes leaders strive for something else, which also leads to engaging with alternative forms of organizational management and leadership. More specifically, general discontentment with 'business-as-usual' and the conviction that the corporate sector must change and that alternative ways of running and leading businesses are possible is supportive of RL. Also, leaders' understandings and approaches of leadership as people-oriented, based on personal values, and linked to employees' personal development enable RL in businesses. From the empirical findings, the author noted that personal and professional contexts inform each other and cannot be separated. Leaders are not willing to compromise their personal values in their workplaces.

However, based on the study's result, personal values and their possibilities of fostering RL in businesses are constrained by several organizational aspects concerning the corporate structure and culture. More specifically, the author found that time restrictions and high workloads hinder RL. Leaders cannot dedicate enough time to building up organizational structures that support RL, particularly inner sustainability. Also, they struggle to consider employees' well-being in their decision-making and interactions to the extent they want to. Time was also identified as an impeding factor for implementing a regenerative development framework in communities by Gibbons (2020a), indicating that regenerative practices require commitment. On busy workdays, however, it is easy to forget to consider the inner, outer, and ecosystemic implications of one's decisions, actions, and behaviors, which are crucial to be considered by regenerative leaders (Hutchins & Storm 2019).

Further, the author found that organizational requirements constrain RL as they sometimes do not align with employees' needs. Hence, leaders need to find trade-offs and balance corporate requirements and employees' needs, which might hinder, for example, being patient or showing compassion. RL, however, requires that attention is paid to interactions with others (Hardman 2012). Being compassionate and empathic, in particular, is decisive to the inner dimensions of sustainability (Wamsler 2020). The study's findings further show that, in some instances, physical distances and limited personal contact might constrain RL as it is more challenging to build up personal relationships.

Moreover, internal discrepancies and competitiveness provide a barrier to RL, especially inner sustainability, since they complicate the establishment of an organizational culture that supports this leadership strand. It can be expected that people will not be willing to share their feelings and emotions in a workplace where a hostile atmosphere prevails. Based on the study's results, internal conflicts might be linked to the lack of shared goals and a common organizational culture. If

companies are able to establish a shared vision, common goals, and an organizational culture that supports inner sustainability, RL is enabled. It encourages people to relate to each other and open up. According to Hardman (2012), a collective higher purpose is strived for by regenerative leaders.

Moreover, the empirical findings indicate that implementing measures and practices that support employee well-being and a corporate culture that values employee relationships enables RL, especially inner sustainability. Scheduled meetings and joint activities ensure that people's mental conditions are taken seriously, embedded within the organization, and not forgotten in day-to-day activities. Further, such measures and practices can counteract time restrictions, high workloads, and to some extent, organizational requirements that constrain RL and inner sustainability. Generally, 'safe spaces' must exist, so employees feel comfortable sharing their feelings and emotions.

However, the corporate culture and individuals must be willing to accept such measures and practices. According to the study's results, 'leading by example' where the leader starts and holds up the discussion about feelings and emotions at work is beneficial. It shows employees that openness and vulnerability are welcome in the company. Still, leaders cannot force them to open their inner landscapes to their colleagues. Instead, it is an individual journey and people's own responsibility to get to a point where one understands it is essential to engage with such dimensions. Here, the interlinkages of personal and organizational elements become apparent as the corporate culture is formed by all individuals in a firm (Frost et al. 1991; Schein 2010).

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the author further found that leaders but also employees felt urged to address current environmental and social issues. Based on the thesis' findings, RL is enabled by people acting out of their personal convictions and trying to improve environmental and social conditions. At the same time, this leads to people feeling stressed and not allowing the organization as a whole or themselves to pause and reflect. Slowing down, however, is crucial to RL as it ensures that people are sustainable with themselves (Hutchins & Storm 2019). As several respondents described it for themselves and their employees, people risk losing themselves in their jobs if they are working with topics that they are highly passionate about and perhaps even personally involved with. Thus, RL is simultaneously enabled and constrained by people's desire and urge to create positive change and address current environmental and social issues. Here, inner and outer sustainability seem to compete with each other. Both, however, are decisive to RL (ibid.).

