

**Eliminating distance between CEOs and employees:
An explorative study of electronic leadership enabled
by many-to-one communication tools**

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Fabian Heuschele

from

Germany

Approved on the application of

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Jenewein

and

Prof. Dr. Felicitas Morhart

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The University of St. Gallen, School of Management, Economics, Law, Social Sciences and International Affairs hereby consents to the printing of the present dissertation, without hereby expressing any opinion on the views herein expressed.

St. Gallen, May 19, 2014

The President:

Prof. Dr. Thomas Bieger

Für meine Familie und Carolin

Vorwort

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ABSTRACT

The process of direct interaction between Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and employees in large organizations represents a black box in both research and practice. The purpose of this dissertation is to generate an understanding of this research phenomenon.

Traditional theory in leadership is grounded in the notion that there is no direct interaction between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons. However, modern communication media can change this status quo in organizations. Today, an increasing number of CEOs seeks the direct dialogue with employees via electronic communication media such as many-to-one communication tools. These tools are based on mechanisms that collect, aggregate, and prioritize information. In this way, employees can forward their most relevant questions, concerns, and suggestions to the CEO and receive direct feedback.

The author applies explorative case studies at three large, multinational organizations that launched many-to-one communication between their CEOs and employees. The case studies reveal that the impact and the application of many-to-one communication differ strongly across organizations. The author explores the causes for these differences and develops a conceptual framework that explains the determinants for and consequences of the usage of the communication tool. Guided by the theoretical lens of Construal Level Theory (CLT), the explorative case analysis reveals that the CEO at the organization with an intensive use of many-to-one communication could reduce various dimensions of distance to his employees by distinct behaviors. In doing so, the perceptions of the CEO (micro-level) as well as various organizational factors (macro-level) were positively affected. The findings contribute to the current research in electronic leadership as they outline that CEOs can directly influence employees on lower hierarchical echelons. In terms of managerial contribution, the author presents success factors that help CEOs to increase the efficiency of the many-to-one communication in their organizations.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die direkte Interaktion zwischen Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) und Mitarbeitern in Großunternehmen ist eine Black Box sowohl in der Forschung als auch in der Praxis. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es daher, ein grundlegendes Verständnis für diesen Untersuchungsgegenstand zu schaffen.

Klassische Führungstheorien basieren auf der Annahme, dass keine direkte Interaktion zwischen CEOs und Mitarbeitern unterer Hierarchieebenen stattfindet. Moderne Kommunikationsmedien können diesen Status-quo in Unternehmen verändern. Heutzutage suchen immer mehr CEOs den direkten Kontakt zu Mitarbeitern über Kommunikationsmedien, wie beispielsweise über many-to-one Kommunikationsplattformen. Diese basieren auf Mechanismen, die Informationen sammeln, verbinden und priorisieren. Mitarbeiter können so ihre wichtigsten Fragen, Bedenken und Empfehlungen dem CEO mitteilen und ein direktes Feedback erhalten. Der Autor führt explorative Fallstudien in drei großen, multinationalen Unternehmen durch, die many-to-one Kommunikation zwischen ihrem CEO und Mitarbeitern anwenden. Die Fallstudien decken große Unterschiede zwischen den Unternehmen in der Nutzung und den Auswirkungen von many-to-one Kommunikation auf. Der Autor untersucht die Gründe für diese Unterschiede und entwickelt einen konzeptionellen Rahmen, der die Einflussfaktoren und Konsequenzen der Plattformnutzung erklärt. Die explorative Analyse wird auf Basis der Construal Level Theory (CLT) durchgeführt und zeigt, dass der CEO des Unternehmens in dem many-to-one Kommunikation intensiv genutzt wurde, durch sein Kommunikationsverhalten verschiedene Dimensionen der Distanz zu seinen Mitarbeitern reduzieren konnte. Dadurch wurde die Wahrnehmung des CEOs in der Unternehmung verbessert und verschiedene organisationale Faktoren positiv beeinflusst. Die Erkenntnisse leisten einen Beitrag zum Forschungsgebiet der elektronischen Führung, indem offengelegt wird, dass CEOs einen direkten Einfluss auf Mitarbeiter unterer Hierarchieebenen ausüben können. Aus den Erkenntnissen werden zudem Erfolgsfaktoren für CEOs abgeleitet, um die Effizienz von many-to-one Kommunikation in Unternehmen zu steigern.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIT	Advance information technology
approx.	Approximately
B2B	Business-to-Business
B2C	Business-to-Customer
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CIO	Chief Information Officer
CLT	Construal level theory
CMC	Computer mediated communication
EBIT	Earnings before interest and taxes
E-leadership	Electronic leadership
IOED	Illusion of explanatory depth
IT	Information technology
LCM	Language categorization model
M	Mean
OCM	Organizational climate measure
P	Proposition
p.a.	Per annum
RQ	Research question
R&D	Research and Development
TAL	Transactional leadership
TFL	Transformational leadership
TMT	Top management team
USA	United States of America
#	Amount
Ø	Average

PART A: INTRODUCTION

1 Introduction to the research phenomenon

1.1 Background information on the phenomenon

The distance between the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs)¹ and employees of lower organizational echelons² in large organizations is usually immense. Most of the employees in organizations work at different locations, on very different tasks, and consequently do not personally get in touch with the CEO often. Theory on CEO leadership is therefore grounded in the notion that there is no direct interaction between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons. A prominent study on CEOs of Waldman and colleagues (1999) underlines this notion. The authors state that there exist two distinct paths that support the emergence of CEO charisma: a.) through close relationships with direct followers in top management, or b.) through positive attributions with distant organizational echelons (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Similarly, Shamir (1995) accentuates that if the distance between leaders and followers is very large, leadership only emerges through ascribed leader characteristics that he summarized as “larger than life” (p. 23). However, just very few leaders have these qualities. The research literature therefore suggests that the impact on followers in the context of high leader distance is not as strong as in the context of proximity (Shamir, 1995).

With the introduction of information technology (IT) this status quo in organizations is subject to change, as it enables personal interactions independent of physical or hierarchical distance. Today, IT-enabled social media³ have become an integral part in the modern society. A recent study by Chui and colleagues (2012) reveals, for instance, that in the year 2012, more than 1.5 billion people all over the world used social media. Moreover, the study shows that approximately 70 percent of all global companies already employ social technologies – and this figure is increasing continuously (Chui, et al., 2012). The authors accentuate the potential of these social

¹ A Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is the highest-ranked corporate executive in organizations and is in charge of the total management (Princeton, 2013; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999).

² An organizational echelon represents a social position within an organization and is defined as “the level or stratum in the organization” (Aiken & Hage, 1968, cited in Walker & Brewer, 2008, p. 1113).

³ “A group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

technologies and state that they bring “the speed, scale, and economics of the internet to social interactions” (Chui et al., 2012, p. preface). Thus, social media may radically change the way of communication in organizations. However, van der Meulen and Rivera (2013) state doubts on the actual impact of social media in organizational practice. In their study, they reveal that 80 percent of the projects that are based on social media fail. The impact of social media implementation therefore remains unclear.

Today, leaders in many organizations apply social media as a means for communication with followers. In research literature, this phenomenon is termed “electronic leadership”⁴ (Avolio, 2001). Social media enables leaders to interact with followers who are spread all over the world and to provide and get immediate feedback regardless of time- and location limits (Kahai, 2013). Various scholars therefore underline that the use of IT and social media is significantly changing the status quo of leadership in organizations.

In practice, organizations discovered that social media offers great potential for their CEOs. These organizations recognized that with social media, CEOs can directly connect with numerous employees all over the world. Before the implementation of these technologies, in traditional face-to-face contexts, the direct interactions between CEOs and employees in large organizations were not possible. Social media enables CEOs to directly send messages to employees at the lower hierarchical echelons and to get feedback from these employees. However, the dialogue between CEOs and employees is a black box for these organizations. This dissertation reveals that, in practice, the phenomenon of direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees is highly relevant, but there also exists great uncertainty among organizations and their CEOs about what to expect of this interaction. Therefore, this dissertation aims to shed light into the black box of virtual interaction between CEOs and employees by coherently exploring the phenomenon with multiple-case studies.

1.2 Gaps in the literature

A literature analysis reveals that direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees is not just a black box in practice; there is also a lack of research in this field. The research literature presented in this dissertation mainly focuses on three research streams in leadership that are most relevant for the analysis of the research

⁴ Electronic leadership (e-leadership) is defined as “a social influence process mediated by advanced information technology (AIT) to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and/or performance with individuals, groups, and organizations.” (Avolio, 2001, p. 617)

phenomenon: 1.) CEO leadership, 2.) leader distance, and 3.) e-leadership. However, they all lack comprehensive findings concerning the determinants and the consequences of virtual interaction between CEOs and employees in organizations. In the following, the author briefly shows the gaps in literature in the respective fields. An extensive literature review on each research stream is conducted in chapter two of this dissertation.

1.) Most of the studies on CEO leadership (e.g., Chun, 2009; Waldman, 2004; Waldman, 1999) assume that CEOs only have frequent and direct contact to a relatively small number of people in organizations, and that most of these people are in the top management. The vast number of these studies is grounded in the notion of traditional face-to-face leadership. Consequently, these studies did not conceptualize that there is a direct linkage between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons in organizations (e.g., Waldman, 1999). Most theories assume that the information from CEOs cascade via middle management to employees of lower hierarchical echelons, and vice versa. Employees therefore get information from the CEO only indirectly and not immediately (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999).

Direct interaction between CEOs and employees thus represents a research gap in this literature stream. By exploring direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons, this dissertation addresses this research gap.

2.) The theory in the research field of leader distance has large overlaps with the theory on CEO leadership. Antonakis and Atwater (2002) state that distance between leaders and followers comprises three distinct dimensions: social distance, physical distance, and interaction frequency. They underline that CEOs are always physically distant from most of their employees, highly socially distant from all their employees, and that the interaction frequency between them is very low. As a result, the employees in the lower hierarchical echelons usually know very little about their CEO, who therefore has only low personal relevance for them (Chun et al., 2009). Due to the little knowledge about their CEO and his actual behavior, employees rely on attributions of the CEO to explain and interpret causes of behavior and events (Heider, 1944). These attributions are influenced by various factors such as the CEO's personality and charisma, but also by stereotypes- and performance cues (Popper, 2012; Meindl, 1995). The literature argues that for CEOs, it is difficult to influence these attributions from a distance, because there is no direct link to the employees. Various scholars criticize these existing theories on leader distance. They explicitly state that they lack applicability for the CEO level (Chun, 2009) as well as potential for integrating communication technology (Popper, 2012).

The literature review in the field of leader distance reveals that the current research lacks answers on how direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees influences their perceptions of distance and on the effects in organizations. This dissertation aims to address this gap in research on leader distance.

3.) The field of e-leadership is immature compared to research on CEO leadership or leader distance, with only few studies published in top journals (e.g., Avolio, 2001). The majority of studies in the field of e-leadership are conducted in the context of virtual teams. These indicate, for instance, that certain leader behavior such as transformational leadership may have similar effects in the context of virtuality as in a face-to-face context. However, to the best knowledge of the author, there is no study in a top journal that addressed electronic leadership applied by CEOs or top-management. Due to their lack of rigor and scope, the existing findings on e-leadership cannot be transferred to the virtual interaction between CEOs and employees (Vera & Crossan, 2004). The aim of this dissertation is therefore to address the gap in literature of e-leadership at the CEO-level.

1.3 Purpose of the study

This dissertation sheds light into the black box of direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons. Its main purpose is to increase theoretical and managerial understandings of the research phenomenon. The author addresses various research goals:

Qualitative exploration of the research phenomenon based on primary data of CEOs

This dissertation qualitatively explores the phenomenon of virtual interaction between CEOs and employees. Scholars in the field of CEO leadership accentuate the need for primary data on CEOs (Zajac, 1990). The author therefore aims to provide insightful and primary evidence of the research phenomenon in organizational practice. The dissertation applies an explorative multiple-case study design based on Eisenhardt (1989b) and Pan & Tan (2011). For the exploration of the cases, the author uses evidence from organizations that apply virtual communication between their CEO and employees. The author collected data via interviews (>30) and questionnaires from CEOs and employees in three large multinational organizations. Further, this data is supported by archival records of the virtual communication traffic between the CEOs and their employees to enhance the rigor of the evidence.

Development of a conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon

The dissertation aims to contribute to the current research by developing a conceptual framework for direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees enabled by many-to-one communication tools⁵. A literature review reveals that there is yet no theoretical conceptualization of the research phenomenon (see section 1.2). Therefore, the author develops a comprehensive conceptual framework that draws key components, influencing factors, and the effects of direct interaction between CEOs and employees in organizations. The development of the conceptual framework contributes to the current understanding of the research phenomenon and fills various research gaps in the field of CEO leadership, leader distance, and e-leadership.

Coherent theoretical foundation by consolidation of theories

This dissertation further seeks to address a large number of calls in academia for the integration of existing theories (Hambrick, 2007; Wilson, 2012). Various scholars in the field of organizational behavior and leadership propose to integrate well-established theories from other fields into explorative leadership research. “The time is right for researchers to broaden the scope by bringing in theories from completely new areas” [...]. “Rather than continue forward in a fragmented manner, it may make sense to consolidate what we have learned in one or a few combinatory theories” (Schiller & Mandviwalla, 2007, p. 41-42). Thus, the author does not aim to start developing theory from scratch. Instead, construal level theory (CLT) is applied in the exploration process as theoretical guidance. This approach is proposed by various scholars in the field of explorative case studies (e.g., Pan & Tan, 2011). CLT has its origins in social psychology and represents “a compelling alternative means to explain perceptions, judgments, and evaluations in any context where spatial, temporal, [...] or other forms of distance are important features of the environment.” (Wilson, et al., 2012, p. 14). By addressing various types of distances in a compelling manner and because of its high relevance in the field of psychology, CLT is integrated in this dissertation to explore the research phenomenon.

Conclusions and implications for CEOs and organizations

Virtual interaction between CEOs and employees has great relevance for many organizations. This dissertation aims to contribute to managerial practice by providing organizations and their CEOs with implications on how to set up and apply a direct dialogue between CEOs and employees. The presented success factors may reduce

⁵ These tools are based on mechanisms that collect, aggregate, and prioritize information. More details are presented in the section 2.4 of this dissertation.

uncertainty among the organizations and their CEOs and can be directly implemented to enhance virtual communication between CEOs and employees.

1.4 Research questions and structure of the dissertation

This dissertation addresses various research questions. The research questions directly correspond to the purpose of this study, which is to explore the research phenomenon and to develop a conceptual framework (see section 1.3). The author reveals two main research questions (RQ1-2) that are divided into five sub-questions (RQ1.1.-RQ2.3.). Following the principles of explorative research, some of these research questions were determined at the beginning of the research process, while others emerged in the process of the analysis. The structure of this dissertation also follows the purpose of explorative theory development. The author decided to apply a procedural structure in this dissertation that enables the reader to get profound insights into how the conceptual framework emerged.

In the following the author introduces the research questions and draws how these are connected to the procedural structure of this dissertation:

RQ1. How is the influence of direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees addressed in leadership research, and how is the phenomenon applied in practice?

- *RQ1.1. How is the influence of direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees addressed in the theory of CEOs, leader distance, and e-leadership?*
- *RQ1.2. What are the drivers for direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees in practice, and how is the phenomenon implemented in organizations?*

For the exploration of virtual interaction between CEOs and employees, the author first profoundly reviews relevant literature in the field of leadership in order to outline the current state of research. The answers for RQ1.1. are presented in chapter 2. Based on this analysis, the author then presents a research methodology that seems most appropriate to address the research gaps (chapter 3). Explorative case research (multiple cases) based on Eisenhardt (1989b) and Pan & Tan (2011) seemed promising to reveal rich insights of the research phenomenon. These scholars suggest iteratively working with deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) elements for

analyzing data and developing theory. Therefore, they propose collecting data early in the research process and to conduct narrative case analyses that derive important practical insights of the phenomenon. Chapter 4 reveals answers to RQ1.2.

Based on the insights of RQ1, the author narrows the research phenomenon by identifying a theory from the field of psychology (construal level theory) that provides an appropriate foundation for the coherent exploration of the virtual interaction between CEOs and employees (chapter 5). The author therefore presents a literature review of this theory and outlines its main constructs, and effects. Subsequently, following research questions are addressed:

RQ2. How can direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees in organizations be conceptualized, and which insights can be revealed from cross-case comparisons?

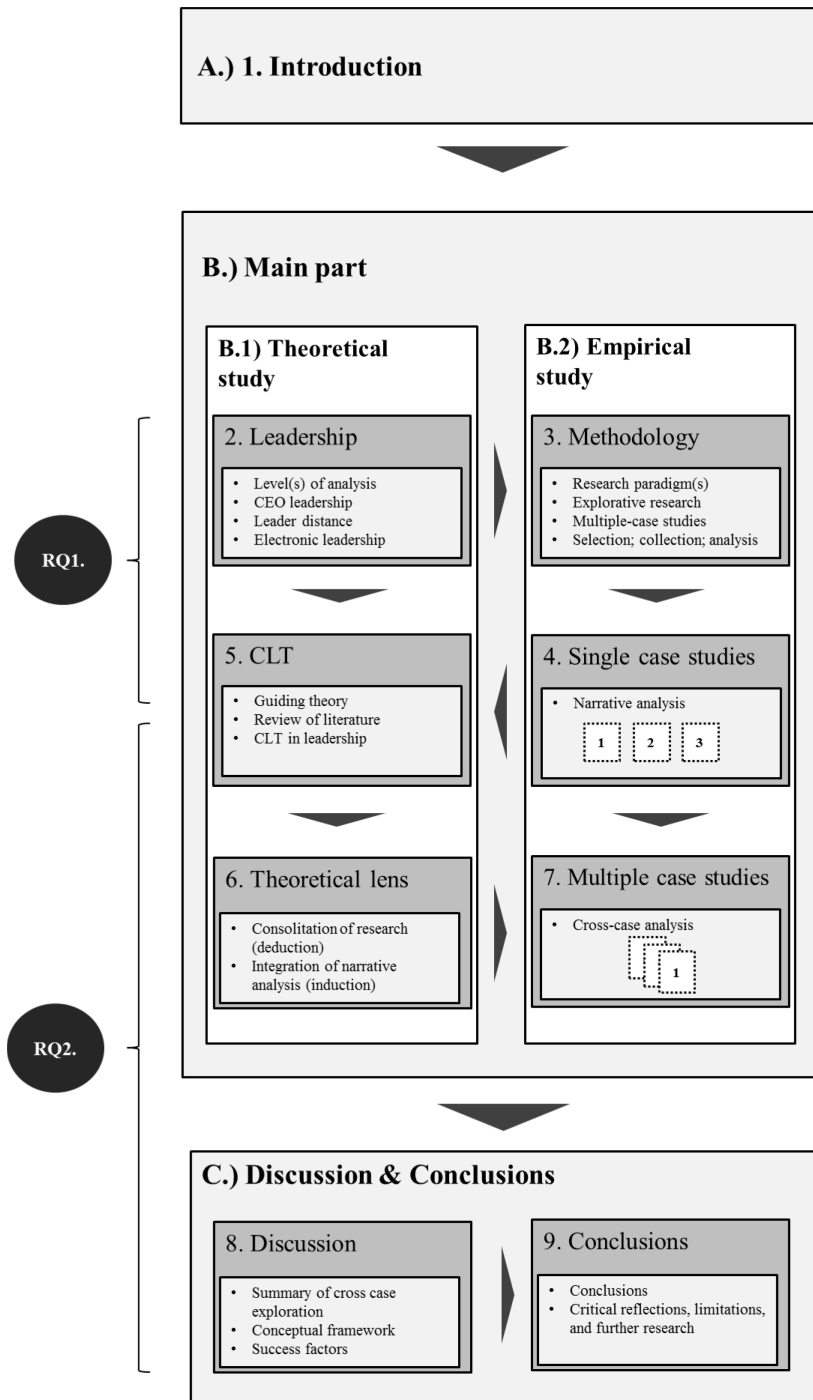
- *RQ2.1. How can direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees be conceptualized based on construal level theory?*
- *RQ2.2. Which insights on the phenomenon can be revealed by comparing cases?*
- *RQ2.3. Which success factors can be derived for virtual communication between CEOs and employees in organizations?*

In line with Pan & Tan (2011) the author next combines the insights of chapter 5 with the knowledge of the research phenomenon from leadership research and the narrative case analysis in a theoretical lens. Chapter 6 presents the answers on RQ2.1. The theoretical lens represents the result of the “preliminary stage of theorizing” and aims to give guidance and direction for the multiple-case analyses by providing key components, constructs, and linkages that are compared across the cases. Guided by the theoretical lens, multiple-case analyses reveal profound insights on the research phenomenon. Chapter 7 summarizes the results of the analysis and gives answers to RQ2.2. These findings are then used to elaborate the theoretical lens and to develop it into a conceptual framework. Based on the findings of the case exploration and the conceptualization of the research phenomenon, the author lastly reveals distinct success factors for virtual communication between CEOs and employees in organizations. Chapter 8 consequently answers RQ2.1. and RQ2.3.

Figure (1-1) illustrates the above explained structure of this dissertation. The dissertation is divided into three parts (A-C) that are drawn in the figure. The main part of this dissertation is part B. It outlines the procedural structure of this dissertation that

combines deductive and inductive elements with the aim to develop a conceptual framework.

Figure 1-1: Structure of the dissertation



PART B: MAIN PART

2 Leadership as the key discipline of research

This dissertation aims to explore new avenues of research in the field of leadership. This chapter draws the research streams in leadership that are relevant for the conceptual foundation of this dissertation. It addresses RQ1.1 and is structured as follows. First, it underlines the importance of defining the level(s) of analysis in leadership research before it outlines the level of analysis (the theoretical scope) of this dissertation (section 2.1). Consequently, it outlines literature on CEOs (section 2.2) and draws the influence of distance for leadership at the CEO level (section 2.3). Lastly, it illustrates research on electronic leadership (e-leadership) and introduces many-to-one communication tools that mediate the direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees (section 2.4).

2.1 Multiple levels of analysis

The field of leadership research is very broad. There is an extensive amount of literature that covers phenomena at various levels. However, even in studies that are published in high-ranked journals, the coherence of the theoretical conceptualization and the alignment of the subsequent analysis are often poorly developed (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). This is often reflected in the use of conflicting terminologies, inexplicit definitions of the objects of study, or inconsistent results. In this context, Yammarino and colleagues (2005) prove with a meta-study that solely 30 percent of the considered studies in leadership define their “level of analysis.” This is rather surprising, given that explicit specification of the level of analysis is crucial for the production of clear and testable theory (Klein, Tosi, & Cannella Jr, 1999). Several scholars underline the importance of defining the level(s) of analysis in research (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004; Gardner & Coglisier, 2009; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999), as does Rousseau (1985, p. 6) who already wrote 30 years ago that “theories must be built with explicit descriptions of the levels to which generalization is appropriate”.

This section aims to shed light onto the abovementioned levels of analysis. Before defining the level of analysis of this dissertation relevant literature is presented in the next section.

2.1.1 Literature review on the level of analysis

From the academic point of view, the level of analysis is coherent with the entity of research. It defines and integrates the object of research in a coherent set of relationships and thus determines the scope of research (Blalock, 1972).

In leadership research there exist four levels of analysis: 1.) the individual, 2.) the dyad, 3.) the group, and 4.) the organization. The levels follow a hierarchical structure. Objects of lower levels (e.g., the individual) are embedded within objects of higher levels of analysis (e.g., the group) (Yammarino, et al., 2005). In leadership research the objects of study are usually human beings in an organization. At the lowest level of analysis is the individual (Yammarino, et al., 2005). Studies at the individual level of analysis concentrate for instance on an individual leader or an individual employee and his behavior. A higher level of analysis in leadership research is the dyad level. At the dyad level, scholars investigate individuals who are interdependent on each other. Research focuses here on the one-to-one relation of two individuals (Yammarino, et al., 2005). A typical dyad in leadership research is the leader/follower dyad. Scholars may investigate, for instance, a follower's reaction to a certain behavior of a leader. However, the dyad level does not necessarily imply hierarchical differences between the respective individuals. Research in leadership also analyzes groups of human beings or even whole organizations. At the group level, human beings are perceived as an entity of individuals that are interdependent on each other (e.g., Clapp-Smith and colleagues, 2009). Studies on the group level may focus on certain teams that work on a common task or on certain departments. At the organizational level, scholars cluster individuals in collectives with broader commonalities that are based, for instance, on a hierarchical system such as an organization (e.g., Menges and colleagues, 2011) (Yammarino, et al., 2005). The rationale of most scholars that investigate either the group or the organizational level is that their members are sufficiently similar to be investigated collectively (Klein, et al., 1994; Klein, et al., 1999).

However, leadership research is not limited to single levels of analysis. Scholars also study phenomena at multiple levels of analysis. In this context, their aim is to bridge the separate views of single levels of analysis by combining different levels of analysis. In the last decades, multiple-level research established several models such as "cross-level models", "mixed-effect models", "mixed-determinants models", and "multilevel models" (Klein, et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1985). Cross-level models specify relationships between independent and dependent variables that exist at various levels of analysis (Klein, et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1985). Exemplary are models that predict effects of CEO leadership behavior (individual) on organizational performance

(Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Mixed-effect models show single variables that have effects on multiple levels of interest (Yammarino, et al., 2005). Waldman and Yammarino (1999) give an example of a model that illustrates effects of CEO behavior (an individual) on employee behavior, group cohesion, as well as organizational performance (multiple levels). Mixed-determinants models predict that determinants at multiple levels of analysis have influence on a single-level criterion of interest (Klein, et al., 1994; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). For instance, CEO leadership behavior, employee motivation, and group cohesion (multiple levels) may influence organizational performance (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Lastly, multilevel models depict patterns of relationships that exist and that are replicated at a variety of levels. An example of such a pattern could be that CEO leadership behavior, employee motivation, and group cohesion are related in an organization (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999).