Here again, RL is constrained by employees' individual choices and responsibility for themselves. Even if leaders are aware of the importance of inner sustainability, they cannot force others to pause, reflect, and engage with it. Though, it would be crucial to investigate and understand *why* people are not

willing or able to take care of their mental conditions. Are they not aware of the importance? Or are they trapped in their own minds or perhaps societal and systemic constructs that prevent them from slowing down?

Further, the empirical findings show that leaders have personal reflectiveness and work on their self-development, both central aspects of RL (Hardman 2012). Personal reflectiveness and self-development ensure that leaders are willing to reflect on their leadership approach and change if they realize they act out of their "coping mechanisms", as interviewee 2 explained.

Moreover, the results indicate that RL is enabled by leaders' sense of dialectical approaches and cooperation. Both relate to a regenerative way of how organizations are understood and thus run (Hutchins & Storm 2019). If leaders understand that leadership is not bound to corporate contexts but "everywhere" (interviewee 2) and hence, also in organizations, should be distributed rather than centralized, RL is facilitated. According to Hardman (2012), this leadership strand encourages such approaches.

Moreover, the empirical findings show that leaders understand humans and nature as interconnected and think humans can learn from nature. Leadership approaches are influenced by balance, conscious decision-making, and listening to one's intuition, related to leaders' perception of humans and nature. RL is based on these beliefs and approaches (Hutchins & Storm 2019; Hutchins 2022), and thus these findings account for an enabling factor of this emerging leadership strand.

However, the author also observed that modern living standards and not taking the time to be in nature constrain RL in businesses as it makes it difficult for leaders to connect and "feel [...] to sync to it" (interviewee 3). Reconnection to nature is not only an essential condition to tackle the social and environmental challenges society is facing (Capra 2002; Latour 2018) but also a central aspect of RL (Hutchins 2022). As one respondent said, even "city [persons]" (interviewee 4) have an inherent connection to nature, but it must be recognized and nurtured. As Hutchins and Storm (2019) suggest, spending time in nature and engaging in activities to connect to it can help both leaders and whole teams to do so. It further must be noted that the aspect of modern living standards is not only personally but mainly societally informed.

Lastly, the assumption that living in harmony with nature is about self-preservation might constrain RL since then, the intention does not come from humankind's responsibility to take care of the planet but to sustain itself. Here, the link of RL to worldviews and paradigms becomes apparent once more: does humankind act out of self-interest or responsibility for the health and well-being of planet Earth?

6. Conclusion

The sixth and last chapter of this master's thesis provides some concluding remarks that summarize the study and its results. Further, the author points out her research's theoretical contributions and practical implications. Eventually, she explains the study's limitations and gives suggestions for future research.

6.1 Concluding remarks

Against the background of multiple escalating environmental and social crises and the corporate sector's responsibility and potential to address them, this master's thesis has explored the research question of how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses. Seemingly, leaders hold convictions and enact approaches crucial for RL, but the corporate structure and culture influence their endeavors. Moreover, leaders' belief that humans and nature are interconnected provides the ground for RL to root, but connecting to nature and preserving it for its own sake appears more complicated.

As understood throughout this thesis, RL is an emerging leadership strand that envisions a reorientation of leadership to increase the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems. This new leadership strand is based on the understanding of organizations as living systems, addressing inner and outer sustainability and broader ecosystemic impacts, and acknowledging nature and humans and interconnected and that humans must take care of planet Earth (Hutchins & Storm 2019). Thus, RL requires a shift in mindset that aligns with these beliefs.

The results of the multiple-case study conducted for this research show that RL is, on the one hand, enabled and, on the other hand, constrained by multiple interlinked organizational and personal aspects. Leaders hold convictions and enact approaches crucial to RL. Still, corporate structure and culture are decisive and either support or hinder their endeavors. People's desire and urge to address global issues simultaneously enables and constrains RL as despite having good intentions, they neglect being sustainable with themself. Moreover, leaders' belief that humans and nature are interconnected is supportive of RL. However, they sometimes seem to struggle with connecting to nature and preserving it for its own sake.