Over the years the curiosity about multiple levels of analysis in leadership literature has increased significantly (Yammarino, et al., 2005). For example, there are special issues on research at multiple levels of analysis in the *Academy of Management Review* (Klein, et al., 1999) and the *Leadership Quarterly* (Gardner & Cogliser, 2009). The latter explicitly called for an advancement of models that shed light into the “meso paradigm” in leadership. The word meso is Greek in origin and means “in between.” The meso paradigm reveals the integration of micro and macro-levels of analysis. The rationale of meso-level research is that micro-levels and macro-levels cannot be separated in reality. Researchers predict that organizations and their context influence micro-level leadership processes, and vice versa (Gardner & Cogliser, 2009). Micro-levels of analysis focus on individuals and/or groups, while macro-levels of analysis focus on organizations and/or their environment (Klein, et al., 1999; Rowland & Parry, 2009). In the literature the terms meso-level and multiple-level are sometimes confused. A meso-level study is a sort of multiple-level study. It simultaneously investigates “at least two levels of analysis wherein a.) one or more levels concern individual or group behavioral processes or variables, b.) one or more levels concern organizational processes or variables, and c.) the processes by which the levels of analysis are related are articulated in the form of bridging or linking propositions.” (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995, p. 73). The abovementioned discussion shows that scholars can choose between different levels of analysis in research. The spectrum varies from different single levels up to various combinations of multiple levels of analysis. Studies on single levels of analysis have the narrowest scope. Multiple-level studies are applied to phenomena that appear

at several levels of analysis. Meso-levels of analysis not only imply several levels of analysis, but also the relationships between phenomena at micro-levels and macro-levels of analysis as well as the context. However, no matter what kind of analysis scholars choose, an explicit definition of their level of analysis is crucial, because it guides the research process by coherently aligning theory development with data analysis (Burstein, 1980; Klein, et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1985).

2.1.2 Level(s) of analysis in the dissertation

This dissertation explores the phenomenon of direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons in organizations. As Porter and McLaughlin underline, its basic assumption is that “leadership in organizations does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in organizational contexts” (as cited in Hunt, Osborn, & Boal, 2009, p. 504). Leadership is always context-dependent in practice and occurs per se at different levels (Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009). This dissertation aims to address the abovementioned quote by developing a conceptual framework that illuminates multiple levels of analysis.

Due to its various levels of analysis, multiple-level research is very complex in nature. However, it is particularly this complexity that may help generating novel insights. Klein and colleagues (1999) mention the strength of multiple-level research to identify “individual-level characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions that underlie and shape organizational-level characteristics and outcomes” (p. 243). This underlines the opportunities offered by multiple-level research for this dissertation as it concentrates on the effects of electronic leadership applied by CEOs on employees (micro-levels of analysis) and in organizations (macro-level of analysis).

In the literature, an increasing amount of scholars suggests combining traditional, micro-oriented theory with macro-level phenomena (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999; Yammarino, et al., 2005). Klein and colleagues even propose taking micro-level theory from parent disciplines such as “psychology, sociology, or anthropology” to expand classical borders of disciplines and generate richer insights (Klein, et al., 1999). Several highly published studies in leadership recently followed the advice of Klein and colleagues and combined multiple levels of analysis with theory from a parent discipline (e.g., Wilson and colleagues, 2012; Dasborough and colleagues, 2009; Hunt and colleagues, 2009). The former two studies apply a micro-level theory from the field of psychology to a leadership phenomenon on a higher level of analysis, while the latter applies a macro-level theory from the field of sociology to a lower-level phenomenon. This dissertation applies a multiple-level theory-building approach,

similar to the above. It enfolds analysis at the micro-level and combines it with analysis at the macro-level. As suggested by Klein and colleagues (1999), it relies on a micro-level theory that has its origins in the parent discipline of psychology (see chapter 5). As the research on distance in psychology is much more advanced than research in leadership, construal level theory (CLT) (Liberman & Trope, 1998) is integrated in the explorative research to explain the perceptions of distance from a micro-level perspective. Although multiple-level research has many benefits for developing theory, there are also barriers (Klein, et al., 1999). One key issue of research at multiple levels of analysis is the sheer mass of potentially relevant literature. Another issue is the difficulty of bridging the conflicting interest of micro-level and macro-level researchers. Klein and colleagues mention that most scholars are either trained on micro-level or on macro-level research. The statement “organizations do not behave; people do” may depict, for instance, the underlying assumption of a micro-level theorist, but contradicts the basic assumption of a macro-level scholar (Klein, et al., 1999, p. 244). Another issue deals with the scope of multiple-level research. Due to the integration of theory from multiple levels, research runs the risk of being either too complex or too simple. Finding an appropriate balance is a key issue for multiple-level researchers. This dissertation addresses the issues above in a comprehensive manner. It concentrates on literature and theory that seem highly relevant for the analysis. Furthermore, it takes into account the heterogeneity of information at the micro-level of analysis, but assumes within-organization homogeneity at the macro-level of analysis (e.g., Dansereau et al., 1984; Rousseau, 1985; Waldman and Yammarino, 1999). Thus, this dissertation combines the strengths of micro-level and macro-level research. It conducts rich and detailed analysis at the micro-level and aggregates the findings to the macro-level with the aim of developing insightful, meaningful, and relevant theory.

2.2 Chief executive officers (CEOs)

This section gives an overview of the key literature in the field of leadership at the CEO level. A CEO is defined as the “*primus inter pares*” in an organization (Norburn, 1989). The CEO is the highest-ranked corporate executive in organizations who is in charge of the total management (Princeton, 2013; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Leadership theory is based on the notion that there exist observable differences between leaders and followers (Bass, 1990). Additionally, scholars state that the tasks, responsibilities, and behavior of leaders differ highly from one level of management to another. The vast array of research that is conducted at lower- and middle-

management levels thus cannot be applied to the top-management level, and vice versa (Vera & Crossan, 2004). In a well-elaborated study on CEOs, Norburn (1989) describes the unique role of CEOs in organizations. He states that CEOs are the major catalysts for stock appreciation of organizations and responsible for strategic decisions and their implementation. However, he also underlines that CEOs are responsible for the employees' corporate identification and that CEOs should also have a focus on involvement of the workforce (p. 2).

Literature on leadership at the highest level of management can be divided into two consequent streams of research. The first stream was dominant in the research literature for a long time. It connected leadership at the top level of organizations with organizational performance indicators. The second stream represents the modern approaches toward leadership at the top level. These include relational and behavioral components of leaders (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Both streams are discussed in detail in the following sections.

2.2.1 Traditional approaches: positivist agency theory and upper echelon theory

The literature on leadership on CEOs was for a long time dominated by two theories: "positivist agency theory" (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) and "upper echelon theory"⁶ (Child, 1972; Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

Both of these theories link leadership with the field of strategic management. In this context, Hunt and Ropo (1995) accentuate that both theories analyze phenomena with regard to "leadership of organizations." They differentiate those streams of research from the vast majority of leadership literature that investigates "leadership in organizations" (Hunt & Ropo, 1995). However, positivist-agency theory and upper-echelon theory differ heavily in their assumptions. After comparing the two theories with each other, Cannella and Monroe even concluded that "[their] divergence makes conclusions seem almost schizophrenic" (1997, p. 214).

Positivist agency theory deals with conflicting interests and different risk perceptions of management and shareholders in organizations. It considers the top management as agents who work for the principles (shareholders) of the organization. According to positivist agency theory, the agents and the principles have different interests and agendas as well as their own attitudes toward risk. For the shareholders (principles) it is difficult and costly to verify the top management's (agents) actions (Cannella Jr. & Monroe, 1997; Eisenhardt, 1989a). Thus, there is a risk that the agents make decisions

⁶ The upper- or top echelon in organizations represents the highest management level in hierarchy. It focuses on CEOs and/or top management teams (TMTs).

that are not in line with the principles interests. Based on the notion of conflicting goals in organizations, positivist agency theory derives governance mechanisms in order to align the decisions of agents with the intention of principals (Eisenhardt, 1989a). The theory is mainly applied at the organizational level but also at the dyad level of analysis. Various scholars such as Cannella and Monroe (1997) or Meindl and colleagues (1985) criticize the theory because it ignores the positive effects of top management in organizations and because it only has limited support in empirical studies. The relevance of positivist agency theory in literature has considerably decreased from 2000 on.

On the contrary, upper echelon theory is based on positive assumptions about the top management in organizations (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004). The underlying notion of the theory is that organizational outcomes and processes are a reflection of their top management's characteristics (Nakatani & Zhou, 2009). Object(s) of analysis in upper-echelon theory are CEOs, top management teams (TMTs), or boards of directors (Daily & Schwenk, 1996). According to the upper-echelon theory, decisions from top managers have strong influence on firm performance (Child, 1972; Waldman, Javidan, & Varella, 2004). In its early phase, the researchers mainly tried to link distinct CEO characteristics (e.g., demographics, tenure) to company performance. Hambrick and Mason (1984) integrated the theory in a solid framework that consequently served as a basis for many studies in the field. The framework connects situational factors, upper-echelon characteristics, strategic choices, and performance.

2.2.2 Modern approaches: strategic leadership and charismatic / transformational leadership

More recently, scholars claimed that linking leader characteristics with organizational performance lacks explanatory power (Cannella Jr & Monroe, 1997; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Finkelstein, for instance, called for stronger integration of personality factors, leadership qualities, and leader behavior in upper-echelon research (Finkelstein, 1992). Consequently, researchers tried to explore the role of CEO behavior in company success (Waldman, et al., 2004). They began to integrate not only strategic but also psychological and social measures in their analysis (e.g., values and beliefs) (Carpenter, et al., 2004). From the late 1990s on leadership research that builds on the notion of upper-echelon theory was consolidated under the stream of strategic leadership (Cannella Jr & Monroe, 1997; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Strategic leadership focuses not only on macro-level influences of top executives, but also

considers behavior of top executives at micro-levels of analysis. According to strategic leadership researchers, CEO behavior is an important element that is used to further strengthen strategic and symbolic activities (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Consequently, they began to integrate relation- and attribute-based theories such as charismatic leadership and transformational leadership in their research (Colbert, Kristof-Brown, Bradley, & Barrick, 2008). From the 1990s on this research stream produced an extensive amount of literature. Transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1987) has become the most-studied theory in leadership research (Cole, Bruch, & Shamir, 2009). However, these theories have been applied mostly at micro-levels of analysis and in subunits of organizations (Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006; Jung, Wu, & Chow, 2008).

Both charismatic leadership (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) and transformational leadership (Bass, 1990; Bass, Avollo, & Goodheim, 1987; Burns, 1987) account for emotional attributions and/or relations from followers toward their leader (Waldman, Ramírez, House, & Puranam, 2001). These leaders “motivate followers to move beyond expectations and transcend their self-interest for the sake of a collective by implicating followers' self-concepts with the leader's values and goals.” (Chun, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik, & Moon, 2009). Due to their similarity, the terms charismatic leadership and transformational leadership are often confused in the literature. The concept of charismatic leadership in the literature is largely based on the work of Shamir and colleagues (1993). In this theory, they integrate transformational leadership theory by Bass and colleagues (1987) and further emotional and motivational leadership theories such as visionary or inspirational leadership.

According to Shamir and colleagues (1993, p. 586) charismatic leadership encompasses the following dimensions: “(a) reference to values and moral justifications, (b) reference to the collective and to collective identity, (c) reference to history, (d) positive reference to followers' worth and efficacy as individuals and as a collective, (e) expresses their high expectations from followers, (f) reference to distal goals and less reference to proximal goals. [This leader behavior increases followers'] personal commitment to the leader and the mission, their willingness to make sacrifices for the collective mission, their organizational citizenship behavior, and meaningfulness in their work and lives.” There is much evidence in the literature that charismatic leadership increases perceptions of organizational performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe & Galen, 1996). However, the literature that investigates

objective links of charismatic leadership with performance measures reports inconsistent results (Wilderom, van den Berg, & Wiersma, 2012).

Transformational leadership is mainly based on the work of Bass (1987). It encompasses four behavioral dimensions: 1.) idealized influence, 2.) inspirational motivation, 3.) intellectual stimulation, and 4.) individual consideration. Certain studies on transformational leadership also integrate charisma as a fifth distinct dimension (Jung, et al., 2008). Scholars in the field of transformational leadership mention follower effects such as high commitment toward leaders and their organization, increased intrinsic motivation, high levels of cohesion, and facilitated unconventional thinking (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Jung, et al., 2008; Zhu, Chew, & Spangler, 2005). Some scholars mention a positive impact on firm outcomes; however, the impact of objective performance measures is not clear (Avolio, 1999; Wilderom, et al., 2012; Zhu, et al., 2005).

The above indicates that the concepts of strategic leadership, charismatic leadership, and transformational leadership are to some extent very similar in their notions and in the analyzed effects. However, all concepts have distinct characteristics. Pawar and Eastman (1997) illustrate the differences as follows. Strategic leadership focuses on upper echelons of organizations and involves shaping organizational strategy and processes with the main goal to improve organizational performance. Transformational leadership also aims to improve organizational effectiveness but rather concentrates on the organizational members. It emphasizes that leader behavior and relations to followers trigger motivation and performance and aligns individual with collective interests. Furthermore, Pawar and Eastman (1997) state that transformational leadership is less broadly defined than strategic leadership, because the latter comprises a mixture of both strategic and leadership activities.

The distinction of charismatic leadership and transformational leadership is not sharp in the literature. However, Shaskin (1992) and Bass (1985) mention that charismatic leadership is based on personal identification with leaders and thus it is a component of transformational leadership. Other scholars underline that their differentiation is not clear. In their conceptualization of charismatic leadership, House (1993) and Conger and Kanungo (1987) apply several components of transformational leadership. Charismatic leadership theory thus ranges from rather narrow concepts such as Bass (1985) with a focus on personal identification up to rather broad concepts such as House (1993) or Conger and Kanungo (1987) that are closely related to transformational leadership (Bass, 1987). Pawar and Eastman (1997) conclude that charismatic leadership concentrates more on followers' personal identification with

leaders than transformational leadership does. Charismatic leadership thus concentrates on attributional processes in leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) while transformational leadership integrates various behavioral components. The term attribution in the context of leadership roots in the attribution theory of Heider (1944) which postulates that people explain causes and reasons for things or events by creating attributions. These attributions are in fact interpretations of anything people do not directly experience (Popper, 2012).

The lack of a coherent distinction between charismatic and transformational leadership is represented by a fairly flexible use of both terms in the literature. Both theories are applied in strategic leadership research (e.g., Zhu (2005), Colbert (2008), Waldman, et al., (2001; 2004). However, the literature with focus on CEOs is dominated by the term charismatic leadership theory. A variety of studies suggest that the positive effects of charismatic leadership that were found on lower levels in organizations can also be found at the CEO level. These studies propose that CEO charisma may be a key component of strategic leadership (Agle, et al., 2006; Waldman, et al., 2004; Waldman, et al., 2001; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Based on Shamir's theory of charismatic leadership, Waldman and colleagues (1999) derived the concept of CEO charismatic leadership. Their conceptualization is very similar to the concept of transformational leadership (Bass, 1987). Waldman and colleagues (1999) describe two key elements of CEO charisma: First, they mention CEO characteristics and behavior which are necessary in order to be perceived as charismatic such as “articulation of a clear vision, [...] communication of high performance expectations, [...] reference to the greater collective” (p. 268). Second, they underline that the effects of CEO charisma can be perceived through two distinct paths: a.) through close relationships with direct followers (with the top management team), or b.) through positive attributions with distant organizational echelons (Waldman, et al., 2004; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). According to Waldman, these simultaneous developments of close and distant relationships lead to a collective identification, organizational cohesion, as well as finally to an increased organizational performance (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). However, they also underline that both, the close and the distant path, have different effects on the perception of CEO charisma. Chun and colleagues agree and also highlight the importance of relational (in closeness) and attributional (in distance) components in experiencing charismatic leadership (2009). Together with various other scholars they underline that distance has large influence on the perceptions of leaders (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Antonakis & Jacquart, 2013; Chun, et al., 2009).

It can be drawn from the literature review that research on direct interaction between CEOs and employees is in line with modern approaches of leadership at the CEO level that accentuate the influence of CEO behavior in organizations. However, the review also underlines that distance plays a crucial role of the perceptions of CEO behavior. In order to explore the research phenomenon the following section therefore outlines literature on distance in leadership.

2.3 Distance in leadership

In a prominent study on distance in leadership, Antonakis and Atwater (2002, p. 676) define leadership as “an influencing process that results from follower perceptions of leader behavior and follower attributions of leader-dispositional characteristics, behavior and performance” (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002, p. 676). The authors accentuate that followers perceive leaders on the basis of a.) attributional and b.) behavioral factors. However, further research indicates that these perceptions and their effects are strongly influenced by the extent of how “distant” leaders are from their followers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Chun, et al., 2009; Shamir, 1995). This section presents literature on the phenomenon of distance in leadership. It begins with defining distance in leadership before presenting its influences and its effects. Lastly, it summarizes the key findings that emerged in this field of research to date.

2.3.1 Definition of distance in leadership

The influence of distance is implied in many leadership theories. However, only few studies explicitly define distance or describe the implications of distance or its effects on leader perceptions or follower outcomes (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Interestingly, the phenomenon “leadership at a distance” was already mentioned in the 1920s. Back then, Bogardus (1927, p. 127) stated: “To the extent that leadership rests on sheer prestige, it is easily punctured by intimacy.” According to Bogardus (1927), intimacy between leaders and followers may weaken the leaders’ position. Half a century later, Katz and Kahn (1978) further developed the ideas of Bogardus. They claimed that leaders on lower hierarchical levels cannot build a “magic aura”, because their close working relationships with followers destroy “illusions and myths”. They concluded that extraordinary images in leadership could only be created by top executives of organizations. However, two decades later, Shamir (1995) found that both close and distant leaders can be charismatic. According to Shamir, the level of hierarchy is therefore not crucial for the extraordinary leaders’ qualities. This

dissertation subsequently aims to shed light on the contradicting statements about the influence of distance in leadership by outlying its definition and conceptualization.

In an early study about distance in organizations, Napier and Ferris (1993) define distance in leadership research as a “multidimensional construct that describes the psychological, structural, and functional separation, disparity, or discord between a supervisor and a subordinate” (p. 326). According to the authors, distance in leadership comprises three distinct dimensions: 1. Psychological/social distance that describes the “psychological effects of actual and perceived demographic, cultural, and value differences between supervisor and subordinate” (pp. 328-329). 2. Structural distance that describes “those aspects of distance brought about by physical structure (e.g., actual physical distance between the work spaces of the supervisor and subordinate) as well as organizational structure (e.g., the degree of centralization or span of management) and supervision structure (e.g., the amount of task and social contact between the supervisor and the subordinate)” (pp. 333-334). 3. Functional distance that refers to “the degree of closeness and quality of the functional working relationship between the supervisor and subordinate; in essence, whether the subordinate is a member of the in-group or the out-group of the supervisor” (p. 337). In their study, they derive a model that links the three distances with each other as well as to follower outcomes. The model shows that functional distance (close working relationships) mediates the relationship of psychological/social distance and structural distance with outcomes such as subordinate performance, satisfaction, and withdrawal. For example an increase of psychological and/or structural distance leads to increases in functional distance which consequently leads to decreases of subordinate outcomes (Napier & Ferris, 1993).

Antonakis and Atwater (2002) criticize this model. They state that leader-follower intimacy (functional distance) is not a necessary success factor for leadership. Moreover, they state that the model just describes the dyadic level of analysis and ignores the influence of leaders at higher hierarchical levels or on groups or organizations. The assumption that structural distance leads to weaker follower outcomes may be true for the dyadic context where leaders and followers may work close together, but it cannot be applied to the organizational level of analysis. In their review on “leader distance”, they consequently redefined the dimensions of leader distance. They describe leader distance as a perception that comprises the following distinct dimensions: 1.) social/psychological distance, 2.) physical distance, and 3.) interaction frequency. Until today, these dimensions serve as foundations for most studies on distance and leadership (e.g., Popper (2012), Antonakis & Jacquart (2013),

or Lewandowski & Lisk (2013)). Due to their high relevance in the literature these are discussed in the following.

1.) Social/psychological distance is defined as “perceived differences in status, rank, authority, social standing, and power, which affect the degree of intimacy and social contact that develop between followers and their leader” (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002, p. 682). Scholars report contradicting consequences of social distance in leadership. According to Yagil (1998) social closeness enhances individual consideration in leadership and is therefore an important aspect. On the contrary, Bass (1990) and Shamir (1995) underline that social proximity is not necessary for enfolded effects of charismatic leadership. As mentioned before, Katz and Kahn (1978, p. 683) even state that there needs to be a certain distance for leaders at the top echelon in order to “build a magic aura” and “to make a magical image possible.”

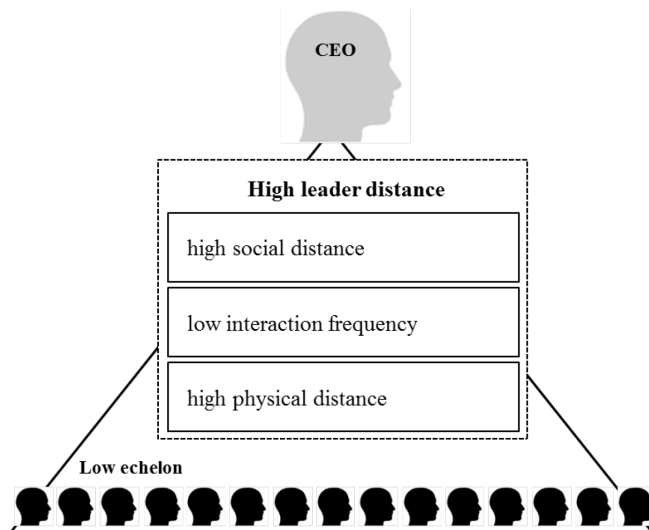
2.) Physical distance is defined as “how far or how close followers are located to their leader” (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002, p. 684). The literature is not consistent regarding the consequences of physical distance. Especially early research contributions argue that distance has negative effects on leadership (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). The underlying assumption of this research stream is that distance has negative effects on e.g., the quality of exchange (Bass, 1990), makes task-oriented leadership impossible (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), or makes monitoring difficult (Yagil, 1998). However, these studies were all conducted in the context of a dyadic level of analysis. Moreover, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) indicate that communication via modern communication media may neutralize the effects of physical distance.

3.) Finally, leader-follower interaction frequency is the third distance dimension described by Antonakis and Atwater (2002). It is defined “as the perceived degree to which leaders interact with followers” (p. 686). The rationale of this dimension is that interaction frequency is associated with closeness between leaders and followers. However, Schyns and Day (2010) propose that the frequency of the leader-member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) does not necessarily imply a high quality of exchange and thus does not lead to perceptions of closeness (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). They also state that various contextual factors influence the interaction frequency and perceptions of closeness. Interaction frequency may therefore not be a profound measurement.

In their study, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) describe the typical CEO (“manor house leadership”) as being located proximally close to followers. Moreover, they describe the CEO to be highly distant in terms of social aspects due to the differences in status and power. Lastly, they state that the CEOs interact only indirectly with followers

(e.g., via communication cascades), and leader-follower interaction frequency is thus very low. On the basis of the above, the following figure illustrates CEO distance to lower echelons in organizations.

Figure 2-1: *CEO distance in organizations*



Own figure based on Antonakis and Atwater (2002)

The notion of Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) dimensions is that these are distinct from each other. Each dimension may independently increase the perceptions of distance in leadership. For example, a leader may be located far away from a follower (physical distant), but still be perceived as socially close and have frequent contact. Moreover, they underline that the dimensions may occur concurrently. While one dimension of distance may increase (e.g., interaction frequency), another may decrease (e.g., physical distance), and thus reduce the overall effects of perceived distance. However, Chun et al. (2009) criticize the limited scope of these three distances. They state that Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) dimensions are just relevant for the analysis of a leader distance at low hierarchical levels. According to them, the large differences of CEOs versus followers in terms of e.g., power (Napier & Ferries, 1993), span of control (B. Schyns, 2013), and workplace proximity are always manifested in high social distance, high physical distance, and low frequency of direct interaction.

2.3.2 Influence of distance on leadership at the CEO level

This section provides an overview of literature published in the field of leadership that gives further insights on distance and its influences for CEOs. The aim is to present literature that broadens the notions of the distance dimensions (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002) described in the previous section.

In a recent study, Chun and colleagues (2009) draw on the differences between close and distant leadership. According to them, close leadership is characterized by “a high level of personal relevance to leaders, a substantial amount of leader-related information, repeated observations of leaders’ actual day-to-day behavior, and direct interpersonal experience with the leader” (Chun, et al., 2009, p. 692). On the contrary, distant leadership is characterized by “low level of followers’ personal relevance to the leader, little leader-related information, occasional observations of the leader, symbolic impression management, and indirect experience with the leader” (p. 692). Their notion is that close leadership is a relational phenomenon where strong commitment with leaders may emerge. Distant leadership, however, is an attributional phenomenon. Attributions are mental processes by which individuals explain or interpret the causes of behavior and events (Heider, 1944). In the context of distant leadership only weaker attitudes (e.g., commitment) toward leaders emerge. Similarly, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) state that attributions are more prevalent in the context of high leader distance because distant followers solely have little actual information about leaders and their behavior (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

The influence of attributions in the context of leadership is not a new finding (e.g., Popper, 2012; Yukl, 1989; Lord & colleagues, 1984). In 1984, Lord and colleagues found, for instance, that employees tend to attribute the results of working tasks to leaders’ qualities. Popper (2012) explained these findings with the fundamental attribution error. The fundamental attribution error is the tendency of individuals “to underestimate the role of situational determinants and to overestimate the degree to which social actions and outcomes reflect the dispositions of relevant actors” (Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977, p. 491). Followers thus put more weight on the influence of distant leaders than on the influence of situational circumstances and interpret the leaders’ influence to explain and judge situations. According to Popper (2012), this is because in the followers’ minds leadership is more easily accessible for interpreting situations than complex situational circumstances. This notion is also in line with Meindl and colleagues (1985), who claim that when situations are difficult or too complex to understand, followers tend to “romanticize” the influence of salient

leaders. The consequence is that they attribute much more influence to leaders than these actually have.

In an exploratory study on charismatic leadership Shamir (1995) reveals significant differences in perceptions of close versus distant charismatic leaders. While close leaders are described on the basis of actual and concrete behaviors such as “sociability, openness, consideration, sense of humor, expertise, [or] dynamism,” distant leaders are described on the basis of broader traits and behaviors such as “courage, rhetorical skills, and ideological orientation” (p. 32).