To conclude, the study aimed to explore how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses and thus, understand the possibilities of this new leadership paradigm within the corporate sector. Based on the findings of this research, the foundation for RL to set roots is there. Still, the organizational constraints that exist, primarily linked to the corporate structure and culture, must be considered. Also, several personal limitations have been discovered through this research that mainly concern leaders' and employees' beliefs and habits and thus, can be expected to be more challenging to address. However, observing leaders' awareness of several aspects essential to RL and their understanding of humans and nature as interconnected seems promising to see RL rooting and blooming within the corporate sector in the future.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

As outlined in chapter 1.3.2, several scholars define the conceptual understanding of RL (Hardman 2012; Hutchins & Storm 2019; Hutchins 2022), but no empirical investigation about how this new leadership paradigm is enabled or constrained in businesses has been conducted yet. Hence, this thesis has contributed new theoretical knowledge on RL by exploring precisely this. In addition, the thesis has extended the discussion about the inner dimensions of sustainability, which are often neglected in academia (Ives et al. 2020; Woiwode et al. 2021) but nevertheless important to the corporate sector (Bradbury 2003).

More specifically, the study discovered that looking at organizational and personal aspects helps understand how RL unfolds in organizations. On the one hand, RL, particularly inner sustainability, is constrained by organizational aspects such as time restrictions, high workloads, organizational requirements, physical distances and limited personal contact, and internal discrepancies and competitiveness. Generally, these aspects constrain RL as they hinder leaders and employees from relating to each other and sharing their feelings and emotions. On the other hand, RL, particularly inner sustainability, is enabled by organizational aspects such as implemented measures and practices, 'safe spaces', a shared vision and common goals, an organizational culture supporting inner sustainability, and 'leading by example'. These aspects ensure that inner sustainability is embedded in the company and that people feel comfortable opening up their inner landscapes at the workplace. Considering the personal aspects, RL is simultaneously enabled and constrained by people's desire and urge to address environmental and social issues and create positive change. Inner sustainability, in particular, is hindered by this. Even if leaders want to integrate people's health and well-being into the organizational culture, they cannot force employees to pause, reflect, or open up to others at the company. Instead, it is their individual choice and own responsibility to do so. On the one hand, the awareness of the interconnectedness between humans

and nature and leadership approaches informed by this perception enable RL. On the other hand, modern living standards, not taking the time to be in nature, and relating living in harmony with nature to self-preservation of the human species provide barriers to this new leadership paradigm.

6.3 Practical implications

On the basis of the findings, the author of the thesis suggests that organizations should try to create a structure and culture that supports RL and inner sustainability. As time restrictions and high workloads cannot be avoided in workplaces, it is decisive to implement measures and practices that allow individuals in firms to get together, slow down, and talk about their general well-being. People spend a profound amount of time on their jobs. Thus, companies are responsible for caring for their employees' mental conditions, especially if they operate in sectors where people are usually highly passionate and perhaps even personally involved in their work topics. If employees have limited personal contact with each other due to physical distances, it is possible to arrange such meetings and activities online.

Since the organizational culture is decisive for whether people feel comfortable opening up and sharing their feelings and emotions with their colleagues, leaders should strive to create the 'safe spaces' that allow this. Still, it is crucial to remember that opening up and sharing feelings and emotions in front of others and accepting measures and practices supporting inner sustainability in firms is an individual choice. Leaders cannot force employees to do so. However, they can 'lead the way' and serve as role models, showing others that the organization welcomes transparency and vulnerability.

As Hutchins and Storm (2019) suggest, reconnecting to nature can be supported for individuals and entire teams by, among other things, moving work meetings outside or having group activities in natural environments. Further, this is beneficial as being in nature has positive effects on people's well-being and social and cognitive skills (Berman et al. 2008; Weinstein et al. 2009; An et al. 2016).

By implementing the suggestions of this chapter, the connection to oneself, other people, and nature can be nurtured, which helps approach the environmental and social crises outlined in chapter 1.1, at least in the socio-egological system one engages in and with.