In a study on CEO charisma, Agle and colleagues (2006) found that organizational performance is associated with perceptions of CEO charisma. In their study, employees of high-performing organizations perceive their (highly distant) CEOs as being more charismatic than employees of low-performing organizations. However, this association did not work the other way round. CEO charisma is not related to subsequent organizational performance. This suggests that followers tend to attribute leader skills to organizational performance in context of leader distance. In a recent study on political leaders, Antonakis and Jaquart (2013) report similar findings. They propose that the influence of “performance cues” (e.g., the knowledge of organizational performance) on judgments of leader quality decreases as leader distance decreases.

Antonakis and Jaquart (2013) give further evidence on the influence of distance on followers’ perceptions and judgments of leaders. They found that when followers have less individuating information about a leader, they tend to ascribe certain qualities to the leader. When distance is large (low individuating information), followers tend to ascribe readily observable qualities to leaders. However, in this context Antonakis and Jaquart (2013) report biases, because these qualities do not necessarily reflect characteristics that are crucial for successful and “effective leadership.” In fact, people ascribe rather stereotypical characteristics (especially visible characteristics such as gender, age, height, or looks) to leaders that do not correlate at all with successful leadership. On the contrary, when followers are close to leaders, they judge them on the basis of actual information. Here, they may directly observe the leaders’ qualities and link these qualities to the outcomes they perceive. These qualities, in particular intelligence or social competence, are therefore less biased and thus are assumed to be more related to actual leadership performance. Antonakis and Jaquart (2013) conclude that in distant situations; people “are susceptible to irrelevant markers of leadership that are simply unrelated to leader outcomes” (p. 179).

Table 2-1 summarizes the overall findings of this section. It underlines that direct interaction between CEOs and employees at low hierarchical echelons represents a black box in the research literature. The only linkage between CEOs and employees that is acknowledged in literature is indirect, via attributions. The next sections therefore investigate the field of e-leadership research in order derive insights on how virtual communication is setup in context of leadership and how it may affect the interaction processes between CEOs and employees.

Table 2-1: *Close versus distant leadership*

	Close leadership	Distant leadership
Legitimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attributions
Traits / Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational behavior • TFL / TAL leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glamorized personality • Charisma
Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification • Emulation of leader behavior • Positive affect toward leader • High commitment to leader • Trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idealized image • Inspiration • Low commitment to leader
Bias	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stereotypes • Romance of leadership • Performance cues

Based on Antonakis & Jacquart, 2013; Chun, et al., 2009; Meindl, 1995; Popper, 2012; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999.

2.4 E-leadership

Modern information technology (IT) is highly proliferated in today's organizations. It has influence on macro- and micro- levels of organizations as it changes the status quo of the organizational context (e.g., industries and markets) as well as organizational processes (e.g., leadership and collaboration). Welpé and colleagues (2010) accentuate that corporations respond to these developments with more flexible and decentralized structures and the implementation of virtual communications systems for improving collaboration. Similarly, Picot and colleagues (2009) state that classical external as well as internal organizational borders are blurring. They mention that by applying IT, issues such as geographic discrepancy or differences in time may not be as relevant any more as they used to be in organizations. Moreover, various scholars underline that IT changes the context of leadership (Kahai, 2013). Leaders can now directly

reach geographically dispersed followers while employees can give immediate feedback anytime and anywhere. Zaccardo and Bader (2003, p. 377) even state that “in the near future, e-leadership will be routine rather than the exception in our thinking about what constitutes organizational leadership.”

This dissertation investigates direct interaction enabled by modern communication technologies between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons. As indicated by the literature review, this phenomenon has not been addressed in the research so far. The following section is structured as follows. It first gives an overview literature on e-leadership before it presents the many-to-one communication technology applied by CEOs. Lastly, it outlines the potential of many-to-one communication to overcome traditional boarders in organizations.

2.4.1 Literature review on e-leadership

E-leadership is a relatively new research stream with many unsolved questions. The first and most-cited study by Avolio was published in 2001. Since then only few studies followed. E-leadership focuses on leadership in organizations that is mediated by advanced information technology (AIT). Avolio defines e-leadership “as a social influence process mediated by AIT to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and/or performance with individuals, groups, and organizations” (2001, p. 617). He underlines that e-leadership can occur at any hierarchical level in organizations and can involve one-to-one and one-to-many interactions within and across large units and organizations.

Various scholars have investigated whether leadership changes with the proliferation of technology. However, no clear consensus exists (Kahai, 2013). Research contributions by Sutton (2010) or Champy (2010) show, for example, that technology does not enable new kinds of leadership. The latter mentions that technology needs traditional leader qualities (as in a face-to-face context) in order to achieve outcomes such as “follower engagement” and “high-quality leader-follower relationships” (Champy, 2010; Kahai, 2013). According to Kahai (2013, p. 67), authors such as Sutton (2010) and Champy (2010) ignore the fact that by communicating via IT (information technology) fundamental human processes such as human cognitions and emotions are triggered and thus influence follower perceptions. By the changing context toward virtuality certain leadership behaviors may be more and others less relevant. In this context, Mohammad (2009) states that the basic roles of leaders don’t change through the implementation of new technologies. For him, the question that emerges is how the leaders can communicate with their followers effectively without

having face-to-face contact (Mohammad, 2009). Moreover, he mentions that e-leaders do not have to be experts in technology. Instead, they have to know about their employee's needs and know how to build relationships and trust (Mohammad, 2009). Therefore, e-leaders need to be cautious, especially in the early phase of technology appropriation, because this phase has a huge influence on the level of trust and satisfaction of employees (Avolio & Kahai, 2003).

Most research on e-leadership is accomplished on the group level and focuses on virtual teams e.g., Fiol & O'Conner (2005), Fjermestad (2009), Ilze (2003), Purvanova & Bono (2009), Siebdrat, Hoegl, & Ernst (2009), Sivunen (2008), and Niermann (2008). Hambley and colleagues (2007) define virtual teams as interdependent groups of individuals who work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with communication links that are heavily dependent upon advanced information technologies. In this context, research focuses especially on behavioral aspects of leadership such as, e.g., transformational leadership (Bass, et al., 1987). Ilze (2003) accentuates that in a virtual team context, leadership models that are constructed on the basis of face-to-face interactions cannot fully explain how virtual leadership works. She states that in virtual teams, social control is weaker than in face-to-face teams, because direct supervision is not feasible and differences in location and experiences may also negatively influence social control.

Research in the field of virtual teams indicates that leadership is one of the main contributors to team effectiveness. It can be drawn from the literature that the transactional/transformational leadership paradigm can be applied for virtual teams as well (Hambley, et al., 2007). Transactional leaders (TALs) see leadership as an exchange process between leaders and followers (Bass, et al., 1987). Two main factors influence this process: 1.) contingent rewards, and 2.) management by exception. As mentioned before (see section 2.2), transformational leadership (TFL) is comprised by four behavioral dimensions: 1.) idealized influence, 2.) inspirational motivation, 3.) intellectual stimulation, and 4.) individual consideration (Bass, et al., 1987). The literature indicates that as the communication medium becomes more anonymous transformational leadership might be more effective. Interestingly, Hambley and colleagues (2007) show that face-to-face communication and virtual interaction were similar with regards to their effects on group performance, as well as regarding solution quality and acceptance. Kahai presents a possible influence of leadership style on group outcomes in the context of virtuality (1997). He argues that a participative leadership style (e.g., TFL) might lead to greater team inputs in the form of supporting remarks and solution proposals. In another study on virtual collaboration, Sosik and

colleagues (1997) find that transformational leadership is associated with higher group potency and higher group effectiveness. Moreover, they state that it limits social loafing, enhances elaboration and originality, and has a motivating effect on collective performance (Sosik, Avolio, & Kahai, 1997). Dionne and colleagues (2004) mention a direct influence of transformational leadership on team commitment and shared vision and thus on team cohesion. Balthazard and colleagues indicate that face-to-face teams are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of transformational leadership (Balthazard, Waldman, Howell, & Atwater, 2002). Purvanova & Bono (2009) even present evidence for transformational leadership having a stronger positive effect in virtual teams than on traditional teams. However, some scholars state doubts about the influence of transformational leadership styles on e-leadership. Den Hartoga and colleagues (2007) state that an impact of leadership may not emerge in the context of virtuality. As a reason they state that emotions cannot occur online, for instance, due to a lack of interactivity as well as the fact that relationships cannot be established due to depersonalized communication (Markus, 1994).

It can be concluded from the above that the literature on e-leadership reports conflicting outcomes. Most studies at the group level of analysis indicate that transformational leadership in the context of virtual teams leads to high group cohesion and team outcomes. However, these studies also indicate that virtual communication processes may differ from face-to-face leadership processes, e.g., in terms of behavioral needs and their effects. Evidence of the influence of e-leadership at the organizational level is rare. Moreover, current research lacks contributions dealing with the direct interaction between CEOs and employees in the context of e-leadership.

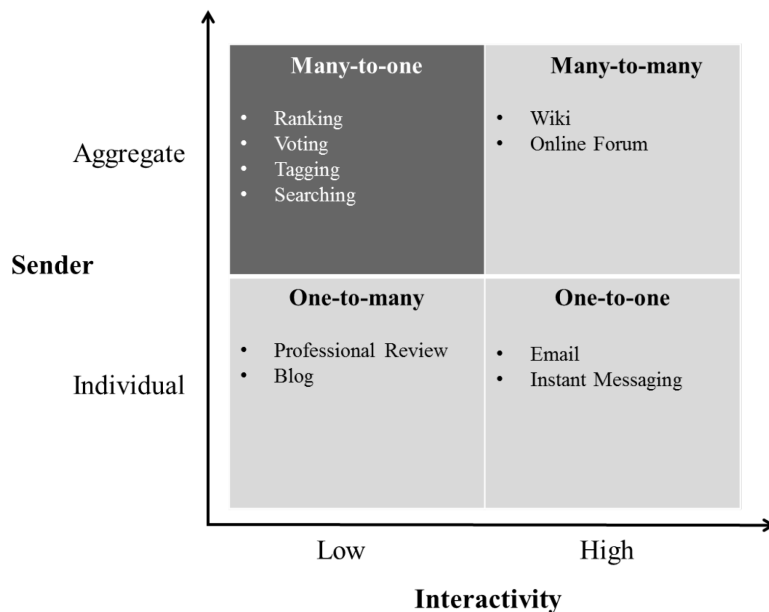
2.4.2 E-leadership technology for CEOs

In today's organizations, the usage of traditional computer-mediated communication (CMC) as well as modern Web 2.0-based social media is continuously increasing (Chui, et al., 2012). Examples of CMC systems are, for instance, emails, instant messaging, and video-conferencing; Web 2.0-based solutions are, for instance, blogs, wikis, Twitter, or Facebook (Kahai, 2013). This dissertation does not aim to give insights on all these systems; this would go beyond its scope. Instead, this dissertation focuses on illustrating a Web 2.0-based system, so called "many-to-one communication"⁷ that can be implemented in organizations to enable virtual

⁷ also called ballot-box communication

communication between CEOs and employees. Many-to-one communication represents “an enumerating mechanism that aggregates individual choices, opinion, or experience, and in doing so, effectively enabling a new medium to reveal the interests of the mass population” (Xia, et al., 2007, p. 265). There exist different types of CMC systems in online communities that are outlined in Figure 2-2 (Xia, et al., 2009, p. 139).

Figure 2-2: *Many-to-one communication in the field of CMC*



Source: Xia, et al., 2009, p. 139

As opposed to other CMC systems, many-to-one communication gives a large amount of users (senders) a chance to participate actively in the community. They can directly express their opinion about given topics or simply follow collective preferences of a community. What makes this communication special is that it reduces the information richness of communication by replacing messages with a set of limited choices. It thus effectively reveals the interests of many participants by offering a limited amount of communication choices such as voting, tagging, and rating (see Table 2-2). The effort for users to participate in the communication process is therefore relatively low and the effectiveness of communication is very high. Due to the less-attached communication choices users tend to participate more in these communities, and this facilitates information exchange. Another feature of many-to-one communities is that users get to know the other user’s preferences through aggregated measures such as total views or rankings. According to Xia and colleagues (2009), there are four

different features applied in many-to-one communication: access statistics, rating/voting, tagging/folksonomy, and searching. The following table illustrates these features.

Table 2-2: *Many-to-one related features in online communities*

	Description	Examples
Access Statistics	Indicating the popularity using view ranking, the number of visitors, and the number of comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E.g., YouTube, Last.fm
Rating/Voting	Revealing users' opinions or the value of information through a poll or relevant activities such as marking as favorites and referencing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social news, e.g., Slashdot, Digg, reddit • Blog aggregator, e.g., Technorati
Tagging/Folksonomy	Generating metadata of content from individual labels (keywords) and publishing the outcome as various rankings, tag clouds, or search results.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual tagging, e.g., YouTube, Flickr • Social bookmarking, e.g., Backflip • Collaborative tagging, e.g., WikiMapia
Searching	Recommending the most relevant results for searches based on other users' search and feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social network search engines, e.g., Jookster

Source: Xia, et al., 2009, p. 139.

However, Xia et al. mention that compared to other forms of communication, many-to-one communication is less interactive and lacks the ability to encourage the exchange of complex semantic meanings (Xia, et al., 2009).

The many-to-one communication system that is subject to the analysis in this dissertation was created by a European company ("provider") that implements its solution in several multinational corporations. Their solution represents an online platform that is accessible for all employees in the respective organization. The intention of the platform is to enhance communication between CEOs (or top management teams) and employees. An executive of the provider stated that "today, many organizations try to fly without knowing where to go. Through many-to-one communication, senior management teams get to know the unfiltered issues of their employees and can react directly on the basis of fruitful information."⁸ Both the CEO and employees (users) participate in the many-to-one communication process. When employees have an idea, a question, or an issue in mind that they want to discuss with the CEO, they can post their input on the platform. The platform then aggregates these

⁸ Stated in preliminary interview. See appendix A.1.

inputs and clusters them on the basis of the employees' majority vote. The more interesting an input is for the users, the more it may get voted on. In order to concentrate on relevant issues, the CEO/senior management teams only respond to the top-rated inputs. Special about the platform is therefore that employees can decide what to discuss with the CEO by the majority vote. Moreover, the employees can decide over their degree of participation in the communication process. They can, for instance, post issues, or just rate other posts, or even not take part in the process at all. There are clear rules that guarantee a fair and transparent communication process. The top-voted inputs are forwarded to the CEO. Consequently, the CEO states his opinion by posting an answer to the platform. Thereby, the CEO gets an overview of the most important topics and can address these directly. The communication process also works the reverse way. The CEO can provide input on the platform and ask employees for their opinions.

2.4.3 Many-to-one communication and CEO distance

So far, this chapter shows that the notion in leadership theory is that CEOs only directly interact with employees from higher organizational echelons. Interaction with lower hierarchical echelons thus works indirectly via cascades of communication through subordinates. However, recent literature on e-leadership states that leadership at a distance may also emerge via social media or other electronic channels (Antonakis & Jacquart, 2013). Kahai (2013) suggests that by communicating via IT fundamental human processes such as human cognitions and emotions may be triggered and may consequently also influence follower perceptions. However, other scholars state doubts on the impact of leadership in a virtual context (Hartog, Keegan, & Verburg, 2007). They mention that emotions cannot occur online due to low interactivity in virtual communication and that relationships suffer due to depersonalized communication (Markus, 1994).

This dissertation aims to explore this gap in the literature. For the analysis, it investigates the many-to-one communication process between CEOs and employees in organizations. Previous research literature indicates that many-to-one communication may influence the perceptions of CEO distance by changing the status quo of various traditional borders in organizations such as e.g., 1.) information/time, 2.) location, and 3.) hierarchy/agenda.

1.) Due to differences in levels of hierarchy and bureaucracy in organizations, information often needs a long time until it reaches employees (top-down) or senior management teams (bottom-up). This process is normally mediated by middle

managers via information cascades, because these have direct contact to senior management as well as employees (Conway & Monks, 2011; Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011). Avolio and colleagues (2003) mention that due to a greater access to IT in organizations, leadership is migrating toward lower levels. Many-to-one communication may thus offer a chance for CEOs to better control this process.

2.) Today, employees in organizations already communicate on the virtual level. Moreover, organizations are increasingly internationally dispersed. The broad array of literature concerning virtual teams underlines this (Bughin, 2008; Fjermestad, 2009; McAfee, 2006). Many-to-one communication may influence communication across hierarchical and spatial boundaries. This is in line with Avolio and colleagues (2003) who mention that e-leadership can create networks that go across community boundaries and traditional organizational borders.

3.) The agenda of CEOs/senior management and employees of lower echelons differ highly. The focus of CEOs lies more on the strategic development of their organization (see section 2.2), while lower echelons work mainly on operational topics (Raes, et al., 2011). By enhancing the information flow via many-to-one communication, both CEOs and employees may gain insight in the others' agenda/topics.

However, the effects of the direct interaction between CEOs and employees at lower hierarchical echelons enabled by many-to-one communication tools have not been explored so far. The literature does not provide a coherent framework that seems appropriate for capturing the complexity of e-leadership via many-to-one communication at the CEO level⁹. This dissertation aims to address this gap in the literature. The subsequent chapter introduces the research methodology that is applied for the explorative analysis.

⁹ Note: In the following, the author uses the terms e-leadership, many-to-one communication, and virtual interaction interchangeably to describe many-to-one communication applied by CEOs and employees of lower organizational echelons.

3 Research methodology

Chapter 2 outlined that e-leadership applied by CEOs is a black box in existent literature. This dissertation explores many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees in organizations with the aim of developing a conceptual framework. Therefore, it applies multiple-case studies as research methodology. The present chapter describes the research methodology that is applied in this dissertation. It is divided in two sections. The first section introduces theory on qualitative research and case studies (section 3.1). Based on these insights, the second section outlines the research methodology that is applied in the dissertation (section 3.2).

3.1 Theory on qualitative research and multiple-case studies

This section first outlines the underlying assumptions of qualitative research from a theoretical perspective. Therefore, it starts by introducing the paradigms of research before it sheds light on case study research. Lastly, it introduces multiple-case research based on Eisenhardt (1989b).

3.1.1 Research paradigms and qualitative research

All research is based on assumptions, concepts, and underlying principles. These assumptions and principles are understood as paradigms in the literature. Paradigms constitute the human beliefs about the world they live in (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kuhn, 1962). They also constitute the nature of research and therefore the selection of the research methodology that is appropriate for the analysis of a phenomenon. Gephart (2004) classified the array of paradigms into three groups (see Table 3-1): 1.) positivism/post-positivism, 2.) interpretive research, and 3.) critical postmodernism. Various scholars suggest that it is crucial in research to apply a methodology that is consistent with one of these research paradigms (e.g., Langley & Abdallah, 2011; Gephart, 2004; Walsham, 1995).

1.) Positivism/post-positivism assumes that reality is objectively given and that it can be reflected and systematized by empirical methods (Gephart, 2004). Positivist researchers understand knowledge as a quantifiable entity. For them, knowledge consists only of facts such as verified parameters (Walsham, 1995). Furthermore, they assume that facts and values are distinct. The ultimate goal of positivist researchers is to discover the objective truth. Post-positivism represents a modified perspective that is less strict than positivism. Post-positivism assumes, for instance, that nothing

outside the human mind can be perceived with full accuracy and “reality can be known only probabilistically” (Gephart, 2004, p. 456; Thomas, 2010).

2.) Contrary to positivist research, interpretive research assumes that reality consists of subjective experiences (Thomas, 2010). The goal of interpretive research is thus to understand phenomena, the meaning and the concepts of actors in real settings. Interpretive research assumes that people can adopt diverse meanings. Consequently, there exist different and even competing definitions of reality. Interpretive researchers focus on “how [these] different meanings held by different person or groups produce a sense of truth” and investigate verbal as well as nonverbal actions (Gephart, 2004, p. 457). Walsham (1995) states that the purpose of interpretive research is not to discover truth but instead to understand the reality of the involved actors (Walsham, 1995). Gummesson (1991) agrees and concludes that “maybe it’s a fact that there are no facts” (Gummesson, 1991, p. 126 in Hartmann, 1992).

3.) Critical postmodernism combines the two different views of critical theory and the postmodern approach (Gephart, 2004). Critical postmodernism can be considered as a broad collection of theories that are “essential parts of a semiotic analysis” (Thomas, 2010, p. 299). It assumes that social reality emerged historically and formed conflicting social structures. The aim of critical postmodernism is to question the status quo “through the exposure of what are believed to be deep-seated, structural contradictions within social systems” with dialogic methods (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 6). However, compared to positivism and interpretive research, critical postmodernism is not well established in management research (Gephart, 2004).

Table 3-1: *Three research paradigms by Gephart (2004)*

	Positivism / post-positivism	Interpretive research	Critical postmodernism
Assumption	Realism: Objective reality that can be understood by mirror of science: definitive/probabilistic.	Relativism: Local intersubjective realities composed from subjective and objective meanings: represented with concepts of actors.	Historical realism: Material/symbolic reality shaped by values and crystallizes over time.
Purpose	Uncover reality, discover truth.	Describe meanings, understanding of reality.	Uncover hidden interests and contradictions.
Tasks	Undertake explanation and control of variables: discern verified hypotheses or non-falsified hypotheses.	Produce descriptions of members’ meanings and definitions of situation: understand reality construction.	Develop structural or historical insights that reveal contradictions and allow emancipation, spaces for silenced voices.
Product	Developing theory in form of	Capturing and modeling informants	Understand historical evolution of

testable propositions.

meaning.

meanings, material practices,
contradictions, and inequalities.

Source: Gephart, 2004, p. 456; Langley & Abdallah, 2011, p. 205.

Traditionally, qualitative research is defined as interpretive research (Mayring, 2002). Qualitative research was “born out of the concern to understand the other”. It can be defined as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, pp. 2-4). It is conducted mostly in natural settings where the observer interacts with the phenomenon of interest. The phenomenon is then absorbed by the observer into representations such as e.g., interviews, recordings, field notes, or memos, and thus involves an subjective and interpretive approach for the analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). However, the field of qualitative research is broad with different methods that have a long history in research of various disciplines. In sociology and anthropology the first qualitative studies emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. Shortly after, qualitative research was applied in other social and behavioral disciplines as well, such as political science, business, history, medicine, social work, and communications research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In the meantime, qualitative researchers have developed numerous methods, that aim to explore human and social phenomena, crosscut disciplines, and subjects, and comprise many interconnected traditions, concepts, and terms (Creswell, 1998). They draw upon different approaches¹⁰ such as e.g., narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies (Creswell, 2007). These methods are not fully distinct, but each of them gives the research a unique character (Morse, 1994).

However, qualitative research was long time discussed with controversy in science (Walsham, 1995). Especially positivist researchers termed the focus on interpretive, humanistic, and descriptive elements as being unscientific due to their lack of objectivity (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). Some quantitative theorists therefore consider qualitative research as a mistreatment of their tradition of “hard” science, where they assume that “truth can transcend opinion and personal bias” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 12). The controversy thus lies in the contradiction of the research paradigms.

This controversy is the reason why management literature was long time strongly dominated by post-positivist research. A study in 1991 found, for instance, that of all top rated research on organization information systems (155 articles) 97 percent followed positivist assumptions, three percent were interpretive, and no research

¹⁰ An introduction of all qualitative approaches and methods would go beyond the scope of this dissertation.

contribution was classified into the critical postmodernism category (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). However, Mayring (2002) states that, in the last decades there has been a turn towards qualitative research and that it has increasingly gained in acceptance. Key reason is that, due to its flexible and humanistic focus, qualitative research can find answers to phenomena that cannot be addressed quantitatively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Interestingly, qualitative and quantitative research today even have various overlaps (Gephart, 2004). Gephart (2004) states, for instance, that meanwhile a large proportion of qualitative research in top-rated journals (e.g., *Academy of Management Journal*) follows post-positivism assumptions. Most researchers following this approach aim to develop testable propositions or generalizable hypotheses qualitatively (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 546). Therefore, they integrate e.g., “statistics, tables, graphs, and numbers” in their analysis in order to enhance objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 10). Gephart (2004) thus concludes that in academic practice of qualitative research the distinction between the post-positivist tradition and the interpretive tradition is not clear anymore and even “at times superficial” (p. 456).

3.1.2 Introduction to case study research

Case studies are distinct research methods that have their origins in qualitative research. Case studies are applied in different fields such as e.g., anthropology, business, sociology, political science, and psychology. They aim to contribute to various levels of research such as the individual, the group, and the organizational level, and, on even larger scales, for social and political phenomena (Yin, 2003). Patton (2002, p. 55) states that “regardless of the unit of analysis, a qualitative case study seeks to describe that unit in depth and detail, holistically, and in context”. Yin (2003) agrees with this notion and adds that the essence of all case studies is illuminating “a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result.” (p. 17).

Existent literature describes four key criteria for choosing case research over other research methods. Case study research is especially appropriate for: addressing “how” and “why” questions (Walsham, 1995), examining complex phenomena within a real-life context (Klein & Myers, 1999), in contexts when investigators have little control over the event, and when multiple sources of evidence are investigated (Yin, 2003). In case-study research there exist three main case-study designs that can be employed (Yin, 2003). The selection of the design depends on the researchers’ assumptions, the

research questions, and the goals of the research. Case studies can be applied in 1.) exploratory, 2.) explanatory, and 3.) descriptive inquiries.

1.) Explorative research represents the preliminary stage in research. It enters a new field and tries to develop theory. It can be applied for various research questions such as “why?” or “how?” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) “what?”, “who?”, and “where?” (Yin, 2003). In this context the research questions are rather broadly scoped and the researcher has a great deal of flexibility (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Gebhart (2004) calls this research phenomenon-driven and inductive, because it is justified by an interesting phenomenon that lacks an existing theory. Interestingly, many of the top-published studies apply explorative research and work with post-positivist assumptions e.g., Martin and Eisenhardt (2010), or Hallen and Eisenhardt (2012). In these studies, the exploration process is not fully inductive. Often, theory is developed in an iterative process by integrating inductive elements of data and deductive elements of existing theory (Pan & Tan, 2011).

2.) Descriptive case studies aim to elaborate theory (what happened?). They focus on information on a particular feature of a phenomenon, or an aspect of behavior with the aim to provide a better understanding of processes (Schell, 1992). Descriptive case studies often have an interpretive and inductive focus. However, Yin (1998) warns that descriptive case studies often tend to “describe everything” and lack focus. Pan and Tan (2011) even state that purely descriptive case studies may lack theoretical contributions.

3.) Explanatory case studies focus on explaining why and how a phenomenon happens. They aim to give an accurate replication of the facts and the causality of the respective phenomenon. Explanatory cases consist of precise descriptions of the phenomenon in the case. They look for alternative explanations, and make conclusions based on credible explanations (Yin, 1981). A key issue of explanative case studies is that they lack convincing causality compared to other available (e.g., statistical) means (Pan & Tan, 2011, p. 163). In academic practice there are overlaps between explorative, explanative, and descriptive inquiries (Schell, 1992). Yin (2003) even mentions that some of the best case studies combine both exploratory and descriptive inquiries.

Another key decision in designing case studies is to choose between a.) single- and b.) multiple-case designs (Yin, 2003).

a.) Single-case studies are chosen when a case is especially revealing and offers a high richness of data (Langley & Abdallah, 2011), or when a case is critical, unique, or longitudinal (Yin, 2003). Single-case studies aim to generate in-depth, trustworthy, and diverse theory that captures the informants’ understanding of organizational

phenomena. Most of these studies ground in interpretive assumptions (Langley & Abdallah, 2011) e.g., in Gioia and colleagues (2010).

b.) In multiple case designs, two or more cases are chosen with the aim to create and maximize credible novelty of a phenomenon (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). They often comprise post-positivist notions. The key procedure in multiple-case studies is applying a replication logic. Replication logic means following and duplicating the same conditions for all cases with the goal to separate the unimportant- from the important information. The setup of the replication process can be compared to the setup of multiple experiments; here researchers try to replicate findings of their first experiment in additional experiments in order to ensure valid results. Similarly, findings that are generated by replication logic can be considered as more robust compared to e.g., single-case studies (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) mentions two strategies for case selection in multiple-case studies. Either 1.) cases are selected that predict similar results (literal replication), or 2.) cases are selected that predict contrasting results but for certain proposed reasons (theoretical replication). Important here is that, in both replication procedures, the goal is to develop a theoretical framework that describes conditions that are relevant for a phenomenon to be proven true (literal replication), or conditions for a phenomenon to be proven false (theoretical replication) (Yin, 2003).

Multiple-case studies based on the replication logic have distinct advantages over single-case studies. Single-case studies often richly describe the research phenomenon but “multiple-case studies typically provide a stronger base for theory building” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). Moreover, since evidence is based on various cases, multiple-case research is often considered as more elaborated with more robust findings (Yin, 2003). Some scholars even state that multiple-case studies are not necessarily weakening within-case understanding (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Pan and Tan (2011) conclude that exploratory research with a multiple-case design is the most convincing case study inquiry, because it combines inherent richness of case data with compelling findings from various cases.

However, the literature also states drawbacks of multiple-case research. One is the lack of clear methodology guidance. Actually, guidance on multiple-case research can even be contradictory and does not necessarily help to make sense of the complexity from multiple cases (Gephart, 2004). The key challenge of multiple case studies lies in analyzing and combining the various sources, actors, and different temporal settings and to present the findings in a credible way (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). From a practical perspective, a disadvantage of multiple-case research is that it requires

extensive resources such as e.g., time and financial resources that often go beyond the means of single independent researchers (Yin, 2003). Moreover, it is challenging to gain access to relevant cases. Pan and Tan (2011) state, for instance, that in their experience not even one of 10 requested companies participated in their studies.

3.1.3 The Eisenhardt method as dominant logic in multiple-case research

While quantitative research has distinct methodological procedures, there is “a lack of a boilerplate” in qualitative research (Pratt, 2009). However, insightful instructions/templates have recently started to appear for generating case study research. Based on a literature review on case studies, Langley and Abdallah (2011) outline such an instruction. They state that there currently exists a dominant logic in multiple-case research called “the Eisenhardt method” (p. 203). The name refers to the scholar Kathleen Eisenhardt, who published various articles in top-rated journals within the last decades by applying a distinct method of research (e.g., Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012; Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011; Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009). The overall aim of “the Eisenhardt method” is to maximize credible novelty of a phenomenon by multiple-case exploration. It is grounded in post-positivist assumptions and applies inductive analysis (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Eisenhardt (1989b) defines her approach as “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (p. 534). Her method represents a “synthesis” of previous theory on case-studies such as e.g., designing case studies by Yin (1984), or inductive theory building by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and her own extensions, specifications, and techniques (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 532). The analysis of various studies from Eisenhardt (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989b) and various studies on the Eisenhardt method (e.g., Langley & Abdallah, 2011) revealed a set of distinct elements that are core to the approach. These give profound insights on how to conduct high quality multiple-case research. Eisenhardt (1989b) applies five elements that are crucial for the explorative case analysis: 1.) theoretical sampling, 2.) triangulation of data, 3.) iteration process of developing theory, 4.) data tables, and 5.) offering explanation. These elements are consequently used as guidance for the case analysis in this dissertation.

1.) A key element of the Eisenhardt method is theoretical sampling (called theoretical replication in Yin (2003)). The key criterion for selecting cases for the analysis is that all offer promising insights for the same phenomena. Eisenhardt further applies a procedure called polar sampling, where she purposely chooses cases a.) that perform very well, and others b.) that perform very poorly on a key dimension of the analysis.

Consequently, she uses this information to identify patterns across the cases and to identify reasons for the differences in performance (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

2.) Triangulation of data is crucial for multiple-case research as it aims to minimize the inherent bias. Eisenhardt conducts, for instance, interviews with informants that have different perspectives on phenomena (e.g., as they belong to different hierarchical levels). Moreover, Eisenhardt uses quantitative data to support the qualitative data and to strengthen the chain of evidence. Another element of triangulation is that Eisenhardt combines real-time with retrospective data (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 28).

3.) Eisenhardt (1989b) applies inductive case analysis. However, Eisenhardt actually applies an interactive process of induction (data from cases) and deduction (data from theory) (1989b). According to Eisenhardt (1989b) this is the most difficult part of the research process. A first and crucial process in her case research is “within-case analysis,” where she conducts narrative case reports that help coping with the enormous volume of data (Eisenhardt, 1989b). The next step of the process is cross-case analysis, where patterns across the cases are identified. Here, she identifies “within-group similarities” and “intergroup differences” across the cases and integrates existing literature that help structuring the analysis and developing theory (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 541). Eisenhardt (1989b) calls this a highly iterative process that compares “systematically the emergent frame with the evidence from each case in order to assess how well or poorly it fits with case data.” (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 541). The idea is to constantly compare the emerging theory with the evidence from the cases in order to generate elaborated propositions (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

4.) A further element of the Eisenhardt method is the integration of data tables into the analysis. These aim to support the emerging story by giving narrative examples of the high- and low-performing cases (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). For Eisenhardt the tables are crucial, because they “summarize case evidence and indicate how the focal construct is measured, thus increasing the testability of the theory and creating a particularly strong bridge for qualitative evidence to theory-testing research.” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 29).

5.) A final step of the Eisenhardt method is offering explanation of the findings by integrating literature. This process “involves asking what is similar to [literature], what does it contradict, and why” (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 544). Offering explanation deepens the credibility of the analysis by linking the findings to prior theory (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

3.2 Research procedure for the analysis in this dissertation

This dissertation explores e-leadership applied by CEOs in organizations with the aim to generate a conceptual framework. Section 3.1 gives important insights for the development of the research methodology of this dissertation. The “Eisenhardt method” offers a great potential for exploring the research phenomenon. It applies post-positivist assumptions and inductively explores multiple cases. On the one side it gives the researcher the flexibility that is crucial for developing rich insights on broad phenomena, because it is appropriate for addressing the phenomena in a real-life context and for combining the various sources of evidence (e.g., CEO and lower echelons). On the other side it offers robust findings by combining multiple-case research with distinct techniques such as triangulation or applying data tables.

This section outlines the research methodology of this dissertation in detail. The section is based on Eisenhardt (1989b) but also applies elements of Pan and Tan (2011) and Yin (2003). It begins with outlying criteria for the case selection. Then, it draws the details of data collection, and lastly, it gives insights on the data analysis process.

3.2.1 Case selection criteria

The selection of the cases for the multiple-case analyses is a crucial process (Eisenhardt, 1989b). The intention is to find cases that match predetermined research criteria. The literature suggests that there exist various criteria for selecting cases. A case may be selected, for instance, because it deals with phenomena in internationally renowned organization, a difficult to access phenomenon, or because it is an extreme case (Pan & Tan, 2011). Pettigrew (1990) further suggests an approach that he calls “planned opportunism” where selection is also based on resource- and opportunity considerations. Eisenhardt (1989b) applies a mixture of the above criteria. However, the main criterion she uses is polar sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989b). Polar sampling means that she selects her cases systematically because they either perform extremely well or extremely poorly (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). This helps juxtaposing cross-case similarities and differences.

For the analysis in this dissertation three cases were selected. As proposed above, these were chosen on the basis of various criteria. The author only considered corporations with CEOs that apply an identical technology that mediates the e-leadership process. This was a crucial criterion for ensuring comparability across the cases and external validity (Gibbert, et al., 2008). Consequently, in all three selected

cases the CEOs apply many-to-one communication and this for a period of 21 months at a minimum. Another criterion was that the cases concentrate on internationally renowned organizations of a certain size. This criterion was chosen to enhance validity in the analysis. Two of the three selected companies are relatively similar in size. They both make revenues of more than 30 billion euros and each has more than 50 thousand employees. One of the selected companies is smaller in size with revenues of around 1-2 billion euros and around 6,000 employees. However, this selection is in line with what Pettigrew (1990) stated as planned opportunism.

Moreover, polar sampling was applied by making the “emergent constructs and theoretical relationships transparently observable” (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 535) in the analysis. One of the three cases predicted high performance of the many-to-one communication process, while the other two cases predicted low performance. The prediction was based on information from an informal focus group with informants from the platform provider¹¹ (4 persons, 2 hours discussion at the very beginning of the study) and the many-to-one platform manager at the respective company (1 hour telephone interviews at the very beginning of the study) (see appendix A). At this early stage of the research process, the author had no *ex ante* definition for the performance of the cases. Instead he applied a procedure suggested by Brown and Eisenhardt (1997, p. 4). Many-to-one communication performance was consequently defined as the informants did, in terms of the interactivity level of communication between CEO and employees.

3.2.2 Details of the data collection

In the present dissertation the identity of the companies and the informants were concealed in order to ensure anonymity. Yin (2003) states that anonymity of cases and informants are desirable for reducing bias and protecting the individuals. The cases were consequently labeled as Company X, Y, and Z; and the informants as informant X, Y, and Z, respectively. Table 3-2 summarizes key information about the data collection.

At the three organizations data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, archival records (e.g., platform traffic), and secondary sources (e.g., usage statistics). The evidence includes real-time observations (e.g., platform traffic) and retrospective data (e.g., interviews). As in Eisenhardt and Martin (2010) and Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) the primary sources of data were semi-structured interviews (see appendix A).

¹¹ The many-to-one communication platforms were setup in the organizations by an external provider. See section 2.4.2 for detailed information.

Semi-structured interviews are very appropriate for explorative studies because they combine the flexibility of open-ended questions such as e.g., “What did you think about the platform?”, with the structure of predetermined questions that are related to a domain of interest such as e.g., “Do you have the feeling that you can directly contact the CEO through the platform?” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 149). Moreover, the interviews addressed bias in various ways. Courtroom questioning was applied in the interviews (Huber & Power, 1985). The informants had to focus here on what others were doing e.g., “How did your colleagues feel/think about the platform?”. Furthermore, critical incident technique was applied in the interviews (Flanagan, 1954). Here, the author asked for critical events during the many-to-one process in order to identify major problem areas, e.g., “[...] What were the critical events that you observed?”.

Table 3-2: Overview of data collection

Com-pany	Industry / Revenues / Number of employees	Number of informants / Informants by position	Interview process / Interview type / Informant location	Interview transcripts / Archival records
X	Manufacturer	Total: 10 interviews	Sept.-Dec. 2012	~ 150 pages
	> 30 bn. €	CEO*: -	7 face-to-face interviews	~ 400 pages
	> 60 tsd.	CEO assistant: 1 Platform manager: 1 Employees: 8	3 telephone interviews France, Germany, Spain	
Y	Retail and wholesale	Total: 10 interviews	Oct.-Dec. 2012	~ 150 pages
	> 60 bn. €	CEO: 1	9 face-to-face interviews	~ 300 pages
	> 200 tsd.	CEO assistant: 1 Platform manager: 1 Employees: 7	1 telephone interview Germany	
Z	Manufacturer	Total: 10 interviews	Feb.-Apr. 2013	~ 100 pages
	> 1 bn. €	CEO: 1	8 face-to-face interviews	~ 300 pages
	> 6 tsd.	CFO: 1 Platform manager: 1 Employees: 7	2 telephone interviews China, Germany, India	

* At Company X the author could not interview the CEO. Instead the CEO assistant – who was highly involved in the many-to-one process – revealed insightful information about the CEO.

At each company 10 interviews were held. These lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. The informants could choose whether the interviews were held in English or German. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts totaled about 400 pages. The author translated key statements that were in German into English. Detailed information on the informants as well as the transcripts are attached in appendix A. As suggested by Eisenhardt (1989b), the informants were from different

hierarchical levels in the organizations. There were three types of informants selected: 1. CEO/CEO assistant, 2. platform manager, 3. employees. The CEOs and their assistants represent the perspective of the CEO in the many-to-one communication process and were expected to reveal insights on the execution of the many-to-one process. The platform managers are internally responsible for the many-to-one communication process and gave insights on the internal setup and maintenance. The selected employees represent the perspective of the lower echelons in the organizations. All of them are in the lower tiers of their organization and none of the employees works directly with the CEO. Since the author did not have enough information on potential informants, they were selected by “snowball sampling” (Heckathorn, 1997). This means that they were identified by the platform manager or by other informants. As a result, a broad mix of users with different demographic backgrounds (e.g., origin, gender) and different platform usage habits (e.g., non-user, heavy-user) were selected for the interviews.

For each of the three types of informants the author used separate interview guides. The version of the CEO focused, for instance, on his personal intention with the platform, his usage behavior, and his assessment of its performance. The version of the platform manager particularly concentrated on the internal processes of the many-to-one communication process. The interview guide for the informants focused on their intention to apply many-to-one communication, their observations, their personal experiences, and their perceptions of the CEO. Each interview guide had four sections. It began with general information about the informants and the context of the organization. Then, it focused on the organizational adoption of the platform, before it concentrated on the informants’ individual usage experiences. Lastly, the informants gave narrative assessments. The full interview guide (type: employee) is outlined in appendix B.

After each qualitative interview, the author gathered quantitative data on the informants’ perceptions of the platform, the CEO, and the organization. The intention of the author by integrating quantitative data in the qualitative analysis was to strengthen the chain of evidence of the cases. This is in line with Martin and Eisenhardt (2010) who also integrate quantitative data in their case studies. The quantitative data helps to establish a more complete picture of cross-business unit collaborations in their cases. For their analysis, they integrated qualitative statements and quantitative data in tables that draw their chain of evidence.

Appendix B.2 outlines the questionnaires that were distributed to the informants. First, the author asked the informants 15 close-ended questions where they had to evaluate

their experiences and perceptions of the CEO in the many-to-one communication process on a five-point Likert scale (see appendix B.2.1), for example, e.g., “The many-to-one platform changed the transparency of the CEO.” These questions were developed by the author. Secondly, the author gathered data on “CEO charisma.” Here, the author applied a scale (10 items) of Wilderom and colleagues (2012) that they used for the evaluation of charismatic behavior of top managers (see appendix B.2.2). In order to get better insights on the CEO, the informants had to rate CEO charisma on a five-point Likert scale. Thirdly, the author gathered data on organizational climate. Organizational climate describes the shared perceptions of the employees on their organization. Therefore, the author applied four scales (each 4-6 items) taken from the “organizational climate measure” (OCM) (Patterson et al., 2004). Here, the informants had to rate on a four-point Likert scale how they perceive their organizational climate (see Appendix B.2.3).

3.2.3 Details of the data analysis

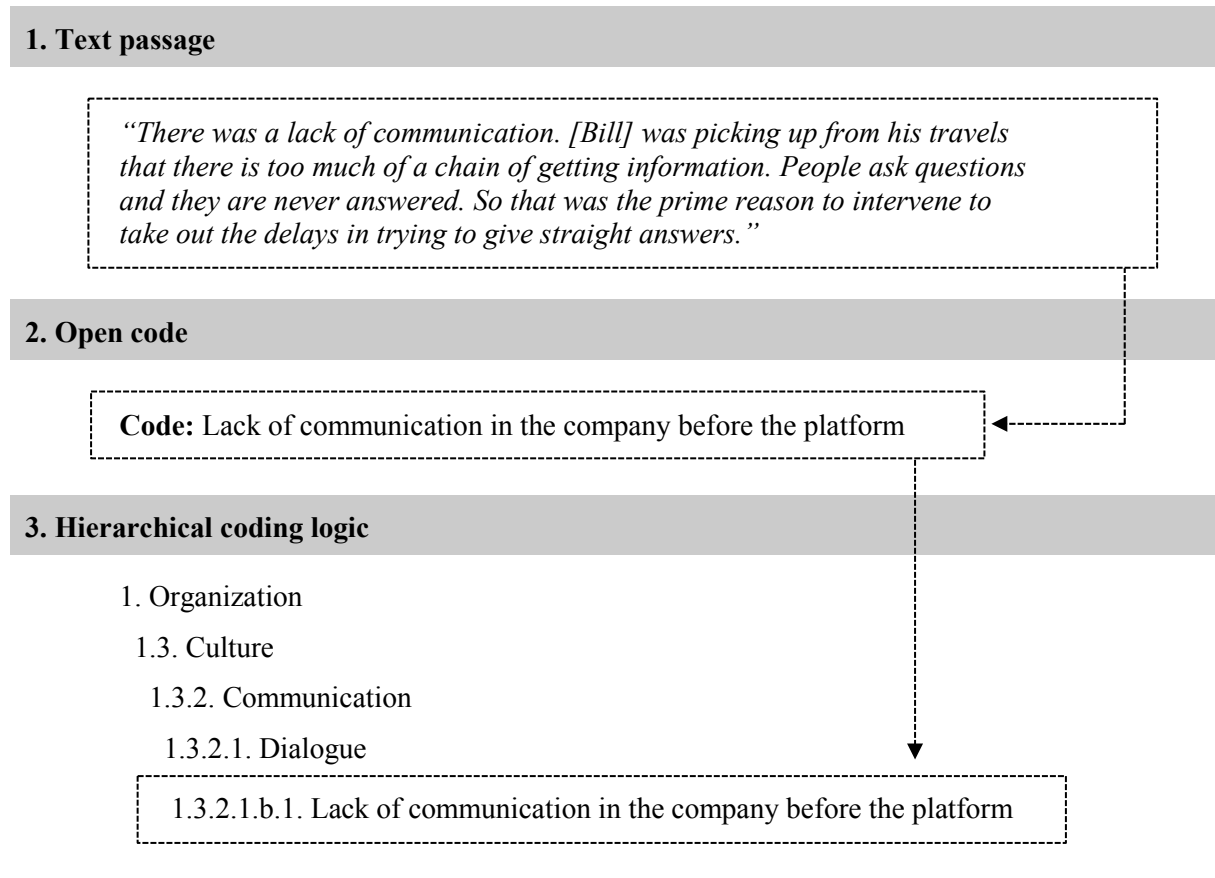
For the analysis of the data in multiple-case research, Eisenhardt (1989b) proposes to follow three steps: 1.) Narrative case write-ups, 2.) Within-case analysis, and 3.) Cross-case analysis. These were consequently applied to analyze data in this dissertation.

1.) At the beginning of the exploration process the author did not constrain the analysis to any theoretical concept. The process therefore began without a priori hypotheses (e.g., Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009; Martin & Eisenhardt, 2010). During the interviews the author wrote field notes that helped sort the large amount of data. In order to structure the data for each case, the author wrote narrative case write-ups where qualitative and quantitative data was triangulated (e.g., Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009). According to Eisenhardt (1989b) case write-ups are “often simply pure descriptions, but they are central to the generation of insight because they help [cope] with the often enormous volume of data.” (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 540). The case write-ups were very insightful because they gathered the key information for each case and helped to increase the understanding of the phenomenon.

2.) Next, the author started within-case analysis, where each organization was treated as a single case. The intention of the within-case analysis was to explore possible relationships, components, or even categories. As proposed by Santos and Eisenhardt (2009) the author started within-case analysis through the lens of a broad initial research question: Why do CEOs and employees seek a virtual dialogue and how is this process perceived in organizations? For organizing the large amount of data the

author applied grounded theory procedures and techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). He used coding, which is a basic analytic process for in-depth analysis of qualitative data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, open coding was applied. “Open coding is the interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically. The purpose of open coding is to help the researcher gain new insights into the data by breaking through standard ways of thinking about (interpreting) phenomena reflected by data. [...] Open coding and its characteristics of making use of questioning and constant comparisons enable investigators to break through subjectivity and bias.” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 423). All interviews were openly coded with the computer program atlas.ti (Friese, 2012). The codes were directly derived from data (Friese, 2012, p. 139). This process led to approximately 700 inductively developed codes. In a first step, relevant text passages were identified. These were subsequently coded with a meaningful label. The array of codes was then consolidated and ordered hierarchically with a numerical logic (see the full list of codes in appendix C). This procedure then revealed superordinate codes (e.g., “organization”) that contained various subordinate codes (e.g., “lack of communication in the company before the platform”). The following table outlines exemplary codes that were developed in the open coding process.

Figure 3-1: Open coding process (inductive development and structuring)



3.) Consequently, the aim was to break down the research phenomenon into coherent components and categories. The author tried to identify patterns across the cases by looking at data in divergent ways and by integrating existing literature. This procedure is in line with Pan and Tan (2011) who propose to integrate an “insightful” guiding theory early in the analysis.

An iterative process of data analysis and literature review revealed that construal level theory (CLT) is an insightful theory to guide the exploration process (see chapter 5). The iterative analysis revealed further categories such as perceptions of the CEO or the perceptions of the organization that play an important role for linking many-to-one communication and CLT (see chapter 6). Consequently, this set of categories formed the “theoretical lens” of the dissertation that is used for guiding the iterative process of inducting insights from case data and theory development (Pan & Tan, 2011, p. 168). Here, the author checked for data and theory alignment by verifying the following questions (Pan & Tan, p. 171): Is the theoretical lens accurate and insightful but still broad enough? Can the cases be explained by the theoretical lens? Does data support the emergent framework?

After developing the theoretical lens, the author coherently explored the similarities and differences across the cases. The author juxtaposed each category of the theoretical lens across the cases. For this cross-case analysis selective coding was applied. “Selective coding is the process by which all categories are unified around a central “core” category and categories that need further explication are filled-in with descriptive details. [...] The core category represents the central phenomenon of the study.” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 424). The basis for the selective coding was the theoretical lens. The theoretical lens is composed by various “main” categories such as the “CEO”, the “organization”, or “effects” (see chapter 6). In this context, Pan and Tan (2011) add that a theoretical lens only becomes a qualified theory when its conceptual categories are “corroborated and integrated with the case data [by] selective coding” (p. 170). The following figure illustrates the main categories of the selective coding process.

Figure 3-2: *Selective coding structure*

Theoretical lens

- A. Organization
- B. CEO
- C. Many-to-one communication platform (general)
- D. Many-to-one communication process (details, insights, influence)
- E. Construal level theory
- F. Effects

In the selective coding process, the “open-codes” were revised and attached to one of the main categories of the theoretical lens. This revealed an in-depth evidence and understanding of the emerging theory. The author therefore constantly compared the emerging theory with the evidence from the cases and further literature in order to generate an elaborated theory (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). In total, the coding process revealed 972 codes of higher and lower orders that helped exploring the cases. The author stopped the selective coding process as soon as all blanks were filled and there was enough evidence for the appropriateness of the conceptual framework (theoretical confidence). The subsequent findings enabled the author to illustrate differences in platform performance across the cases and to explain the effects in the organizations.

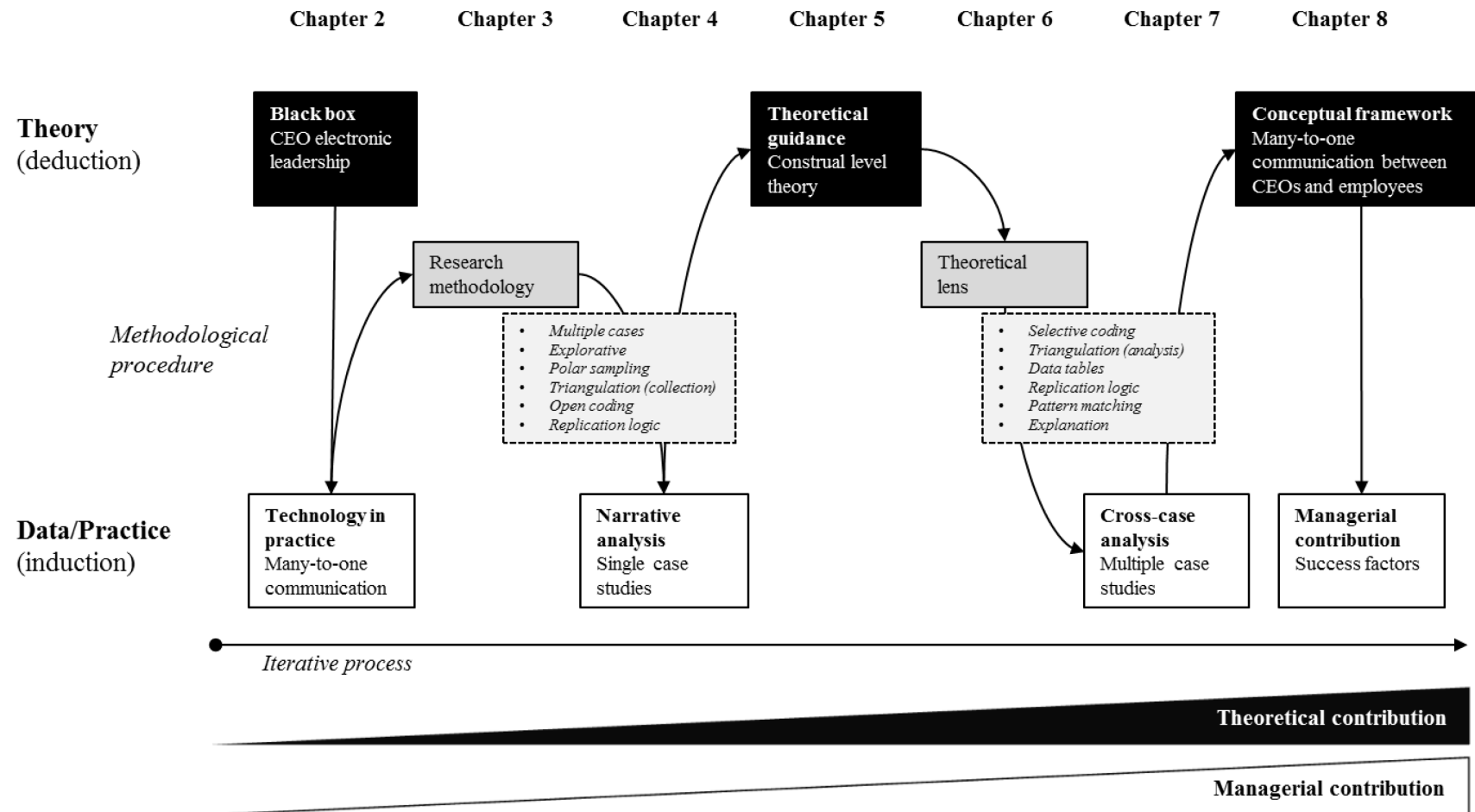
The quantitative data (see section 3.2.3) was analyzed by independent mean t-tests¹² (Field, 2009).