6.4 Limitations and future research

Although the research's results are based on a multiple-case study that does not represent the corporate sector at large, they allow theoretical inference (analytical generalization) about how RL is enabled or constrained in businesses (Flyvbjerg

2006). Still, the research is affected by a number of limitations that the author outlines in this, the thesis' final subchapter, giving directions for future research.

First and foremost, the author's findings point to the importance of further investigating how the organizational and personal aspects that enable and constrain RL influence each other. This master's thesis is an explorative study on a relatively new and little investigated topic. Thus, the author's approach to research was rather broad, did not focus on a single or a few elements of RL, and intended to capture all possible aspects that enable or constrain RL in businesses. Some interlinkages of the discovered organizational and personal aspects have been touched upon in the discussion but require more attention from researchers.

Second, it is crucial to conduct research on RL that emphasizes employees and explores this emerging leadership strand from their perspective. This thesis solely covers employees' experiences from leaders' perspectives. One of many research suggestions concerning this is investigating why people in organizations are not willing or able to take care of their mental health and well-being and how this can be changed.

Third, the study covered various types and life cycles of organizations, and the author's interview partners had different positions within the companies. Whereas this approach was suitable for an initial exploration of the research question, the next step would be to conduct research that focuses on specific organizational contexts. Future research could, for instance, investigate the same type of industry, organization, or leadership position. Through this, more contextualized knowledge of RL can be developed.

Fourth, it must be noticed that the interviewees in this study were all white men from European organizations. It might be that the thesis author could only find male interview partners due to more men in leadership positions in general (Hoyt 2010; Jericho 2017). It is essential to conduct research about RL that includes different genders and geographical and cultural backgrounds to understand how it plays out in other societal contexts. To make academic research on RL more diverse and inclusive, including disabled people in empirical studies is essential. Thus, academic literature on RL can live up to the concept's convictions, and empowerment of disabled people and equity can be fostered (Barton 2005).

Fifth, it should be considered that the author chose case organizations with an environmental or social purpose. Hence, she expected all interview partners to have an understanding of the thesis topic to some extent. Whereas she considered this decisive in finding people willing to contribute to her thesis, this approach also limits the study. It can be expected that RL is enabled and constrained differently in organizations with no points of contact with environmental or social issues.

Sixth, it is crucial to consider that "what counts as critical depends on what counts as dominant" (Parker & Thomas 2011:422) and should be kept in mind when reading the thesis. Throughout this work, mainstream ways of running

organizations and mainstream understandings of leadership are considered dominant, and hence, non-mainstream approaches to both are deemed critical.

Lastly, the author of this thesis encourages researchers to conduct in-depth explorations of how leaders personally engage with inner sustainability and transformation, how that affects their leadership approach, and how they incorporate inner sustainability into organizational life. Also, a future study that performs a detailed investigation of how leaders apply nature's concepts to organizational life and how that affects companies is an essential next step to acquiring more knowledge on how RL plays out pragmatically and theoretically.

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Popular science summary

Global society faces several environmental and social crises. To name a few, there are the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, increasing social inequalities, and numerous ongoing wars. On an individual level, people experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, often related to their jobs and global crises. Generally, the corporate sector contributes to many of the problems outlined above and thus, has a great responsibility for addressing them.

Against this background, the question of how life on Earth should continue in present times and the future arises. Some see the need for a different global worldview that reconnects people to themselves, each other, and nature. Leadership approaches that bring about such a transformation in people's mindsets are stressed. This is because leaders are generally understood as change-makers due to their influential societal positions.

An emerging leadership strand that seems capable of reaching this required transformation is regenerative leadership. Based on the conviction that humans and nature are interconnected, this leadership strand strives to increase the health and well-being of people inside and outside companies and the environment. This, however, requires a specific understanding of leadership, organizations, and society at large. Hence, this master's thesis explores how regenerative leadership is enabled or constrained in businesses. The thesis author conducted interviews with five people in leadership positions from different companies to do so.