3.2.4 Overview of the research process

This dissertation applies explorative case analysis and iteratively develops a conceptual framework for e-leadership, based on many-to-one communication, at the CEO level. For the exploration of the research phenomenon it applies inductive and deductive elements that guide the analysis and ensure rigor. The following figure outlines the research process that is outlined in this chapter. It further shows the procedural structure of this dissertation and how the chapters are connected.

¹² One-tailed (because quantitative data was used to back qualitative statements). All relevant statistical information is provided in chapter 7 where qualitative and quantitative information is outlined in tables.

Figure 3-3: Research process and methodological procedure



Note: Own figure based on Pan and Tan (2011).

4 Single-case analysis

This chapter outlines the many-to-one communication process in each of the three companies. As suggested by Eisenhardt (1989b, p. 540) it draws the cases without bringing them into predefined patterns. The goal is to provide a rich overview of each case by presenting them as a stand-alone entity and “to avoid death by data asphyxiation” (Pan & Tan, p. 170). The cases provide practical insights that are subsequently used for developing the theoretical lens that guides the exploration process and the development of theory. The single-case analysis directly addresses research question 1.2 of this dissertation by drawing the drivers for many-to-one communication between the CEOs and employees in large organizations and by outlining how organizations implement many-to-one communication in practice. Table 4-1 presents key information of the three cases.

Table 4-1: *Key information of the three cases*

Company	Industry / Revenues / Number of employees	CEO / Application of many-to-one communication	Informants by position
X	Manufacturer > 30 bn. € > 60,000	From 2007-2012 21 months (2010-2012)	CEO: - CEO assistant: 1 Platform manager: 1 Employees: 8
Y	Retail and wholesale > 60 bn. € > 250,000	From 2007-2011 33 months (2009-2011)	CEO: 1 CEO assistant: 1 Platform manager: 1 Employees: 7
Z	Manufacturer > 1 bn. € > 6,000	From 2005-2013 24 months (2011-2013)	CEO: 1 CFO: 1 Platform manager: 1 Employees: 7

The single-case analyses are structured as follows. First, they present macro-level information on the organizations such as their strategy and current challenges. Then, they draw the rationale for many-to-one communication at the companies and the actual development of the platform traffic. Consequently, they outline the involvement of the CEO in the platform. Lastly, they draw the expectations of the employees

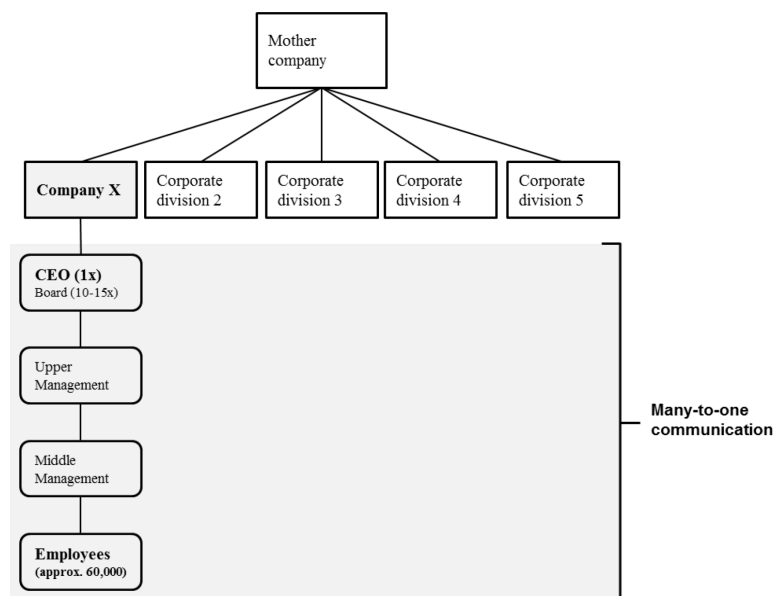
concerning many-to-one communication, their motivation for using the platform, and the array of topics that emerged in the dialogue with the CEO.

4.1 Company X: Narrative case description

4.1.1 About the organization

Company X is a high-technology manufacturing company that is located in Europe. By 2012, company X employed more than 60,000 employees and gained revenues of nearly 40 billion euros. It is a division of a large corporation that employs more than 140,000 employees. The following figure illustrates the organizational structure of Company X.

Figure 4-1: *Company X: Organizational structure (simplified)*



Company X crafts highly innovative and extremely capital intensive products for the Business-to-Business market, and is one of the largest players in its industry. Its products are planned and developed decades before they are sold on the market and its customers are highly international and spread all over the world. The industry is furthermore characterized by intense competition.

Company X has one large, main competitor that they compete with in every product segment, as well as plenty of smaller competitors. Company X was doing very well in the last couple of years, with relatively stable revenue growth rates of more than seven

percent p.a. An exception was in 2009 during the financial crisis, where revenues dropped by approximately three percent. The main competitor reported relatively similar growth rates in the last years. However, in terms of new product orders, Company X actually surpassed their main competitor (Informant X2). Company X's core production occurs in several European countries. However, the company recently began to manufacture in China and the USA. Due to the international production, the workforce is highly dispersed.

In the last decade company X faced several challenges. One of these was that there were several changes in top management. In 2007, the replacement of the CEO brought back stability in the organization. However, the management knew that the employees did not perceive the changes in management well and thus they wanted to gain back trust among their staff.

“[In 2007] there was a large loss of trust, because management changed four or five times before. It was the first time [in recent] years that the company had a stable management.” (Informant X1¹³)

Company X also faced the challenge of bringing three of their highly capital-intensive products to the market. Ten years ago these were still in the development phase. These products are extremely important for the company success due to their long and costly R&D phase. The challenge here was to fulfill the high quality and safety regulations for the products and to deliver them on schedule to their customers. Therefore, they had to increase the industrial ramp-up time to bring production to a very high level, but without weakening the internal organization and the product quality. Finally, Company X had to deal with the impact of the financial crisis. As mentioned before, there was one year where revenues decreased; however, compared to their competitors as well as to other industries, Company X was performing well in the crisis. *“We were not really hit by crises in the last years. Of course we have certain problems, and we also launched a cost-saving program. [...] However, we did not hit a level where it hurts, not like other companies did [...] no one was forced to leave the company.”* (Informant X3)

¹³ Information about all the informants are outlined in the appendix A.

4.1.2 Rationale and set-up of the many-to-one communication platform

In 2009 an employee engagement survey revealed that the employees at Company X were highly motivated by its prominent products but they were not satisfied with the organization. The survey outlined that the employees felt that there was a lack of communication in the organization, especially between lower echelons and the management level. Therefore, Company X put a lot of effort into enhancing internal communication. With a large change-management campaign they wanted to improve company culture and organizational communication. Part of this campaign were events to foster employee well-being, programs to increase CEO presence in the organization (e.g., via CEO site tours), as well as programs of internal reorganization to increase efficiency and decrease complexity. Additionally, Company X decided to employ many-to-one communication, where all employees, independent of their hierarchies or location, could communicate directly with the CEO. This way, they wanted to offer their employees an open and transparent channel to top management, with the aim of gaining back trust in the organization.

When the CEO heard about the platform, he perceived it as a great opportunity. For him, direct exchange seemed promising in order to address the lack of trust and to get to know the employees' disposition at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy.

“[In 2009] management felt that the lower echelons were far away from them. That was one reason [...] for direct [virtual] communication [with lower echelons], but also to state that management knows that there are issues that might get lost while cascading upwards. Now we have a tool with direct scope upwards, where employees can state when something is going wrong or when they want to give their opinion.”
(Informant X1)

“The objective is very clear: an online dialogue with the employees in the scope of the engaged survey results.” (Informant X2)

Table 4-2 illustrates the rationale for implementing many-to-one communication at Company X in detail.

Table 4-2: Company X: Rationale for many-to-one communication

Rationale	Informant
Reduction of distance by direct communication	<p><i>"[The CEO] is a very open personality and had a chance to directly communicate with the people."</i> (Informant X1)</p> <p><i>"[The CEO] wanted to get the chance to get feedback from employees."</i> (Informant X2)</p>
Developing trust in organization	<i>"Nobody in the company besides top management was surprised [by the results of the study that revealed a lack of trust]. We need a cultural change in the corporation, toward more trust."</i> (Informant X2)
Improve internal communication	<i>"It was a good chance to bring up topics that a broad array of people is interested in."</i> (Informant X2)
Improve bottom-up communication	<i>"I need solutions for improving bottom-up communication."</i> (CEO, quoted by informant X2)
Feel the atmosphere in the organization	<i>"The tool is there to enable the management to see things they cannot see [and for] measuring the temperature within the company."</i> (Informant X2)
Get to know organizational issues	<i>"To feel the temperature and to bring up things that are sometimes stopped by middle management."</i> (Informant X2)
Trend toward social media	<i>"We thought we needed to have something [...] we were under pressure of having a tool as well [...] an online or social media type of tool."</i> (Informant X2)

For Company X, the advantage of the platform was, in comparison to other technologies, that it is easy to handle and that it still addressed a large scope of employees. Moreover, its filtering mechanism guaranteed that just the top-voted questions come up. Thus, just the most important topics are discussed between the CEO and the employees. Before they could use the platform, all employees had to register. The platform was held non-anonymous; the names of the questioners were therefore visible for all users. At Company X, four languages are officially spoken (English, French, German, and Spanish). Therefore, they decided to translate all traffic (besides comments) into the four official languages. Before a question appeared on the platform, it was translated by an internal translator into all official languages so that every employee could participate.

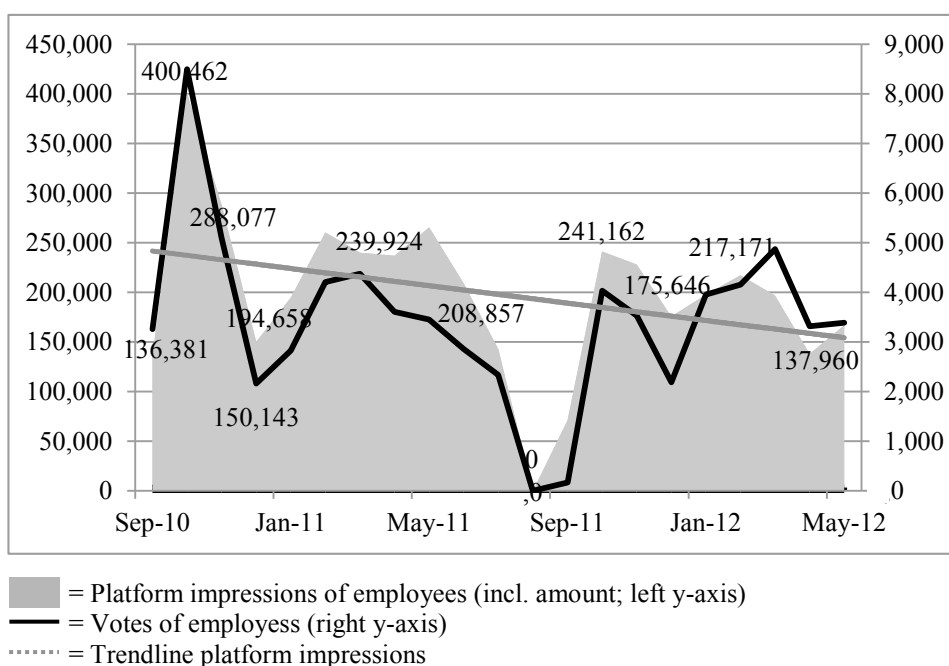
The voting process was very transparent. When a question was put on the platform, it stayed there for approximately one month. During this period, the employees had the chance to vote for or against it. The question with the highest amount of votes was then forwarded to the CEO. The employees also had the chance to post comments to questions and to state their opinions. Once a question was forwarded to the CEO, he tried to provide an answer within two weeks. During that time, the question was frozen

on the platform. Employees could then not vote or comment anymore. As soon as the answer was online, the employees who took part in the dialogue received a message that forwarded them directly to the answer. All other employees who visited the platform could follow the dialogue as well.

4.1.3 Development of platform traffic

The implementation of the platform was fast in Company X. It took three months from the decision to implement the platform until its launch in September 2010. The communication department was responsible for its maintenance. At the launch, the communication department sent a message to all employees where they invited them to directly communicate with the CEO in the platform. Moreover, there was a banner on the Intranet where employees were forwarded to the platform. On the platform, there was uploaded a video of the CEO introducing the platform and asking for employees' active participation. The platform was also advertised on other internal communication channels such as the internal TV channel and the internal newspaper. Shortly after its launch, the curiosity concerning the platform was growing among the employees. *"In the first three months there were hundreds of people in the tool, hundreds of questions."* (Informant X2). The following figure (Figure 4-1) illustrates this development.

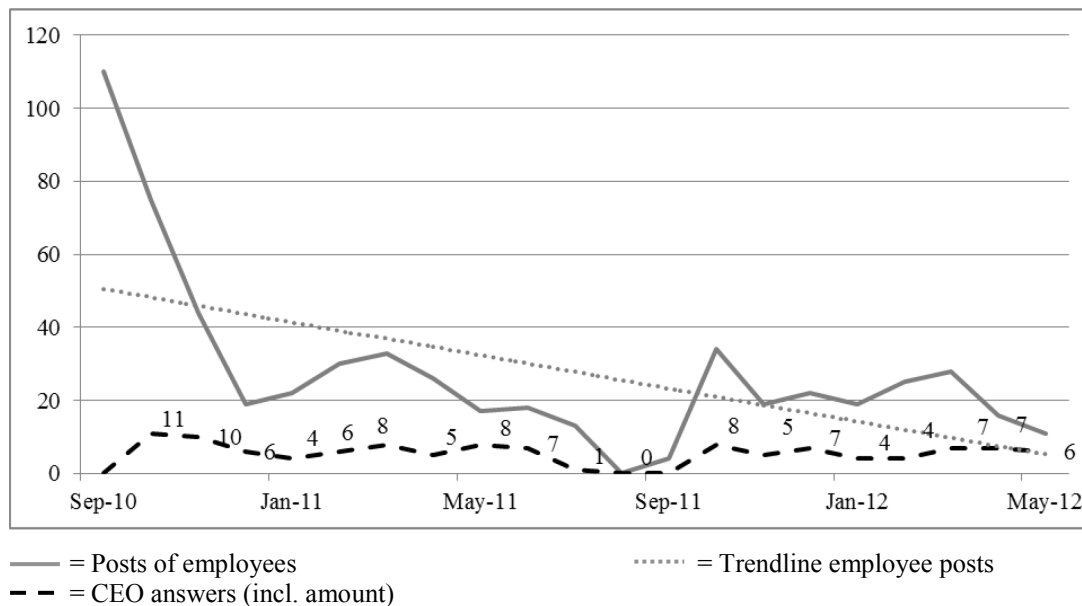
Figure 4-2: *Company X: Platform impressions and votes*



In the first couple of weeks the platform became highly frequented by employees (left y-axis). In its first month it had over 136,000 page impressions¹⁴ and in the second month over 400,000. This positive development can also be observed by the amount of votes. In the first month, the posts got more than 3,000 votes in total. In the second month the votes even reached more than 8,000 (right y-axis). *“In my opinion [the platform] was a very good idea [...] that led to huge curiosity. You could see this in the way the platform was used. There was, very quickly, a lot of [traffic].”* (Informant X4).

Figure 4-3 illustrates the monthly amount of posts that appeared in the platform as well as the amount of CEO answers. In September 2010 more than 100 questions were released. However, this figure decreased heavily in the first half of the year and remained at an average level of 20-40 questions per months. The number of answers of the CEO was also very high at the beginning. In October 2010, the CEO answered eleven questions. However, when the extreme curiosity declined after a couple of months the number of CEO answers remained between 4 to 10 per month.

Figure 4-3: *Company X: Employee posts and CEO answers*



“When we discovered that the CEO is answering the questions, there came up a lot of them. It was a massive number of questions coming [to the CEO in the] tool. [...] We are now in a balanced situation, not as intensive as it was some months ago, but we just keep going.” (Informant X3)

¹⁴ Page impressions represent the amount of impressions of the first page of the platform.

From January 2011 on, page impressions (approx. 200,000), votes (approx. 3,500), posts (approx. 20) and CEO answers (approx. seven) were relatively stable. One exception was in August 2011, where traffic went down heavily to zero. This was because Company X decided to shut the platform down during summer break when most employees were on vacation.

At Company X, both the communication department and the CEO were satisfied with the development of the platform. Therefore, in May 2011 they decided to extend the contract for the platform provider. However, they realized that even though the tool had a lot of traffic at the beginning, it needed maintenance and fresh ideas to keep the interest of the employees.

“I am really happy with the platform, but I want to do more with it.” (CEO quoted by informant X1)

The company decided to hire an employee who would be fully responsible for the maintenance of the platform and who ensured promotion for the tool within the company. In September 2011, after the summer break a platform manager was hired. With the new platform manager, Company X conducted several modifications and changes of the platform. One of the first tasks of the platform manager was to keep the dynamics of the platform. The platform manager therefore directly contacted employees who asked repetitive questions and forwarded the original CEO answers. Furthermore the platform manager changed the outlook of the platform to further attract employees. *“I felt the platform was boring and that we needed to have a nice look and feel. So I reinvented the whole thing.”* (Informant X2).

The platform manager also wanted to bring further impulses to the platform. Therefore, she invented “CEO specials,” as well as videos of the CEO where he discussed certain topics. The CEO specials reversed the original logic of the tool. In the specials, a short video clip of the CEO was uploaded where he stated his beliefs or questions about certain issues and asked the employees for their opinion. Every time the CEO launched a new special, the communication department would send an e-mail to all employees where they invited them to participate in the discussion. These specials followed a clear communication plan, which was created according to the goals of the organization. When Company X, for instance, launched a new plant outside of Europe, this was heavily discussed in the company. Therefore, the communication department launched a special on internalization. However, they did not want to discuss too specific or narrow questions from employees, because there

were other information channels to read this information (official statements, magazines, etc.). In the platform, they rather wanted the employees to discuss the topic of internationalization with the CEO on a more strategic level. *“[We have a] communication plan to answer all questions people have [...] so we said, OK, let’s see the bigger picture and just offer the opportunity to our employees to discuss why we should have an internationalization strategy. Why do we go abroad whether it is to China or the US? Is it dangerous for the company or does it have benefits for the company? We had really good and interesting input.”* (Informant X2).

The platform manager also preselected some questions that were not top-voted, but that were interesting in her opinion for the CEO to explore. The CEO could then decide whether he would want to answer these questions as well.

4.1.4 Answering process of the CEO

The answers of the CEO in the platform were always prepared in collaboration with the communication department and the assistant of the CEO. Most questions could not be answered by a single person. They needed to involve specialists from other departments. Therefore, especially at the beginning, when this process was not fully developed, the answering process took a long time, was extremely complex, and not well-coordinated. Internally, the people were not satisfied with the huge effort it took. There were too many people involved, and these people were also busy with other tasks. Interestingly, one of the people who was most dissatisfied with the situation was the CEO himself. Therefore, he sent a note to the communication department where he claimed that the lead time was too long and thus had to be improved. When the platform manager was involved in the process, responsibilities became clear and participants of the communication process adapted to their roles in the answering processes. The process was then set up as follows. As soon as the results of the voting were completed, the platform manager contacted the responsible departments on behalf of the CEO. Then, they cooperatively prepared an answer. Afterwards, the assistant of the CEO read the answer, checked its content, and ensured that it aligned with the wording and tonality of the CEO. Whenever it was unclear who to contact or who to involve in the answering process, the platform manager and the CEO assistant discussed in advance on an informal level, how to proceed. Once they were done with preparing an answer, they involved the CEO in the process. The CEO either modified the answers or released these directly.

There was no single answer that was not checked personally by the CEO. The CEO was very committed to the answers and aimed to work on the answers as soon as

possible. He preferred to receive the prepared answers on a Friday afternoon and to adjust the answer over the weekend. This was a very efficient way for launching the answers as scheduled. The CEO was so committed to the answers that he even apologized when the answer was too late. With the platform manager and the improved processes the CEO usually answered the questions within 14 days. However, they did not dedicate themselves to answer the questions in less than two weeks because they did not want to put too much pressure on the involved departments. Another reason was that certain topics needed to be well elaborated with the legal department. The involved parties always kept in mind the legal consequences of the statements, especially for topics dealing with personnel issues.

The CEO took the answering process very seriously and wanted the answers to be as authentic and honest as possible. There was, for instance, once a question on the platform that asked for the reasons for the weak performance of Company X in a certain market. The platform manager then prepared the answer together with different departments such as marketing, strategy, and the executive assistant. When they passed the answer to the CEO, he rejected it. For him/her the proposed solution was not honest enough. Therefore, the CEO prepared his own statement.

“Dear [XY], your question cuts right to the bone and I will be completely open with you: our position in the market [XY] is indeed quite weak and our strategy “incomplete,” to put it mildly...” (CEO’s statement in the platform)

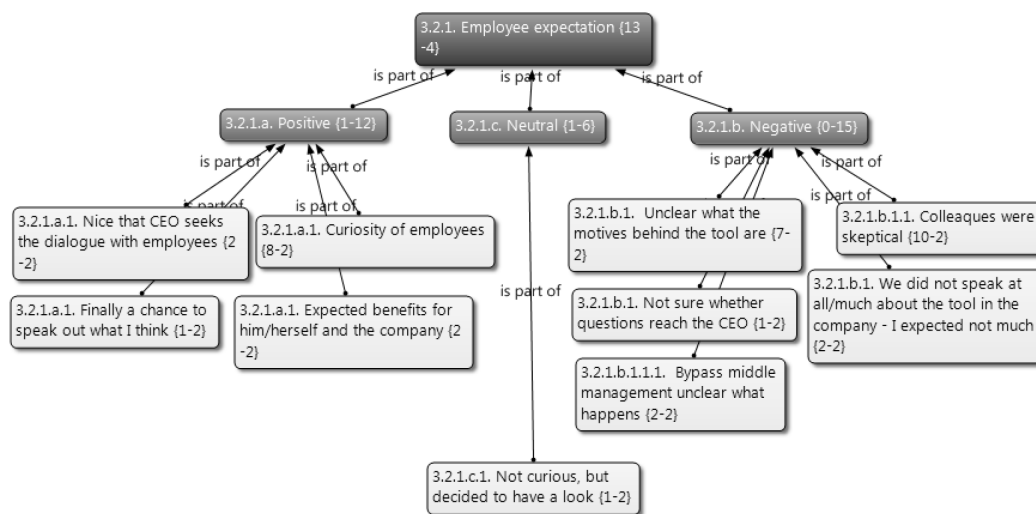
This answer was very open and completely honest. The CEO stated that he totally agreed that the company was not performing well at that moment. However, he also stressed that they had to focus on the key markets to stabilize these. Afterwards they would see what they could do on the market [XY].

The CEO showed his commitment to the platform also in further improvements that he initiated. After a while he did not want to answer all questions by himself anymore. He wanted to show the employees that he was part of a team. Therefore, he involved other people such as his colleagues from the top management in the answer. If a question was not directly addressed to the CEO, he personally forwarded it to the responsible colleague to add a profound opinion. The answer then looked as follows: *“Dear [XY], your question raises an important point that I have asked [XY, Vice President Human Resources] to answer. Please find his answer below.”* (CEO in the platform).

4.1.5 Organizational expectations and adoption

The expectations of the employees at Company X about this initiative were diverse. The following figure illustrates their expectations of the platform. The figure outlines the array of positive, negative, and neutral statements that appeared in the interviews at Company X. Each of these statements was mentioned by at least two informants.

Figure 4-4: *Company X: Expectations of many-to-one communication*



Note: The figure illustrates codes that were derived from the open coding process in atlas.ti (see section 3.2).

Many employees stated that they were curious about what would happen in the platform. For them, it was very exciting to get the chance to speak to the CEO. Some stated that they sought a direct dialogue with the CEO, and they were really happy about getting the chance to get in contact with him.

“So when they introduced [the platform] I really looked forward to [it], [...] when I started my career, my link to the managing director was basically two steps away. Not as in Company X, where it could be 15, 20 steps away.” (Informant X5)

“Finally I can say out loud what I think.” (Informant X6)

“Nice, finally I can bring up suggestions at the very top. That is important for me. The leaders from the direct levels above cannot judge their relevance.” (Informant X9)

Other employees were not that positive in their expectations. Some stated that they were skeptical about the platform and not sure about its goals. They were also

skeptical whether the questions would really reach the CEO or whether they were answered by someone else. Another concern that became obvious was the fear of consequences when bypassing middle management with questions directly to the CEO.

The intensity of the platform usage differed strongly between the informants. It ranged from daily and monthly to none. On average, the platform had about 25,000 visitors per month. The detailed analysis of the platform traffic from September 2010 until May 2012 reveals¹⁵ that it had 24,185 visitors, 3,613 votes, and 29 questions on average per month. Moreover, the analysis showed that more than 25,000 employees registered in the platform during that 21-month period. These figures indicate that there must be a large amount of passive users in the platform. Passive users are the ones who follow the traffic but do not actively take part in the communication with the CEO. The platform manager of Company X gives further evidence here. *“Let’s take the example [of] an answer that was one of the top voted. This one got [at the end] 388 positive votes [but] the answer has been viewed 8,000 times. The statistic shows that there is a large amount of passive users.”* (Informant X2). Among the users that took part actively in the communication, there was just a small amount of people who actually asked questions directed at the CEO. A much larger portion of the employees did vote or write comments: *“I think I wrote two or three questions in total. More often I used the voting function, around 10 to 15 times, and every now and then I wrote a comment.”* (Informant X10).

The platform also had lead users, who used the platform often and intensively. Some informants stated in this context that due to their opinion, mostly the same employees were active in the platform.

The users that took part in the platform were from the lower echelons in the organization. All informants at Company X agreed that people from higher management tiers do not use the platform. *“I did read quite a number of questions. A lot of them were from the non-management row, non-management employees. Very, very few were actually from management.”* (Informant X5). However, the interviews revealed that lowest echelons did not have access to the platform because they did not work with a computer. The platform thus was especially frequented by employees of below the management level with white-collar jobs¹⁶.

Employees from various nationalities participated in the communication on the platform. Most users were from France, the UK, and Germany. There were also

¹⁵ August 2010 was excluded in the analysis because Company X shut the platform off during that time.

¹⁶ White-collar refers to employees who are in administrative jobs.

employees participating from China and the USA; however, this portion was very small. In this context, these informants revealed that it was interesting for them to follow different issues and the habits of their colleagues abroad.

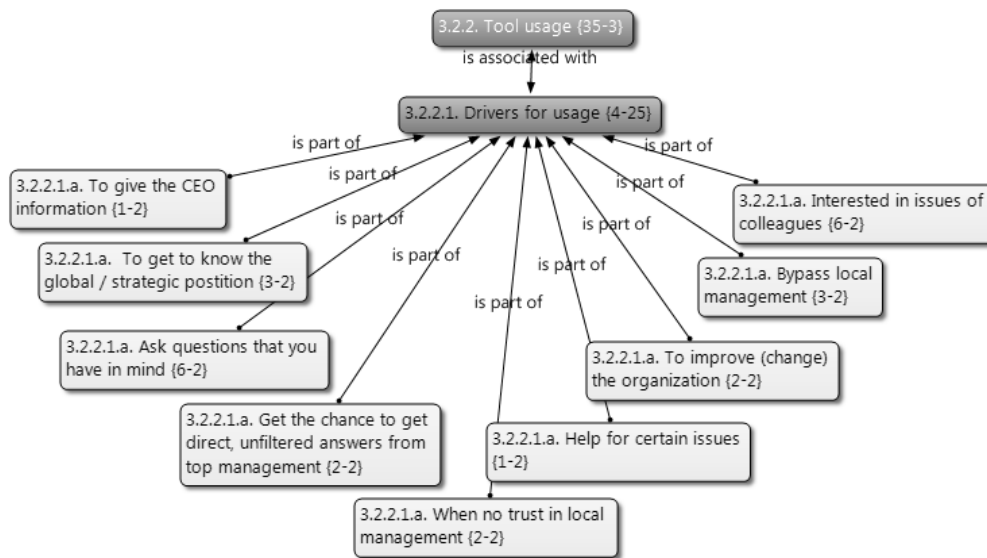
“It was very exiting [...] to discover cultural differences [among the users] in such a platform. [...] Just when you look at the amount of questions, the voting, and how they ask questions – how direct and critical. [...] The people from UK are in my opinion much more straight and direct than the colleagues from France. Those would never dare to criticize the CEO.” (Informant X2)

A group of users who appeared prominently in the platform was the labor union. Informants stated that members of the labor union were very active when there appeared topics such as temporary employment or further personnel related topics. According to them, labor union members could quickly mobilize a large number of employees for votes. This was an uncomfortable situation, not only for the human resources department but also for the communication department and the CEO, because this was not the intention of the platform. However, the usage of the labor union decreased after a while.

4.1.6 Drivers for usage and content in the platform

The employees who were using the platform mentioned numerous reasons that motivated their usage. The following figure gives an overview of the key statements from the interviews.

Figure 4-5: Company X: Drivers for platform usage



Note: The figure illustrates codes that were derived from the open coding process in atlas.ti (see section 3.2).

Most employees stated that the main rationale for their usage of the platform was to speak directly to the CEO without a filter and without any intermediate steps.

“Anytime you ask anything through local management, it always gets twisted and changed. They might not know or understand the basis of the questioner behind it. At least, with this tool you are able to formulate the question and get other colleagues’ opinions and hopefully they will vote for it.” (Informant X5)

Many informants underlined that the platform represents the direct linkage to the CEO that they were particularly looking forward to. Before, if they tried to bring up critical issues, these often did not reach the right addressee and became stuck in middle management.

“For me [the platform] is something very good, because it is very difficult for people at the bottom of the hierarchy to push an idea. [...] In a local department, in a factory, in an office, if you complain about something, if you say something to your direct leader, it is very difficult to get it up.” (Informant X8)

Another reason for the informants to use the platform was horizontal communication. They were interested in issues of colleagues that were located in other departments or even in another country. Due to the large amount of messages to the CEO and the

comments, the platform was very informative for lateral communication. *“It [also] is a satisfaction of curiosity. What affects the people? What comments come back? [...] What question do they have in different plants? Often very local things.”* (Informant X4).

The content of the platform was quite diverse. The informants stated that a broad array of interesting topics emerged.

“Very very exciting is that there is an extremely large variety of topics. [It ranges] from wide strategic topics about the future of the company, [over] questions concerning certain programs of a product line, [up to] the entrance control for bicycles.” (Informant X2)

A review of the platform traffic revealed that there were questions in the areas of strategy, IT, culture, rewards, operations, and the organization itself. However, many informants stated that topics regarding the workplace and rewards were most prominent in the platform, followed by strategic topics. *“The majority of questions are about reward, then strategy is becoming really big, and workplace is still big.”* (Informant X2). Based on the categories mentioned above, the following table provides an overview of the questions that came up in the platform. These questions aim at drawing insights in the respective fields. All of these questions were among the top-rated questions and were thus answered by the CEO.

Table 4-3: Company X: Exemplary questions for content

Content (Votes ¹⁷)	Informant
Strategy/ Market orientation (+270)	<i>“The [product A] has been frozen, the [product B] has been interrupted. We were told just how important these projects are and how great the need for these [projects] is on the market. Regardless from that, I cannot see any [Company X] activities that lead one to assume that there is any strategic orientation [on the market for these products]. Can we let ourselves play a smaller role than [our main competitor] in this area? The growth perspectives [in the market] are good, growth is fast. But it seems as if this cake isn't tasty enough for us?”</i> (Platform question)
Culture/ Workplace (+216)	<i>“[Company X] has proclaimed a 'high-performance culture' and we often hear about the need for 'first time right!' I don't know of any project plan that does not exploit all the reserves to achieve the goal as quickly as possible. Where do you leave room for human error? Tending toward perfection is one thing, expecting perfection is something else. 'Acting courageously' only works if you have the right to make the wrong decision. In the context of a high-performance culture, shouldn't we also talk about a culture of errors?”</i> (Platform question)

¹⁷ Total amount of positive minus negative votes in the platform.

Culture/ Reward (+815)	<i>"Most successful year ever [...]. Production year on year UP. Cash in bank highest ever [...]. Do you support making this year also the most successful year for employees by making this the highest profit share distribution (in national currency terms)? This certainly would be appreciated by the vast majority of your employees and would support the current company 'in word' [...]. We look forward to your timely positive response."</i> (Platform question)
Organization/ Outsourcing (+386)	<i>"At [site A], we have been informed that [task 1] is going to be outsourced. That's why I'd like to ask you: why was this decision made? Isn't [task 1] still a core competence? Are all [task 1] activities of the [side A and side B] going to be outsourced? I would like to express some of my personal feelings: I find it sad the way our company treats its employees. Sectors are being outsourced and with them employees who have worked for [Company X] for tens of years passionately and loyally. Don't you think that [Company X] has a social and moral responsibility with respect to its employees?"</i> (Platform question)
Organization/ Programs (+362)	<i>"When we started the adventure of [program 1], a breakeven number of around [X] sales was given, then it kept on growing until first delivery to around [X+X] sales if I remember correctly. Since then we didn't get any more information on this breakeven number, but I suppose it kept on growing. I know [program 1] is a 'prestige' [project] and was built to slow [sales on competitor 1]. Some technologies have been used in other programs. Question is: Will [program 1] ever be profitable?"</i> (Platform question)

The informants also mentioned that questions highly differed regarding their scope and intention. Some aimed to get information about top level topics, while others were very trivial. Moreover, some questions intended to have positive impact on the company or aimed to change certain issues, while others were just stated in order to complain or criticize.

The following table gives an overview of questions with highly different intentions. While the content of the first questions is targeted on the CEO level, the second question is directed toward a low, functional level. The second question is also exemplary for a complaint from an employee while the third question represents a suggestion for an improvement.

Table 4-4: Company X: Exemplary questions for intention

Intention (Votes¹⁸)	Informant
CEO level/ Vision 2020 (+110)	<i>"When you examine [our] Vision 2020 and you interpret it realistically, you see that there will only be two [Company X] sites left. When and how is [Company X] going to part with the other sites? Or what is the strategy that can be envisaged between now and then?"</i> (Platform question)
Functional level; Complaint Bad food (-208)	<i>"My message may sound a little silly - but it's actually not that funny anymore. I'm a frequent user of the charter flights that are now operated [at company]. I'm happy about the additional capacity and the faster travel [...]. The only problem is the food on board. Omelet in the morning and chicken in the evening. Every time. Seriously - absolutely every time. [...]"</i> (Platform question)
Improvement/	<i>"A while ago, white work uniforms without pockets were introduced [...]. These work clothes</i>

¹⁸ The difference between positive and negative votes of a certain question in the platform.

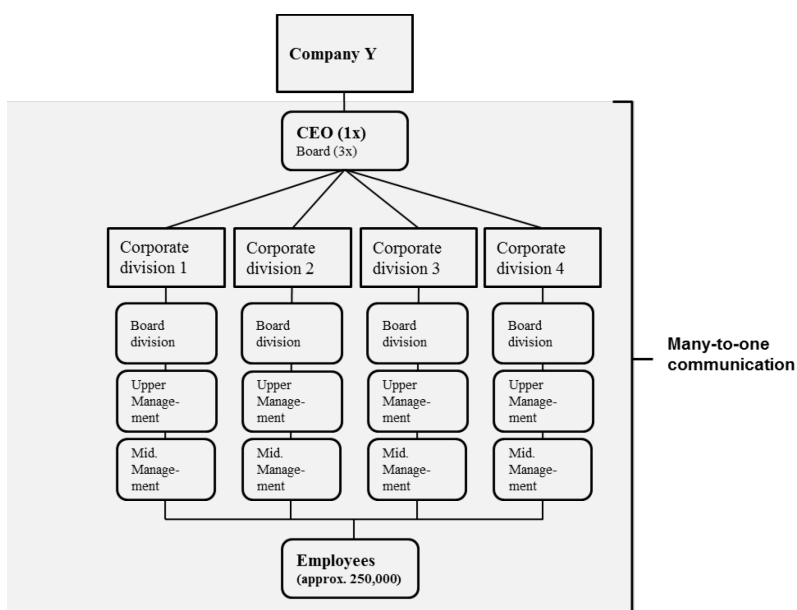
Working clothes (+287)	<i>handicap us in our everyday work. We are aware that the monuments must not be damaged. However it is impossible for us to carry accessories with us such as our badge, work phone or keys for the storage cupboards. [...] The situation could be improved by introducing pockets fitted with Velcro strips. My question is therefore: why don't we have practical work clothes?"</i> (Platform question)
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4.2 Company Y: Narrative case description

4.2.1 About the organization

Company Y is a globally operating retail and wholesale company that is located in Europe. In 2012, it employed nearly 250,000 employees and made revenues of over 65 billion euros. Company Y is an exchange-listed company with a modicum of main shareholders that own the majority of the company. It is a highly diversified company, and it is among the global top five players in its industry. The following figure outlines the organizational structure of Company Y.

Figure 4-6: *Company Y: Organizational structure (simplified)*



Company Y is divided into four corporate divisions and owns several independent affiliates that operate in more than 30 countries in Europe, Asia, and/or Africa. Due to the industry and its diversity, the company offers a large variety of products. The retail business is organized decentralized, which makes it very complex. In the past five years, Company Y just marginally increased their revenues. During the financial crisis

in 2009, revenues even decreased by nearly four percent, but recovered one year later. In the last five years its earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT) have decreased; the only exception was in 2010, one year after the financial crisis.

In 2007 Company Y got a new CEO. Before, the company was performing well with their existing business model. However, the new CEO and the board members saw major challenges coming up that needed to be addressed in order to stay competitive in the market. The first challenge was online/Internet sales. According to the CEO there was a large threat of slumbering business potential here and a threat of being squeezed out of the market. Another challenge was to transform the company from their existing push-driven (purchasing-orientated) approach to a pull-driven (customer-orientated) corporation.

“[We needed] a complete transformation of the “how we do business” and the “how we compete in the market.” (CEO Company Y)

In order to address these challenges Company Y launched a large restructuring program. The plan was to further decentralize the operational functions to give their divisions the chance to be more customers focused and to centralize other functions such as finance and compliance to enhance control. Their credo was: *“as decentralized as possible, as centralized as necessary”* (Informant Y3). Their restructuring program was intended to be executed from 2009-2012. Their goal was to increase EBIT by more than one billion euros. They wanted to achieve roughly half of this amount via increases in revenues, and the other half via a reduction of costs.

4.2.2 Rationale and setup of the many-to-one communication platform

This section illustrates the rationale of Company Y for launching many-to-one communication in April 2009. The following table summarizes the key statements of the interviews at Company Y.

Table 4-5: *Company Y: Rationale for many-to-one communication*

Rationale	Informant
Improve organizational communication	<i>“The original idea was that we wanted to launch a dialogue in the organization. Our company culture was before [not really open].” (Informant Y3)</i>

Bring CEO closer to employees	<p><i>“[We are] in 33 countries of the world. I cannot buy an airplane and fly through the whole world all time. We were looking for a solution to bring ‘the voice of the top’ stronger in the troops.” (CEO of Company Y)</i></p> <p><i>“When the tool was launched, the topic board communication did not exist. It was also used to bring the CEO closer to the employees. Therefore it is very good. Especially in organizations where the board is not close to the employees.” (Informant Y2)</i></p>
Communication key for change-/restructuring process	<p><i>“It was clear when you do the change journey, communication is a key instrument [...] We do not know if it works, but let us try it.” (CEO of Company Y)</i></p> <p><i>“In the context of the restructuring [...] the platform had a central role [...] for the complaints/displeasures and for the discussions of the employees.” (Informant Y3)</i></p>
Dialogue of board with employees	<p><i>“We wanted to bring more dialogue in the company. We said that we open the doors to the CEO, so that everybody can ask his questions directly.” (Informant Y3)</i></p>

The original intention was to increase internal communication at Company Y. The communication department wanted to create a virtual dialogue where all employees, regardless of their functions, can participate. However, they also saw potential in the platform for bringing the CEO closer to the employees.

“This was a tool to make [the CEO] more present in the organization.” (Informant Y3)

For Company Y, communication of the board members with lower echelons was a venture into uncharted terrain. Before, there existed no direct channel where employees could reach board members. With the platform they wanted to change this status quo. For them, this was particularly challenging because they knew that their CEO was very far away from most employees, and they had no idea what would happen.

“[We are] in 33 countries of the world. I cannot buy an airplane and fly through the whole world all the time. We were looking for a solution to bring ‘the voice of the top’ stronger to the troops. [...] The mission is completed when I am predictable for employees. [...] The best thing that can happen is that people say: ‘I have a problem, and I already know the answer of [the CEO]’.” (CEO Company Y)

Due to the enormous scope of the platform and the direct link to the CEO, the communication department decided to give the platform a central role in the restructuring process of Company Y. They knew that this process would lead to complaints and highly diverse opinions among the employees; therefore, they wanted

to give the employees the chance to discuss their issues directly with the CEO. They perceived the platform as a great chance to involve the employees in current issues of the organization. Thereby, they wanted to inspire a change in the company culture.

“In the context of the restructuration [...] the platform had a central role [...] for the complaints/displeasures and for the discussions of the employees. [...] Before we always said ‘you, that, there.’ We are very hierarchical.” (Informant Y3)

The platform was launched in April 2009. It was set up centrally in the intranet of Company Y. The platform was then linked to the intranet of most affiliates. All employees with access to a computer could therefore use the platform. However, a large proportion of the employees at Company Y works in (retail/wholesale) stores and do not use computers. For them, the only chance to use the platform was via open computer terminals that were partially accessible in the markets.

In order to give as many employees as possible the chance to ask questions, the platform was offered in two languages, German and English. All questions and answers were translated into both languages. At company Y, the parties responsible for the launch of the platform were not sure whether their hierarchical, sales driven company culture would have negative effects on platform traffic. The main concerns were that employees would be afraid of speaking openly in front of the whole company. Therefore, they decided to give their employees the chance to post questions anonymously.

“Due to our culture, the hierarchical mindset and the maybe too high respect of supervisors it was clear that we need to offer anonymous contributions.” (Informant Y3)

At Company Y, the communication department intended to interfere as little as possible in the platform. Before launching the platform they discussed how to react if certain questions offended the CEO. When they mentioned their concerns to the head of communications he told them not to worry *“[the CEO] can bear this, he is snappy as well.”* (Informant Y3). The only interference from the communication department was therefore when employees were afraid of their own courage. There was for instance a case of an employee who posted a question in behalf of his team. After a couple of days he contacted the platform manager and asked him to delete the question from the platform. The employee said that his supervisor had contacted him and told

him to keep problems internally in the team. The platform manager stated that they were not sure how to react, because the intention of the platform is to increase communication and to uncover issues. First, the platform manager wanted to admonish the supervisor, but in the end they just took the question off the platform. They did not want to weaken the position of the employee. However, as the platform manager stated, this was an exception.

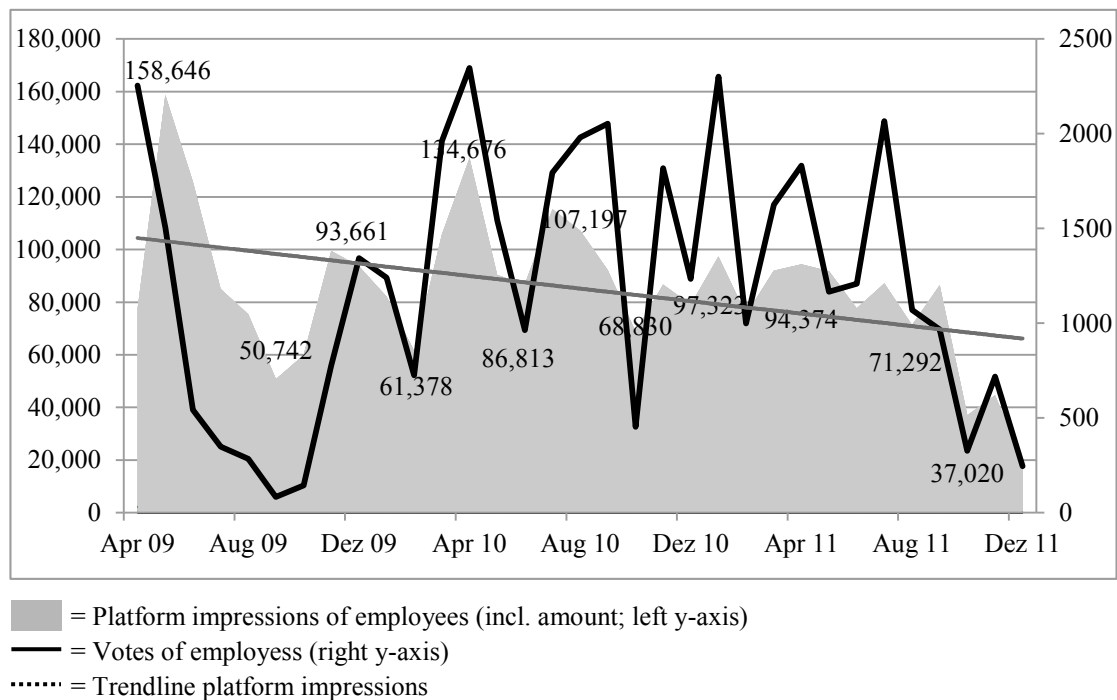
4.2.3 Development of platform traffic

At Company Y the CEO, the chief of communications, and the communication department decided to implement the platform at the end of 2008. A couple of months later, in April 2009, the platform went online. Shortly before its launch, Company Y started an advertising campaign. They put an eye-catching banner with the CEO and the company logo on the intranet and in its newsfeed where they introduced the platform.

“Dear employees, welcome on the new dialogue-platform straight-to-[the CEO]. [...] For me it is important that we, the new [Company Y] group develop together. A main ingredient of joint development is a constructive, open dialogue between all involved people – employees, supervisors, and the board. The new platform helps us here. [...].” (CEO Company Y)

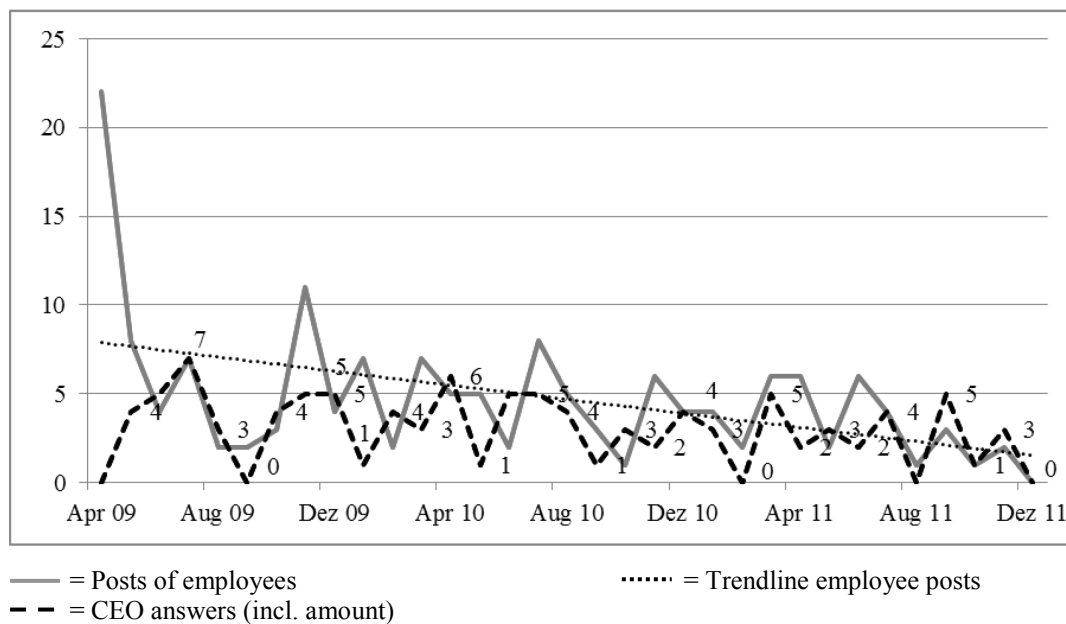
They also advertised the tool offline. At their headquarters they set up posters, and they even put cards on the tables of the cafeteria. However, all offline activities just focused on the headquarters and thus on the home market. On the day of the platform launch, all involved people were very curious about how the platform would develop. In the beginning they actually discussed posting questions by themselves in order to gain momentum in the platform. However, they neglected these thoughts and the plan not to interfere.

As illustrated in Figure 4-7, in the first couple of weeks interest about the platform grew steadily. In May, page impressions of the platform were an all-time high of nearly 160,000. The employees also voted often, with more than 2,000 votes in April.

Figure 4-7: Company Y: Platform impressions and votes

Due to the strong online presence of the platform, most employees quickly got to know about the platform. “*Since I am in the intranet every day, I got to know relatively quickly about the platform.*” (Informant Y3). However, after the first two months, the traffic on the platform began to decrease heavily. Figure 4-8 illustrates this development. In the first two months employees posted around 20 questions per month. Four months after the launch of the platform, the employee posts went down to around five per month. After a peak in December 2009, employee posts stayed at this level until the end of 2011.

Figure 4-8: *Company Y: Employee posts and CEO answers*



“[Platform traffic] was basically fluctuating. In summer holidays we directly recognized directly fewer posts. Fewer posts [lead to] fewer clicks. People observe whether there is happening something.” (Informant Y3).

After the first couple of months in the platform, the parties responsible for the communication recognized that they needed to find solutions to increase the traffic. One thing they changed was the registration process of the platform. Before that, employees had to register each time before they could use the platform. The communication coordinators thought that this would hold people off from applying the platform. Therefore, they cancelled separate registration for the platform and replaced it with a single-sign-on solution. With this, employees just had to sign into the intranet and could then directly access the platform. Communication department also tried to advertise the tool as often as possible. Especially on the intranet, whenever there was interesting news they linked it with an interactive banner for the platform. These actions seemed to be successful, at least for a while because in later summer 2009, page impressions went up heavily.

“There were always peaks. In my opinion the development depended on the topics. We always saw which topics are present in the company, internally and externally.” (Informant Y7)

As indicated above, the platform traffic had several peaks. Some of these were, for instance, in November 2009, April 2010, and August 2010. Interestingly, in all these months an impulse video was uploaded, where the CEO referred to a current topic and encouraged the employees to participate in the platform.

From the middle of 2010 until the middle of 2011, platform impressions and employees votes stayed relatively stable (Figure 4-7). However, employee posts were very low at that time (approximately five per month), so that in 2011 nearly every single post was answered by the CEO. Toward the end of December platform traffic as well as employee posts decreased heavily down to zero in December 2011.

“[At the phase-out phase of the tool] from what I read, I did not have the feeling that a lot happened. I spoke with many colleagues about the platform and all had the same opinion. Nobody was the opinion that the answers [of the CEO] would be worth reading. Nothing happens. They could have surely done it better.” (Informant Y7)

When the CEO left Company Y in December 2011, the platform was taken offline. At the beginning of 2012 Company Y got a new CEO. He did not want to use the platform that was launched by his predecessor.

4.2.4 Answering process of the CEO

At Company Y, the answering process was managed by the communication department. When a question was voted among the top 3, the communication department sent the question to the respective department and asked its members to prepare an answer for the CEO. Sometimes, the questions were rather complex, in these cases several departments had to be involved in the answering process. Due to the structure of Company Y (it has independent subsidiaries), some questions needed the involvement of the board members of these subsidiaries. In this case, the communication department contacted these and asked for their participation. The coordination process of different departments/subsidiaries often took a long time. It could take up to six weeks until an answer was online.