The research reveals that multiple interlinked organizational and personal aspects inform the possibilities of regenerative leadership within the corporate sector. Leaders hold leadership understandings and engage with leadership approaches that align with regenerative leadership. Still, corporate structure and culture are decisive and either support or hinder their endeavors. People's urge to address global issues simultaneously enables and constrains regenerative leadership as, despite having good intentions, they neglect taking care of their own health and well-being. Leaders can serve as role models for employees but cannot force them to pause, reflect, or open up to others at the workplace. Moreover, the study finds that leaders' conviction that humans and nature are interconnected provides a ground for regenerative leadership to take root. However, connecting to nature and preserving it for its own sake turns out to be challenging and not always supported.

Acknowledgements

Writing a master's thesis requires a lot of commitment and motivation. Several people have supported me throughout the last five months, and this part of my thesis is dedicated to them, in deepest gratitude and the sensitive soul I am, with tears in my eyes.

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Third, I want to thank Silvio, whom I just got to know (more closely, to be precise) shortly before starting my research project. Thank you for lovingly supporting me every day, spending such an unbelievable amount of time listening to me talking about my thesis, and always telling me how great I was doing. Our relationship reminded me repeatedly that thesis writing is not what life is all about, something I tended to forget at times. Thank you for giving me so much balance and strength. You do not know how much it meant to me.

Fourth, I must acknowledge how my friends supported and motivated me during the last couple of months. Thanks for being there for me during the lows of the thesis writing process and reminding me to take it easy and not stress myself too much. I am thrilled to have so many amazing, caring, and intelligent people around me. Particular thanks to Louise, Mira, Claudia, Leah, and Lina, who gave me feedback on my writing and presentation.

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Seventh, I am still delighted by the conversations with all my interviewees. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me and enriching my research project and me personally with your thoughts and insights. It is reassuring to know that great people like you who genuinely care about our planet and all its living inhabitants hold leadership positions in firms.

Eighth, thanks to my joint supervision seminar group for valuable feedback on my work and for making thesis writing less serious than I initially expected. Particular thanks to Aran and David, who acted as opponents on my thesis twice.

Last but in no way least, I want to thank my supervisor Erik Melin for being such an exceptional mentor from the beginning of the thesis writing process until its very end. Your feedback, comments, and guidance, hints on what to "ponder" and which "enigmas to solve" gently challenged me and pushed me to unleash my academic writing potential. I am more than grateful for your dedicated, detailed, and extraordinarily great supervision.

Appendix 1

Interview guide non-founders

Welcoming and 'setting the scene'

Hi *name of interviewee*! Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

How are you feeling today?

Recording

I will start the recording now, okay?

Introduction to and purpose of the interview

Again, thanks for taking the time to talk to me. As you know, I am currently writing my master's thesis in Environmental Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. I am writing about a reorientation of leadership that strives to increase the health and well-being of people and the social and ecological systems they engage in and with. The purpose of my study is to explore how such a way of leading is enabled or constrained in organizations.

I have contacted *name of organization* because my interpretation is that the organization operates in line with this logic; you and I are having this conversation as you hold a leadership position within it. I am interested in learning how this type of human and nature leadership that I am writing about might be enabled or constrained at *name of organization*. I have a few questions that I would like to go through in a rather informal way. First, I would like to talk a bit about *name of organization* and, later on, about you and your approach to leadership.

Ensuring comfortability of interviewee

If there is any question throughout the interview that you do not want to answer, please just let me know and we will move on to another one.

Question by interviewee before start

Before we finally start, is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Introduction to the organization

Okay, let us begin then. You work at *name of organization*. If I am correct, *name of organization* was founded in *year* and is working with... Could you tell me a bit more about the organization?
- *Organization's history*
- *What is the organization working with more precisely?*
- *What are the organization's aims and purpose?*
- *What do you think characterizes name of organization?*

Organizational structure

Could you tell me something about *name of organization*'s organizational structure?
- *Hierarchies*
- *Organization of teams/departments*
- *How is decision-making approached?*
- *Delegation/distribution of leadership*

Organizational culture

How would you describe *name of organization*'s organizational culture?
- *Relationships within and with other teams/departments*
- *Overall atmosphere*
- *Do people "come as they are"?*
- *Diversity and inclusion*
- *Do you talk about private issues at work?*
- *What do you think facilitates or hinders open sharing?*
- *Do you address sensitive topics (e.g., conflicts/tensions) at work?*

Could you reflect a bit on what you like and perhaps could be improved about *name of organization*'s organizational culture?
- *What do you think is the potential to change the aspects that you think could be improved?*
- *How do you think it would be possible to change them?*

Understanding of sustainability

In your interpretation, what does 'sustainability' mean to *name of organization*?