The organizational effort for the communication department was especially high during the implementation phase of the platform. During this time, they had to make many adjustments, together with the IT and the legal department as well as the provider of the platform. *“Once the tool is in the daily business, the effort is – that was an advantage – moderate. [The communication department] just moderated the posts.* (Informant Y3).

Before an answer was sent to the CEO, his assistant as well as the head of communications read it. The assistant mentioned that he especially focused on the meaningfulness of the answer. However, there were also constraints in the answering process: *“We could not always write the full truth in the platform [...] do you know what I mean [...] it is a public tool and answers could possibly end up outside the company.”* (Informant Y2).

Once they finalized the answer, the assistant or the communication department submitted the proposals to the CEO. The CEO then either revised the answer or approved it directly: *“The questions were prepared by [the communication department]. I often revised the ones that were on my desk [...] before they were sent out electronically. But the decision which questions [appear on my desk], that was up to them.”* (CEO Company Y).

According to the informants, the CEO did not agree with all answers that they prepared. In some cases they needed to involve the respective departments again in order to revise the answers. However, the CEO stated that he paid the most attention to questions that were critical. For him, the head of communications was essential in the answering process. He stated that they worked hand in hand in this process, and that he trusted him 100 percent. The CEO even mentioned that the head of communications was allowed to answer uncritical questions without verification.

“We organized it in a way that [...] the Head of Communication decided [what questions needed my involvement]. You could not believe what kind of ‘bullshit’ is written in some questions. But then there are questions where you say ‘he has got a point.’ They boys then answered [the uncritical questions] ‘on my behalf.’” (CEO Company Y)

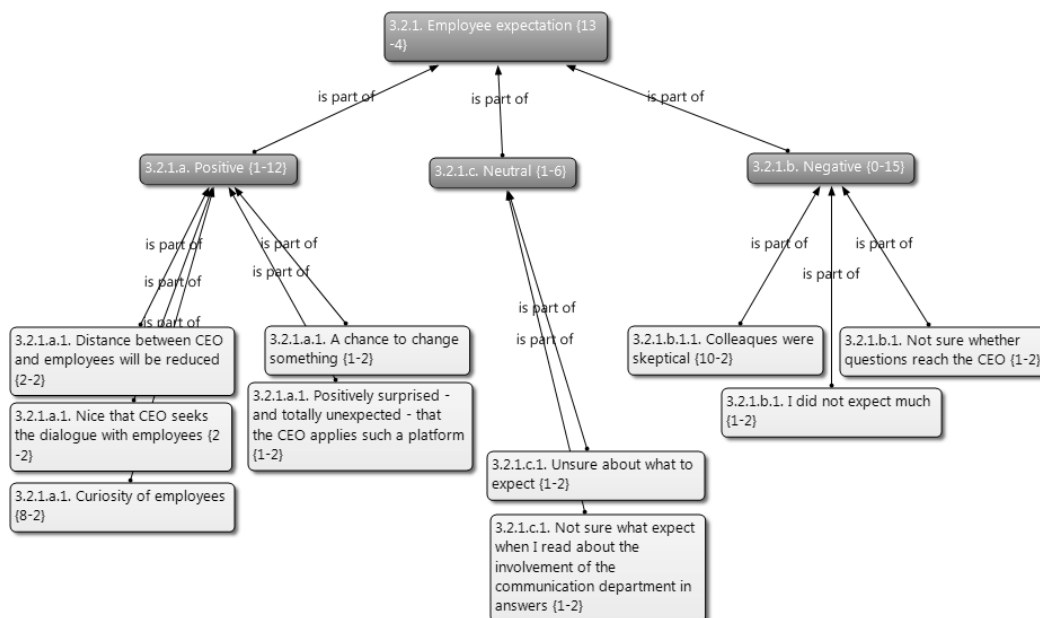
In order to further motivate interest in the platform, the communication department set up impulse events. Here, they uploaded a video or published a written statement from the CEO where he referred to a current event and asked employees to participate in the discussion about this event. In total, Company Y launched five impulses of the CEO. The first was in November 2009 where he referred to the quarterly report. The next three impulses were launched between February and April 2010 and were based on the semiannual report, the new company structure, and an international fair in the highly growing market in China. The last impulse was launched in September 2011 and focused on sustainability. However, according to the communication department they

were not satisfied with the impulses. *“The impulses did not trigger. We can say this clearly. Do not ask me why.”* (Informant Y 4).

4.2.5 Organizational expectations and adoption

Due to the large national advertising effort, the platform was very present especially at the holding of Company Y. The expectations of the employees about the platform were diverse; however, in total the informants stated more positive than negative expectations. The following figure clusters the key statement of the informants when they were asked about their expectations of the platform.

Figure 4-9: *Company Y: Expectations of many-to-one communication*



Note: The figure illustrates codes that were derived from the open coding process in atlas.ti (see section 3.2).

Some informants mentioned that many employees were curious about the platform and felt rather positive about it. Most informants stated that when they first heard about the platform, they were surprised because they did not expect at all that *“[Mr. YX], the CEO, is willing to cope [with the employees] in the platform.”* (Informant Y9). They were rather surprised that the CEO is looking for closer contact to all of his employees. In their opinion, this was a very positive sign of showing interest for the lower echelons. They furthermore added that it would be a great idea and a chance for improving the organization.

Other informants were not sure what to expect. *“In general I found [the platform] positive. But with the constraint that when you read the general terms and conditions [you find out that] the answers were written by the communication department [...] you ask yourself ‘what is it about?’ or ‘what really reaches the CEO?’”* (Informant Y10).

Some informants stated that they were skeptical about the platform, or that they did not expect a lot. One employee mentioned for instance that he was not sure whether the CEO himself will be involved in the platform: *“I did not expect a lot. From [politicians] I know such [initiatives] where you can write directly [...] but then one of their assistants gives the answers.”* (Informant Y8). Another employee stated that he did not think that the platform could encourage an open organizational dialogue, due to their company culture with a large gap between the holding and operations: *“The holding is in many ways not thinking operatively [...]. It often has no contact to the operating business.”* (Informant Y2).

On average, the platform had about 85,000 page impressions per month and the posts got 29,500 clicks per month. Thus, solely one third of the users who accessed the platform (page impressions) really read the posts. There must be therefore a large amount of users that accessed the platform but did not read the posts in detail. The interviews also reveal that the usage intensity varied heavily among the informants. There were informants that never used the platform, e.g., *“I did not think [the platform] was meaningful and did not follow the discussions at all”* (Informant Y6), as well as informants who used it a couple times per week, e.g., *“I applied it two to three times per week [...] driven by the interest for the new messages. Either messages with a certain entertaining factor, or messages with a certain sharpness.”* (Informant Y9). On average there appeared 5.3 questions and 15.1 comments per month. Therefore, most of the users just followed the traffic or voted (1,209 per month). Just a very small share of users actively asked questions or wrote comments. A large proportion was thus rather passive in the platform. *“I mainly checked what was written, and I took part in one or two discussions.”* (Informant Y8). Some of the informants justified their low participation in the platform by their skepticism regarding the anonymity of the platform. *“I never asked some questions [...] because I thought [...] this might have consequences. [Even though we have the option to ask anonymously] many people know me. They would have said ‘that was him.’”* (Informant Y10). Even though there appeared less solely 15 comments per month the members of the communication department stated that the comments were good for giving employees the chance to sort out pointless discussions themselves. *“[In the comment function] happened what*

we hoped for. The community sorted out things between themselves” (Informant Y3). One of the employees mentioned an interesting example concerning the comments in the platform. At the beginning of the platform in 2009 he wrote a post where he indicated potentials of photovoltaic energy for Company Y. This question was voted among the top 3. He stated that he did not receive many comments in the platform. However, he received a large amount of e-mails from his colleagues who wanted to contact him directly and not via the tool.

The voting function was applied much more often at Company Y than the comments function. However, it took a while until the employees began to use the voting function intensively. *“[Before the single-sign-on] we had e.g., 30 pros and 70 contras. Afterwards we had 300 pros and 500 contras. The numbers went up to 10 times the amount.”* (Informant Y3).

The study of Company Y revealed that the users of the platform were to a large proportion from the German market. Even though the platform traffic was translated in German and English, nearly all traffic came from the German market. *“It was a German tool. There came little from international divisions”* (Informant Y3). *“Most questions came from employees. Not just from employees in administrative functions, but also from employees that we [in the holding] perceive as being very far away [from us], the employees with operating functions.”* (Informant Y9). All informants agreed that most traffic, especially after the change toward single sign-on registration, came from the sales market, especially from the largest division of Company Y. *“With the change toward single-sign-on the markets were much more active. There really came up topics from e.g., the market in Wuppertal¹⁹. There came a lot from the markets, also very critical things”* (Informant Y3). The closer the employees were to the CEO, the fewer questions they were posting, according to the informants. Employees in management functions were, for instance, not present in the platform. At least they did not post questions or wrote comments. The informants stated that people in management functions have access to most information anyway and because such a dialogue is not in line with their hierarchical mindset. One stakeholder that was appearing prominently as well was the labor union. The analysis of the platform traffic reveals that among the 176 questions that appeared, 10 questions were posted by the labor union. However, some informants stated that they assumed that labor union involvement was actually higher. Due to the strong appearance of their key topics, they supposed that some questions were posted anonymously from private accounts of

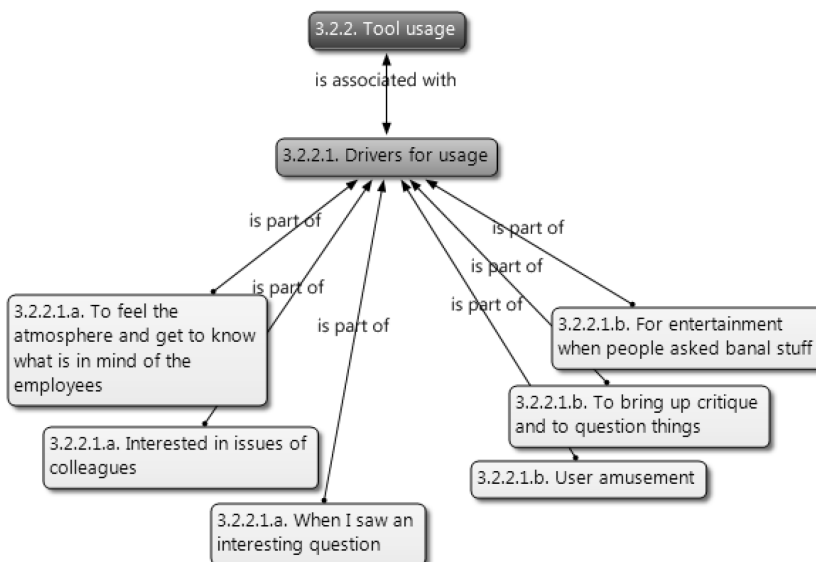
¹⁹ A city in Germany.

members of the labor union. *“The labor union used it more and more as a propaganda tool [...] to create a negative atmosphere”* (Informant Y10).

4.2.6 Drivers for usage and content in the platform

The users applied the platform for different reasons. The following figure illustrates the key statements of the interviews at Company Y. Generally, the statements about the drivers were more negative than the statements about the expectations of the platform.

Figure 4-10: *Company Y: Drivers for platform usage*



Note: The figure illustrates codes that were derived from the open coding process in atlas.ti (see section 3.2).

Most employees used the platform to get information about their colleagues. For them it was interesting to get insights about the organizational climate.

“It was very interesting for me to get a direct picture of the climate from totally different levels [and departments] of the organization. This was a picture that I would never get otherwise.” (Informant Y5)

One of the informants even called the platform an *“instrument to measure”* the general mood in the organization. Most of the users looked at the platform every now and then, and checked on the first page whether there was a topic that sounded interesting. However, some employees mentioned that they opened the platform with a

“smile on [their] face,” because they experienced “entertaining comments and questions.” Another employee even mentioned that they checked the platform regularly for the most “stupid question.” Then he met his colleagues to gossip about the comments. Some of the employees stated that for them, the platform was a vehicle to speak out critically about problems. “At the holding [...] and the subsidiaries there were smaller and larger problems. These [problems] led to a higher usage of the platform. [In my opinion] it was implemented for expressing critique or to question when something is not working well.” (Informant Y2).

The following table gives an overview of exemplary questions for the respective category. The selected questions do not aim to be representative but instead they intend to give the reader an overview of the array of topics that emerged in the platform. All of these questions were among the top rated and thus answered by the CEO.

Table 4-6: Company Y: Exemplary questions for content

Content (Votes ²⁰)	Informant
Strategy / Market entrance (+129)	“Dear Mr. [CEO], in the last weeks you mentioned at many occasions the market entrance of [one subsidiary] in China and its chances and perspectives for [Company Y]. In my opinion the market entrance is critical, especially due to the following reasons: [e.g.] destructively cheap prices. [...] I am interested in your opinion about the topic because I think that simply copying [...] the concept from Europe and bringing it to China will not bring the [...] success you mentioned.” (Platform question)
Strategy / Market closure (+494)	“Dear Mr. [CEO], is the decision of the board to close four large markets of [one subsidiary] not too hasty? In the end we give market shares to the competitors [...]. What futures have the remaining markets?” (Platform question)
Culture / Employees (+788)	“Dear Mr. [CEO], in may posts the topics personnel was discussed. [...] It is incomprehensible for everyone that markets are getting closed and management salary steadily increases. [...] Do you intend that in the future employees work themselves to death? ‘The employees are our greatest good’ was written once in our company newspaper. [...] Where does all of this lead to?” (Platform question)
Culture / Rewards (+760)	“Dear Mr. [CEO], I was astonished when I read in the annual report [...] that the amount of [approx. 30] million € was paid to the retired board members [XY]. Who is responsible for such a decision? [...] Next year I will buy some shares in order to take part in the annual shareholders meeting.” (Platform question)
Organization / Platform operations (+90)	“Dear Mr. [CEO], generally I like the idea of this forum. [...] But I am wondering about the time it takes [for you] to answer the questions of the employees. [...] From my point of view, the perception of the forum decreases heavily (I think that [now], even topics with negative ratings are answered), may this be due to the long time it needs to get an answer?” (Platform question)

²⁰ Total amount of positive minus negative votes in the platform.

Especially in the beginning phase of the platform there were many questions about the organizational strategy of Company Y. The first two questions in the table are exemplary for questions in the field of strategy. The first question states the concerns of an employee regarding the market entrance of a subsidiary in China. In the second question, another employee asked about the consequences of the closure of certain markets. Many informants stated in the interviews that the strategic discussions were highly interesting. *“The possible expansion [of Company Y] in the USA and the creation of new distribution channels. [...] These [discussions] proved that the employees are interested in [...] the development of Company Y. This was very, very interesting. [However,] at the end the platform drifted toward random comments.”* (Informant Y5). However, the longer the platform was online, the more complaining and destructive questions emerged. A large proportion of the traffic dealt with the consequences of the reorganization, especially for the employees. The third and fourth questions in Table 4-6 are exemplary for such concerns. These questions were, with +788 respectively +760 votes the highest-voted questions in the platform. Here, the employee questioned the appreciation of the employees at Company Y as well as its salary policy.

“I did not have the feeling that a lot happened. I spoke with many colleagues about the platform and all of us were of the opinion [...] that it is not worth reading. [...] The opinion about the platform became worse.” (Informant Y8)

The fact that the public opinion about the platform traffic became worse could be also observed in its last month in 2011. Here, the total amount of votes dropped heavily. According to the informants, the quality of the posts was highly diverse. These range from *“very banal questions,”* to *“barroom clichés”* up to *“sophisticated strategic topics”* (Informant Y9). Table 4-7 outlines the broad range of questions. It applies the same logic as in Company X. Exemplary for banal questions are lines two and three. Here, the employees asked the CEO about changing toilet paper and whether they can choose other desktop backgrounds for their computers. However, there also appeared questions of higher scopes. One of the employees for instance suggested increasing the export of wine to China, because he expected high market potential (line 4, Table 4-7).

Table 4-7: Company Y: Exemplary questions for intention

Intention (Votes²¹)	Informant
CEO level	<i>*E.g., all questions in Table 4-6</i>
Functional level/ Sanitation²² (+67)	<i>“Dear Mr. [CEO], [...] the toilet paper [...] is of minor quality and reminds me in terms of comfort to [...] school toilets. [...] In fact I would also like to know why we cannot use our own brand for toilet paper?” (Platform question)</i>
Complaint/ IT problem²³ (-457)	<i>“Dear Mr. [CEO], I would like to know why we cannot choose our desktop background for the computers. I am suffering strong winter depressions and enjoy when I can look on a colorful landscape. [...]” (Platform question)</i>
Improvement/ Market expansion (+19)	<i>“Good evening Mr. [CEO], I would like to put attention on the CNN²⁴ news from this morning. CNN reported that wine consumption in China is growing. [...] This could be the time for Company Y [...] to bring [our] diverse array of wines in the Chinese markets. [...]” (Platform question)</i>

4.3 Company Z: Narrative case description

4.3.1 About the organization

Company Z is a high-technology manufacturer that has its origins in central Europe. It is a business division of a large manufacturing company that employs more than 300,000 employees. Company Z employs approximately 6,000 employees, about one third working in the national market and the other two third working in its sites in Europe, Asia, India, or the USA. Company Z operates in the business-to-business (B2B) market. The following figure draws the organizational structure of Company Z.

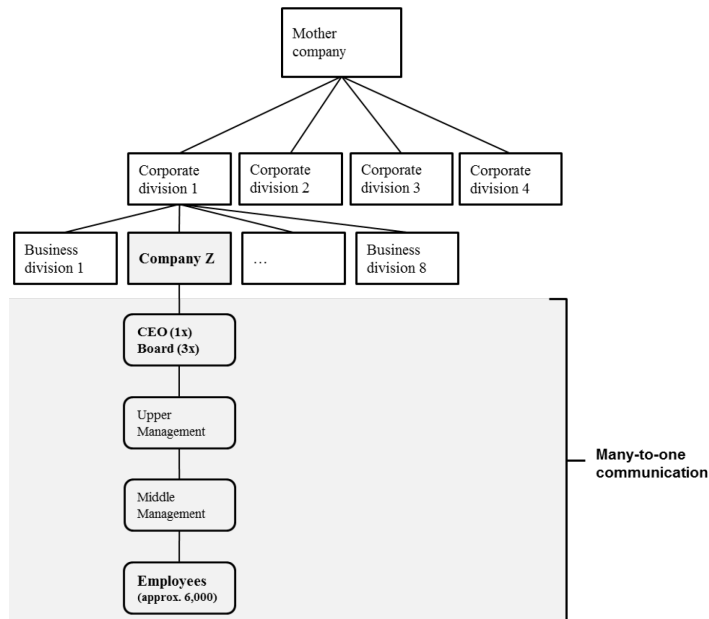
²¹ The difference between positive and negative votes of a certain question in the platform.

²² The question was not published in the platform because it was not voted among the top questions.

²³ The question was not published in the platform because it was not voted among the top questions.

²⁴ Cable News Network (CNN) is an American television channel.

Figure 4-11: Company Z: Organizational structure (simplified)



The market is very dynamic, with a broad array of competitors. Competition does not only emerge from the B2B market, but also from business-to-customers (B2C) market. However, Company Z still has a competitive advantage in the industry because it serves the full range of products in their industry.

However, in the last years Company Z's business was very volatile. After very good results in 2007, the company was heavily hit by the financial crisis. This led to high pressure internally and a tense atmosphere. However, in 2010 business recovered and revenues went back to break even. Between 2011 and the first half of 2012 the revenues developed very well and went back to the level before the crisis. Recently, there have been indicators for an economic slowdown, but Company Z still forecasts growth for the next years. Company Z faced two main challenges. The first challenge was the high competition in the market in combination with large uncertainty regarding its development. The second challenge was the potential entrance of large corporations from the consumer electronic industry.

“We have a much higher amount of competitors than other classical automotive domains. [Additionally] the question is, is [our market] large enough for [the big players] from the consumer electronics world to enter?” (CEO Company Z)

Another challenge for Company Z was to balance the split between the long life cycles their industry (from development until product displacement) and the extremely quick-developing customer expectations regarding electronic devices.

“We are in a market where the time frame from car development until [the termination] of a car takes up to 12, 15, 18 years. [...] And then we have the end users who say, ‘I have a new car but old electronics. In my smartphone I have 1,000 features that are more interesting.’ [...] We have to get both worlds married.” (CEO Company Z)

4.3.2 Rationale and setup of the many-to-one communication platform

Shortly after the financial crisis, Company Z launched a campaign in 2010 that aimed to boost its organizational success. Therefore, they decided to *“launch a new goal [...] that people know [the reason] why they are working.”* (Informant Z3). The campaign they launched aimed to bring revenues up to two billion euros and to greatly increase profits. Its slogan was to “double the good things and halve the bad things” in the company. However, they knew that these ambitious goals could only be fulfilled when all employees work together. For a successful process, a high level of communication in the organization would be crucial. The need for communication was further triggered by a survey among all employees that discovered that certain messages did not cascade down.

“In our business [...] we do not know, or cannot plan what technology will be predominant in five to 10 years. We need culture, people, leadership, and communication that enable people to work agilely and flexibly, [therefore] we need to communicate more openly, otherwise we cannot keep up with the speed and the dynamic [in the market].” (CEO Company Z)

The board did not want to exclude themselves from the communication process. They actually wanted to take further responsibilities because they knew that with their existing communication efforts such as after-work talks or CEO chats, they *“could just create an event character, but [they] could not hold the pace for long”* (CEO Company Z). However, at Company Z they also had certain online communities, but these mainly aimed at informing employees on technical topics. Therefore, they were looking for a solution that brings up topics from the employees (bottom-up) and that is interactive but also manageable with a reasonable effort.

When the communication department introduced many-to-one communication and its potentials to the board, the board decided to implement it. However, the decision was not made without concerns. In a meeting one of the board members asked his colleagues: *“What happens when there come up questions that we cannot answer, or questions we do not want to answer?”* (Informant Z2). The CEO directly answered: *“Hey, welcome - the questions are there anyway. Better we know about the questions than [our people speak behind our backs]. [...] When we know about the issue we can try to eliminate it.”* (CEO Company Z).

By implementing the platform at Company Z, the board and the communication department intended to address various rationales (see Table 4-8).

Table 4-8: Company Z: Rationale for many-to-one communication

Rationale	Informant
Improve organizational communication	<i>“[At Company Z] we did not want to let people alone, but instead we wanted to give them the chance to ask questions, to comment and to discuss.”</i> (Informant Z3)
To bring CEO/the board closer to employees	<i>“Ideally what we can do [with the platform] as management is to transport messages about us at the management team, how we work, how we speak, how we communicate [...] respectfully, open, and on eye level.”</i> (Informant Z2)
Direct dialogue of CEO/board with employees	<i>“Our goal was that employees can also have a critical dialogue with the leaders, and try to bring up topics that have not been implemented so far.”</i> (Informant Z2)
Increase strategy communication	<i>“We wanted to work on strategy communication [...] we were of the opinion that our strategy is well elaborated, but we obviously did not manage to bring it in the teams.”</i> (Informant Z2)
Bringing up topics of the employees	<i>“In the platform, employees had the chance to bring up their questions by voting. We said: ‘Hey, we should do this,’ because the things that come up have certain relevance.”</i> (CEO Company Z)
Developing openness and trust in the organization	<i>“We [always] speak about openness and about trust. [This] is important for us. No one needs to be afraid. This was part of the mind-set [of the platform].”</i> (Informant Z3)
Trend toward social media	<i>“[Another] reason was that we recognized [...] that social networks and tools exist outside of the organization and lead to expectations [internally] that need to be satisfied.”</i> (Informant Z3)

Key rationale was improving communication in the organization. The intention was here not only to increase communication at the employee level, but also to improve communication between the board and the employees. In particular, direct communication of strategic topics should be improved in order to increase the employees’ involvement in the organizational development. Additionally, they wanted to give employees the chance to bring up the topics they want to discuss with the

board. This way the board members wanted to prove their openness and get to know the issues the employees deal with.

At Company Z the platform was linked to the intranet. It was accessible at all sites of Company Z for all employees with access to a computer. The platform was completely in English. However, it was announced on the platform that whenever an employee would have constraints due to the language, he/she could send the messages in their mother language and Company Z would take care of the translation.

An important topic for Company Z was whether to permit anonymity in the platform. They came to the conclusion that they want to make the communication personal and not anonymous. *“We wanted to make it personal for many reasons. One was openness, the other trust. [...] But also honesty and this does not work anonymously.”* (Informant Z3). Another reason for making communication personal was to ensure the quality of the platform.

“We put openness on the agenda; therefore, we do not accept anonymous questions. [...] There will not be any [anonymous] animosity accepted.” (CEO Company Z)

At company Z, the initiators of the platform decided to answer the top three questions every 14 days. Special about the set-up of their platform was that they did not only choose the CEO as addressee of the messages but all four members of the management board. With this decision they wanted to underline the relevance of team spirit at company Z and to share efforts for the answering process. The idea of the board members was to split the questions according to their field of responsibility (e.g., Research & Development (R&D) questions are answered by the Head of R&D). The first page of the platform consequently showed a picture with all board members. The shared responsibility of the board was also underlined by the name of the platform that explicitly mentioned the board as addressee.

4.3.3 Development of platform traffic

The platform was launched at Company Z in October 2011. For the introduction of the platform, the communication department sent a message to all employees and invited them to take part in the discussion with the board. Moreover, they wrote another message to all employees with leadership positions and instructed them to encourage their teams to participate in discussions on the platform. To increase the popularity of the platform, they also put the invitation in the news ticker that appeared on the intranet as well as on the screen savers of all computers at Company Z. On the

platform, they uploaded a video of the board members where they stated the goals they want to achieve by introducing the platform. Here, they especially underlined that they wanted to give the employees a chance to ask all questions they had in mind. All informants at Company Z mentioned that there was huge curiosity about the platform in the first months. Figure 4-12 and Figure 4-13 underline these statements.