Consideration of inner sustainability in the organization

Could you reflect a bit on the consideration of people's health, well-being, feelings, and emotions at *name of organization*?
- *How is it approached when someone is having a bad day?*
- *Space for sharing feelings and emotions*
- *Where does that happen (e.g., internal meetings, external meetings, lunch breaks)?*

Introduction to interviewee's position

Now, I would like to talk about you and your approach to leadership. You are *position of interviewee*. My understanding of your role is that... Is that correct? How would you describe your position?

Alternative if it is not possible to find out anything beforehand: Now, I would like to talk about you. You are *position of interviewee*. Could you tell me a bit about your employment at *name of organization* and your position?
- *How long have you been employed at name of organization?*
- *Why did you start working there?*
- *How long have you been in your current position?*
- *How would you describe your position?*
- *What exactly is your current position about?*
- *What are your main responsibilities?*

Understanding of leadership

As the *position of interviewee*, you have a leadership position within *name of organization*. What is 'leadership' to you?

Approach to leadership

Could you tell me something about your experience with and approach to leadership?
- *Did you have a leadership position before your current one, within the same or another organization?*
- *Which values guide you in your approach to leadership?*
- *What is most important to you as a leader?*
- *Do you consider yourself a leader?*

- *How do you consider your role within* name of organization *in relation to others working in* your team/department*?*

Leadership challenges

Which challenges do you face in your day-to-day activities as a leader?
- *How do you address such issues?*
- *How do you deal with change and uncertainty?*

Is there anything that you would like to change in your leadership style?

Self-awareness and ecosystemic awareness

We talked about the organizational culture at *name of organization* earlier. How, and in what particular ways, would you say you influence the organizational culture?

What about the organization's broader impact on the environment and society?

Where do you think lies your biggest impact?

Sustainability and inner sustainability in approach to leadership

What means 'sustainability' to you?

How, and in what particular ways, do you try to include 'sustainability' in your leadership?

What about aspects such as the health, well-being, feelings, and emotions of the people you are responsible for?

Nature connection and its relation to leadership

How do you perceive humankind and nature?
- *How would you describe humankind's and your personal connection to nature?*
- *What is your understanding of humanity's and your personal role on Earth?*

How would you say that perception comes into play in your approach to leadership?

<u>Final 'catch-all' question</u>

Could you reflect a bit on the potential of *name of organization* in positively impacting the people working within the organization, broader society, and the environment?
- *What do you think makes it difficult for name of organization to positively impact the people working within the organization, broader society, and the environment?*
- *Where do you think lies the organization's strength to do so?*
- *What would you say is your role in unfolding that potential?*

<u>End of interview</u>

These were all my questions. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify? You can of course also contact me again after we end our call.

Thanks for this conversation. Have a nice rest of the day!

Appendix 2

Interview guide founders

Welcoming and 'setting the scene'

Hi *name of interviewee*. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

How are you feeling today?

Recording

I will start the recording now, okay?

Introduction to and purpose of the interview

Again, thanks for taking the time to talk to me. As you know, I am currently writing my master's thesis in Environmental Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. I am writing about a reorientation of leadership that strives to increase the health and well-being of people and the social and ecological systems they engage in and with. The purpose of my study is to explore how such a way of leading is enabled or constrained in organizations.

I have contacted *name of organization* because my interpretation is that your organization operates in line with this logic; you and I are having this conversation as you hold a leadership position within it. I am interested in learning how this type of human and nature leadership that I am writing about might be enabled or constrained at *name of organization*. I have a few questions that I would like to go through in a rather informal way. First, I would like to talk a bit about *name of organization* and, later on, about you and your approach to leadership.

Ensuring comfortability of interviewee

If there is any question throughout the interview that you do not want to answer, please just let me know and we will move on to another one.

Question by interviewee before start

Before we finally start, is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Introduction to the organization

Okay, let us begin then. You founded *name of organization* in *year*. If I am correct, *name of organization* is working with... Could you tell me a bit more about the organization?
- *Organization's history*
- *What is the organization working with?*
- *What are the organization's aims and purpose?*
- *What do you think characterizes* *name of organization?*

Organizational structure

Could you tell me something about *name of organization*'s organizational structure?
- *Hierarchies*
- *Organization of teams/departments*
- *How is decision-making approached?*
- *Delegation/distribution of leadership*

Organizational culture

How would you describe *name of organization*'s organizational culture?
- *Relationships within and with other teams/departments*
- *Overall atmosphere*
- *Do people "come as they are"?*
- *Diversity and inclusion*
- *Do you talk about private issues at work?*
- *What do you think facilitates or hinders open sharing?*
- *Do you address sensitive topics (e.g., conflicts/tensions) at work?*

Could you reflect a bit on what you like and perhaps could be improved about *name of organization*'s organizational culture?
- *What do you think is the potential to change the aspects that you think could be improved?*
- *How do you think it would be possible to change them?*

Understanding of sustainability

In your interpretation, what does 'sustainability' mean to *name of organization*?

Consideration of inner sustainability in the organization

Could you reflect a bit on the consideration of people's health, well-being, feelings, and emotions at *name of organization*?
- *How is it approached when someone is having a bad day?*
- *Space for sharing feelings and emotions*
- *Where does that happen (e.g., internal meetings, external meetings, lunch breaks)?*

Introduction to interviewee's position

Now, I would like to talk about you and your approach to leadership. You are the founder of *name of organization*. My understanding is that your role is to... Is that correct? How would you describe your role in the organization?

Alternative if not possible to find out anything beforehand: Now, I would like to talk about you. You are the founder of *name of organization*. Could you tell me a bit about what is your role in the organization?
- *Why did you found name of organization?*
- *How would you describe your position?*
- *What exactly is your role in the organization?*
- *What are your main responsibilities?*

Understanding of leadership

As the founder of *name of organization*, you have a leadership position within the organization. What is 'leadership' to you?

Approach to leadership

Could you tell me something about your experience with and approach to leadership?
- *Did you have a leadership position before your current one?*
- *Which values guide you in your approach to leadership?*
- *What is most important to you as a leader?*
- *Do you consider yourself a leader?*
- *How do you consider your role within name of organization in relation to others working in your organization?*

Leadership challenges

Which challenges do you face in your day-to-day activities as a leader?
- *How do you address such issues?*
- *How do you deal with change and uncertainty?*

Is there anything that you would like to change in your leadership style?

Self-awareness and ecosystemic awareness

We talked about the organizational culture at *name of organization* earlier. How, and in what particular ways, would you say you influence the organizational culture?

What about the organization's broader impact on the environment and society?

Where do you think lies your biggest impact?

Sustainability and inner sustainability in approach to leadership

What means 'sustainability' to you?

How, and in what particular ways, do you try to include 'sustainability' in your leadership?

What about aspects such as the health, well-being, feelings, and emotions of the people you are responsible for?

Nature connection and its relation to leadership

How do you perceive humankind and nature?
- *How would you describe humankind's and your personal connection to nature?*
- *What is your understanding of humankind's and your personal role on Earth?*

How would you say that perception comes into play in your approach to leadership?

Final 'catch-all' question

Could you reflect a bit on the potential of *name of organization* in positively impacting the people working within the organization, broader society, and the environment?

- *What do you think makes it difficult for name of organization to positively impact the people working within the organization, broader society, and the environment?*
- *Where do you think lies the organization's strength to do so?*
- *What would you say is your role in unfolding that potential?*

<u>End of interview</u>

These were all my questions. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify? You can of course also contact me again after we end our call.

Thanks for this conversation. Have a nice rest of the day!

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