Figure 4-12: *Company Z: Platform impressions and votes*

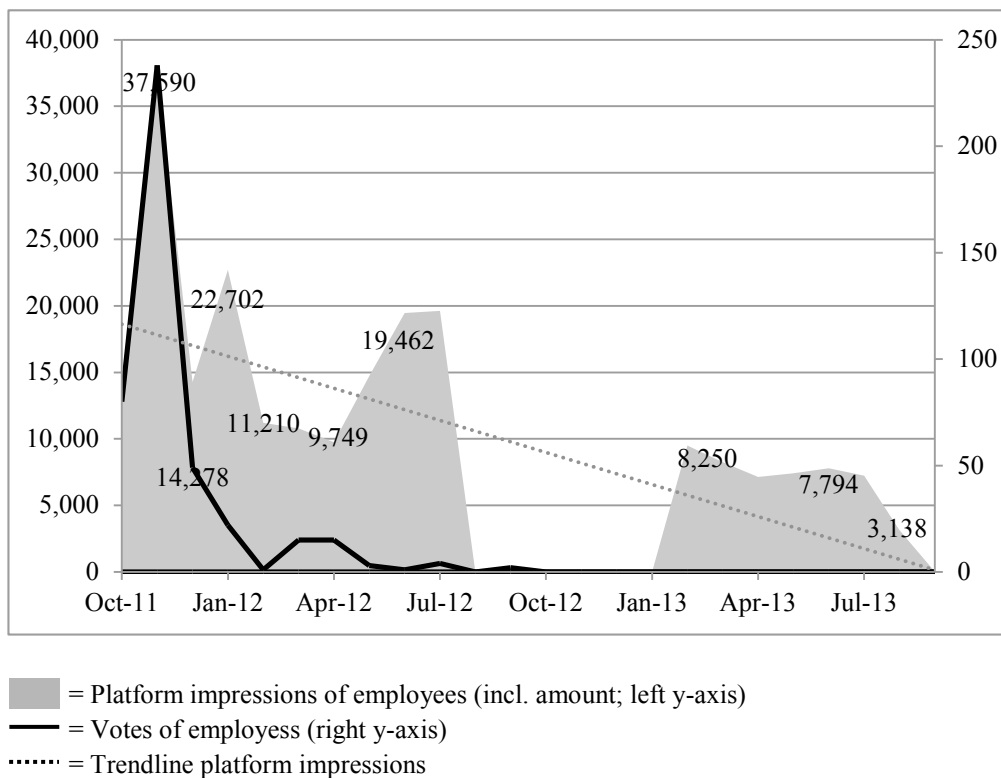
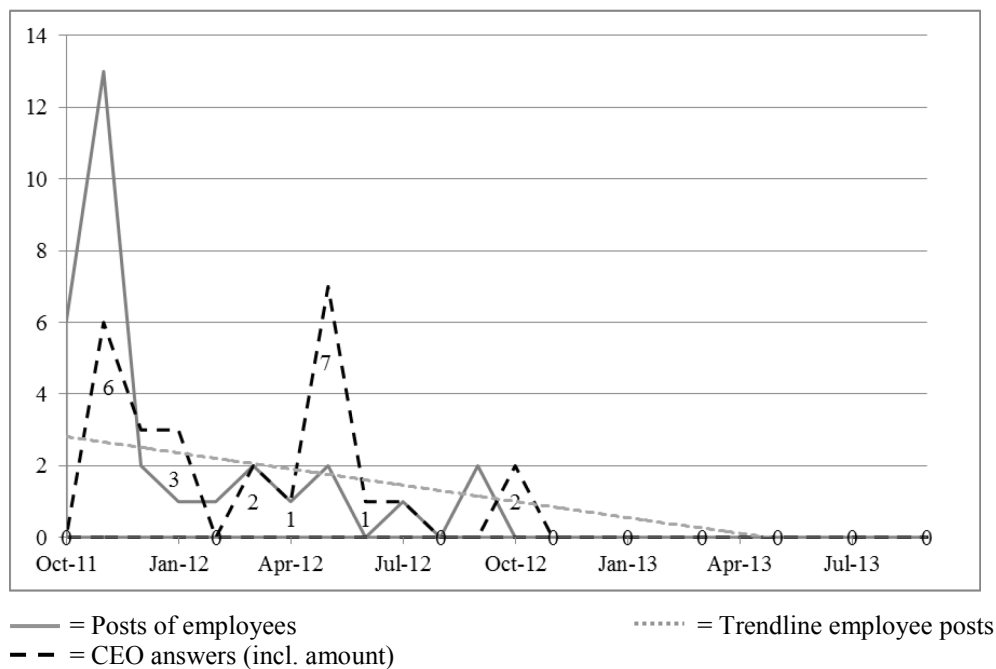


Figure 4-12 illustrates that the amount of page impression (37,590) as well as the amount of votes (approximately 230) increased heavily from October to November 2011. The amount of questions that were posted by the employees in the same period went up highly as well, as Figure 4-13 shows.

Figure 4-13: *Company Z: Employee posts and CEO answers*

The high participation in the first month can be explained by the extraordinary advertising effort of Company Z. In November 2011, the CEO also advertised the platform to the crowd at Company Z's largest international management conference. However, the curiosity about the platform began to decline quickly. In December 2011 page impressions went down to less than 15,000, and in April 2012 they further decreased to less than 10,000.

“Three, four months traffic and then solely some outliers. [...] Afterwards the tool failed completely [...] we became anxious and asked our colleagues [from the communication department]: “Did you turn off the platform? Is nothing coming up any more? We are waiting for the next 14-day package!” (CEO Company Z)

The decrease of activity in the platform is illustrated in Figure 4-13. The grey line illustrates the amount of questions that were posted by the employees. In the whole year 2012, there was not a single month where the number of questions was larger than two. The communication department tried to bring traffic on the platform by intervening with questions on behalf of the communication department. In April 2012 they wrote 13 questions that were all answered by the CEO. These questions were excluded from the statistics in Table 4-13, because they would distort the figures.

“The platform died in installments. Traffic went down steadily, and we made the experience that you have to put in a huge effort. [...] We underestimated the effort; we thought it would be running autonomously.” (Informant Z3)

After the initiative of the communication department, traffic increased a little bit for a period of one month. However, the efforts failed to bring the intended lasting traffic back in the platform. So did their advertising campaigns in the internal newspaper. Thus, platform traffic was literally dead in 2013. There was not a single question. In September 2013 the platform went offline.

4.3.4 Answering process of the CEO

At Company Z, all board members participated in the answering process of the platform. When there was traffic in the platform, the CEO received the three top-voted questions from the communication department. He then allocated the questions among his board colleagues. To prepare an answer to a question, the board members needed around 30 minutes. If they had to involve a specialist from certain departments the process took even longer. Afterwards, they sent a proposed answer to the other board members. They then had the chance to further work on the answer or just to leave it as suggested. Their goal was to answer every question within 14 days. *“At the beginning we were even faster, the answers went online within one week. But then there were [situations], where I ran after [answers] four, five, and six weeks.”* (Informant Z3). The board members took the answering process very seriously. At Company Z, the answers were not prepared by the communication department; instead, each board member was fully responsible for the content. *“You cannot answer just with yes or no, the people would not take this seriously. [...] We put in time and effort [...] this could also mean that when we recognized the question cannot be answered sufficiently, because it is very complex or it has a certain confidentiality, we call the employee or he could have an appointment with us”* (CEO, Company Z). One of the board members also stated that there were certain topics where there are no *“fast and simple answers.”* For such topics they had a dilemma, because it was very difficult for them to bring personal authenticity and sufficient content across in the platform. The CEO stated that he once had a phone call with an employee about a question that was very complex. For him this was a matter of respect, because the employee was intensively engaged in the topic, and the CEO *“did not want to leave [the employee] alone.”* (CEO Company Z).

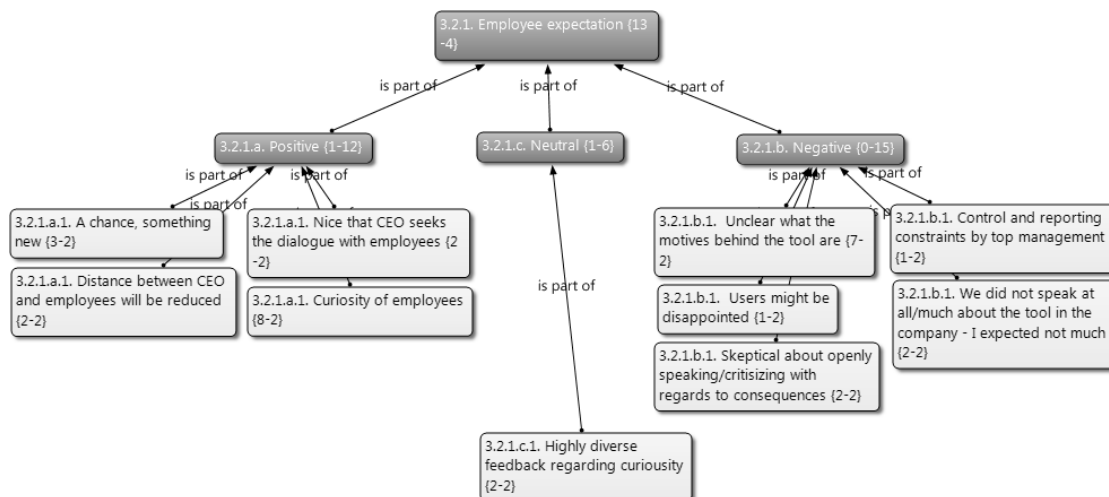
The board members stated that they underestimated the effort to answer the questions, especially in the first months of the platform when there was a great deal of traffic. *“At the beginning [there were] many questions and statements. [...] One the one side it is nice to communicate directly and transparently. But we also need to speak with one voice as the board. [...] There were coordination processes [...] it was quite some effort to keep the platform alive [...].”* (Informant Z2)

At Company Z they did not apply any “specials” where the CEO directed questions to the employees. They were of the opinion that these “CEO specials” would not be authentic.

4.3.5 Organizational expectations and adoption

When the employees first heard about the platform, their expectations were rather diverse. Figure 4-14 clusters the statements of the interviews in terms of their expectations.

Figure 4-14: Company Z: Expectations of many-to-one communication



Note: The figure illustrates codes that were derived from the open coding process in atlas.ti (see section 3.2).

One informant said that when he spoke with colleagues about the platform their statements ranged from *“great idea, very exciting, I want to try it,”* to *“I am not interested”* to *“such bullshit, why did we spent money on this”* (Informant Z3). Among the informants that had positive expectations, some mentioned that they perceive the direct dialogue with the board as a chance to improve organizational issues. *“[I think it is] a great initiative that is helpful and useful! I also thought it is great that the board tries to decrease distance.”* (Informant Z4). Many of the

informants mentioned that they were curious about the platform and how the dialogue would develop. They expected to increase proximity to the board with the platform. Interestingly, the informants that worked at the headquarters of Company Z said they do not perceive the board to be highly distant. According to them, they actually met them coincidentally in the office, or they already had gotten the chance to talk to them on certain occasions.

There were also employees that thought rather negatively about the platform. One informant stated that he is very cautious to speak out about things or to criticize in public because there might be negative consequences. *“I have been working here for such a long time and I will not put obstacles in my way by asking foolish questions or comments.”* (Informant Z4). Some informants stated that for them, the rationale of the platform was unclear. They did not know whether the platform was just a superficial campaign, or whether it was the board’s true motivation to seek dialogue with the employees. One employee actually said that he believed that the platform was created with positive intentions but for him/her it felt like another reporting constraint. Therefore, he did not expect this dialogue to be meaningful.

On average the platform had 12,358 page impressions monthly. However, most of the users used the platform solely in the first months: *“I used the platform at the beginning, [but] I never spoke with my colleagues about it.”* (Informant Z5). The average amount of votes in the whole platform was approximately 18 per month. This underlines the low level of active participation among the platform users. The largest amount of positive votes on a message in the platform was +45, and the largest amount of negative votes was -15. The number of users that used the voting function in the platform was therefore low.

The following figures further underline the weak participation in the platform. The average amount of questions that appeared in the platform per month was 1.8 and the average amount of comments per month was even lower, with 1.6. *“I like to go to the platform from time to time to follow the topics and questions.[...] I have never posted a question. I am not using the platform frequently.”* (Informant Z9).

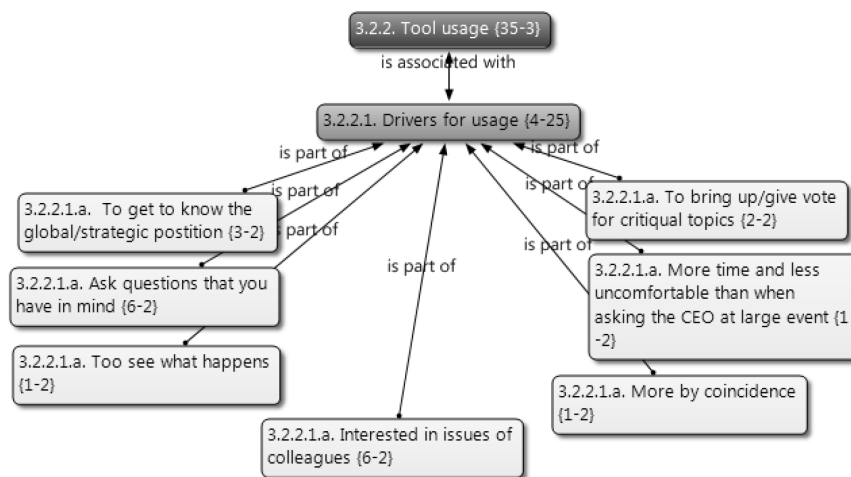
All informants at Company Z stated that a large proportion of the questions that appeared on the platform were posted by employees who work in the administration or in a technical department. The users were *“people that do not have direct contact to the board. Their direct contact is maximal [middle management]. I could see this by the questions.”* (Informant Z6). Employees with no access to computers could not take part in the virtual discussion with the board. These were, for instance, all employees who work on manual production tasks.

The interviews revealed further interesting insights about the users. While a diverse array of users appeared at the beginning, after a while, most questions came from India or Malaysia. “*My feeling is that Indian users are very active*” (Informant Z2); “*Very active were Indian users*” (Informant Z6); “*The last times I checked the platform, you could have said ‘the Indian colleagues ask the board’*” (Informant Z8).

4.3.6 Drivers for usage and content in the platform

After its first year, the platform at Company Z was not highly frequented any more. Consequently, many of the informants stated that they did not use it at all toward the end. However, the informants that applied the platform mentioned a handful of drivers for their usage (Figure 4-15).

Figure 4-15: Company Z: Drivers for platform usage



Note: The figure illustrates codes that were derived from the open coding process in atlas.ti (see section 3.2).

Most prominently, the employees mentioned that they used that platform because they wanted to get to know the rationale for top management decisions. The informants said that they often cannot understand why certain decisions were made. This is because they are too far away from the top management. One informant stated that before the implementation of the platform he did not dare to ask the top management a question, because the only chance to come up with a question was at large events with approximately 300 people listening. Now, by applying the platform, he did not feel uncomfortable anymore because it felt more private. Another driver for applying the platform was that the users could give their vote to topics that are important for them. “*My key motivation was to see what kind of topics appear. What is their focus? [...]*”

This way I had a little voice, I could vote on something that is important for me.” (Informant Z6).

Some informants stated that they were just curious about what happened in the platform. They wanted to see how the dialogue developed and sporadically took part in the discussion: *“I try [the platform] sometimes. [...] I sometimes click on the like button; I check what comes up; or I just read what the people do. [...] Probably the expectations have been disappointed, but I think many just wanted to see what happens.”* (Informant Z3).

The following tables aim to give an overview of the content that appeared in the platform. Table 4-9 illustrates exemplary questions in the areas of strategy, culture, and organization. The analysis of the platform traffic revealed that the majority of questions at Company Z dealt with market-related and strategic topics. The users were, for instance, interested in current positions, future markets, strategic partnerships, or technological challenges. As indicated above, many of these questions came from the Indian and Asian markets. The users wanted to know what role the market plays, how to further strengthen it, and how this will impact their position as an employee. For example: *“The [Company Z] division expansion in China is positive news. What avenue does this open for the [Company Z] engineers [...]?”* (Platform content, Company Z).

Only less than a handful of the questions at Company Z had a cultural focus. Table 4-9 illustrates a cultural question. Here, a user wanted to share thoughts on how to further strengthen trust in the organization. Most of these were directly related to the strategic challenges of Company Z. One user asked, for instance, how the organization could be structured to improve communication and operations in the markets.

Table 4-9: Company Z: Exemplary questions for content

Content (Votes²⁵)	Informant
Strategy/ Partnership (+45)	<i>“Dear members of [Company Z] board, I’d like to refer to the following subject: What is [your] view of the current situation concerning [Customer 1’s] partnership, since this customer has been and is so important to [Company Z], considering also that the perspectives of growth from this customer are quite promising from the strategic point of view? Are we going to grow together with [Customer 1]?”</i> (Platform question)
Culture/ Trust (+13)	<i>“Dear members of [Company Z] board, dear Mr. [CEO], referring to your presentation of five topics to gain trust (truth, reflection, listening, share information, communicate): Don’t you think that acceptance, respect, and involvement should be added?... on horizontal level / in international teams as well as top and(!) down level...”</i> (Platform question)

²⁵ Total amount of positive minus negative votes in the platform.

Organization/ Structure (+8)	<i>“Dear [Company Z] board members, [Company Z] is spread across multiple locations and the development of products takes place collaboratively across countries. For every product, we see responsibilities shared across locations. How do you see us being prepared for the coordination required across geographies & departments? What kind of changes in our organization’s structure do you foresee in the near future?” (Platform question)</i>
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Table 4-10 categorizes the questions according to their scope (CEO level versus functional level) as well as according to their intention (complaint versus improvement). The analysis of the platform content revealed that basically all questions addressed the CEO level. There was no question that dealt with a rather narrow, functional-level issue. Besides two exceptions, there also were no questions that intended to complain or to insult. Nearly all questions were constructive with the aim to improve the organization.

Table 4-10: Company Z: Exemplary questions for intention

Intention (Votes²⁶)	Informant
CEO level (+6)	<i>“Dear members of [Company Z] board, is there a specific strategy for the kind of new products or technologies (open source in particular) we would focus on and any collaborations with research institutions [...] which would give an added impetus to acquire projects especially in the premium segment?” (Platform question)</i>
Functional level	Note from the author: The analysis did not reveal any question on the functional level.
Complaint (+8)	<i>“Today thousands of employees [at the headquarters] were dismissed. This trend, [the founder of Company Z] never would have agreed with. [...] To increase the profit for [Company Z] with participation in a growth market is understandable. But: to dismiss so many employees in the home country [...], who worked hard for the legendary reputation of [Company Z] is not compatible with our rules. Are you aware of your responsibility toward the employees, toward politics, toward future generations, toward the spirit/ideas of [our founder] with all your decisions, especially in the home country? (Platform question)</i>
Improvement/ (+3)	<i>“Dear members of [Company Z] board, I’d like to refer to the following subject: Make everybody clear about their partial job in the whole project, and provide one star [...] for their accomplishments [...]. This will surely trigger my passion.” (Platform question)</i>

²⁶ The difference between positive and negative votes of a certain question in the platform.

4.4 Implications of the single-case analysis for the exploration of the phenomenon

The narrative case descriptions provide rich insights on each of the cases that will be picked up again in the course of the subsequent analyses.

The analysis revealed the impact of many-to-one communication in the three organizations and indicated various similarities and differences across the cases. A detailed comparison of these is conducted later in this dissertation in chapter 7.

At this stage the author wants to accentuate the central role of distance that could be identified in course of the narrative analysis of many-to-one communication at the three organizations. Section 2.4.3 already indicated the potential of many-to-one communication to overcome traditional borders in organizations. The narrative case analysis illustratively showed that all three organizations, regardless of their economic situation or their internal structure, aimed to reduce distance between the CEO and employees by applying many-to-one communication. Moreover, the narrative-case analysis revealed that reducing distance is not only the goal of the CEO and the organizations, but it is also the key determinant for the application of many-to-one communication by employees. In all three cases the informants underlined that they aimed to get direct and unfiltered information from their CEOs and to reduce distance. Distance therefore plays a central role for virtual communication between CEOs and employees, because it is the key driver for organizations to initiate a virtual dialogue, and because it is the key driver for the employees to seek contact to the CEO. Studying distance therefore seems to be a very promising starting point for the exploration and conceptualization of direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees via many-to-one communication. However, various scholars state that the existing theory on distance in leadership lacks applicability for the CEO level (Chun, 2009) and lacks potential for integrating technology (Popper, 2012).

The author therefore conducted a literature review on distance in various fields. The aim of this review was to find an “insightful” theory that gives guidance for the development of a conceptual framework of the broad phenomenon (Pan & Tan, 2011). This guiding theory is introduced in the next chapter.

5 Construal level theory

This chapter outlines construal level theory (CLT) which is applied as the guiding theory for the exploration of the research phenomenon. CLT is a theory at the micro-level of analysis that is well-established in the field of social psychology (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003). CLT illustrates the connection between various forms of distance and the level of abstraction that people create in their cognition (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). Due to its comprehensive conceptualization and its strong establishment in the literature, it offers promising insights for analyzing the many-to-one communication process. This chapter addresses the research question 2.1 that was outlined in the introduction of this dissertation.

Applying CLT to the field of leadership is in line with various scholars that suggest a.) integrating psychological theories in leadership research, e.g., Hambrick (2007) and b.) applying micro-level theories to macro-level phenomena, e.g., House & colleagues (1995) and Waldmann & Yammarino (1999).

The first section (5.1) of this chapter illustrates the composition of CLT and its core effects. Therefore, it draws on key literature from the field of social psychology. The second section (5.2) presents recent literature that started integrating CLT in a leadership context. The combination of CLT and leadership research reveals further insights that are fruitful for the development of the theoretical lens.

5.1 CLT of psychological distance

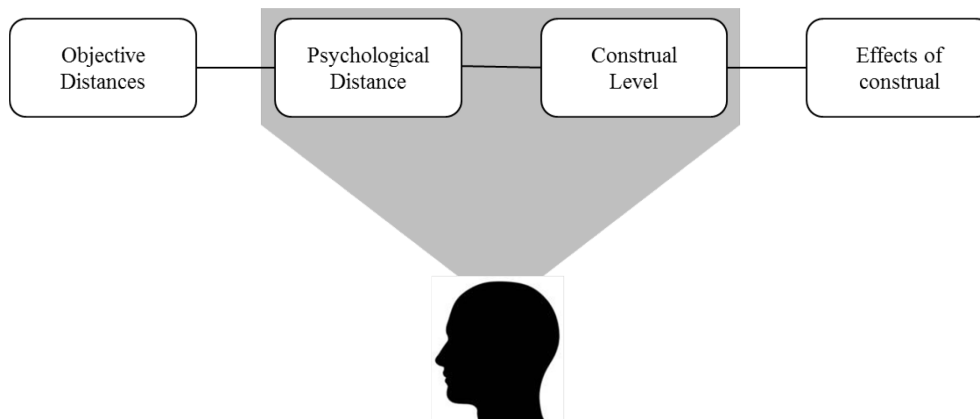
The core notion of CLT is that people can only directly experience the “here and now” (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Any experience that does not occur physically in the immediate presence is mentally construed by the perceiver. However, when people experience anything in the direct present, they have a lot of detailed information about this target.²⁷ Therefore, people think about these targets in concrete terms on the basis of the rich information they gathered (Trope, et al., 2007). When people think about targets that they did not experience in the immediate “here and now,” they do not have as much concrete information, and thus construe the target more abstractly (Trope & Liberman, 2010). People speculate, for instance, about other people’s reactions in the future or memorize an event from the past. However, these speculations or memories cannot be as concrete and detailed as if they would be occurring in the “here and now.” Speculations or memories are called construals in CLT. Construals are defined

²⁷ E.g., people, entities, places, objects, or events (Henderson, Fujita, Trope, & Liberman, 2006).

as predictions that are abstracted from direct experiences, which aim to help individuals to transcend the “here and now” (Trope & Liberman, 2010). As a basis for their choices and actions, people are guided by these construals. CLT posits that people adopt different levels of construals, depending on their psychological distance from a target (Henderson, et al., 2006). The greater the psychological distance from a target, the more they have to construe it. However, psychological distance is a subjective perception (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The self in “here and now” is the starting point, and any distancing from that egocentric point increases psychological distance (Wilson, et al., 2012). There exist different reasons for why targets cannot be experienced in the immediate presence and thus involve construal. Targets may belong to the past or future (e.g., my anniversary yesterday, my first year in high school) to spatially remote locations (e.g., my neighbor’s house, a house in a country far away), to other people (e.g., my best friend, a strange person), or to hypothetical alternatives to reality (e.g., if I had more money, if I could fly) (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007b). These alternatives to the immediate “here and now” represent different dimensions of objective distance namely: temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypothetical distance, respectively (Trope, et al., 2007). All these remove people from having direct experience and thus lead to distancing from a certain target. Moreover, they all affect the level of construal in the same manner by influencing psychological distance.

Figure 5-1 illustrates the direct connection between objective distance, psychological distance, construal level, and effects. Psychological distance serves as a meta-construct that comprises the different dimensions of objective distance. The grey area marks the subjective mental dimensions in the mind of the perceiver. The model is based on a recent and well-elaborated study of Wilson and colleagues (2012, p. 4).

Figure 5-1: Simplified process model of CLT



Source: Wilson, et al., 2012, p. 4.

According to CLT, all objective distances have the same egocentric starting point (the self in the “here and now”) and thus are cognitively related. Therefore, the greater the objective distance of a target, the greater is its psychological distance from the perceiver.

The difference between objective distance and psychological distance is well-illustrated by the following example. In a series of experiments, Burris and Branscombe (2005) found that when people are asked to estimate the distance between them and two towns, town A that is located in the same country and town B that is in another country, they estimate that town B would be more distant, even though they have exactly the same spatial distance from the perceiver (Burris & Branscombe, 2005). Thus, although the two towns are spatially equally remote, the perceiver feels more distant toward the town that is not located in the same country. Objective distance therefore does not fully reflect how close or distant people perceive themselves to be from a certain target.

5.1.1 Level of construal and mental evaluation

This section focuses on construal level and its effects on the mental evaluation of perceivers. CLT proposes that psychological distance determines whether people use primary, essential characteristics or secondary, peripheral characteristics of targets as the basis of evaluation (Trope, et al., 2007). Sagristano and colleagues (2002) give an illustrative example for this phenomenon. They state that “from a distant perspective, we see the forest, but from a proximal perspective, we see the trees” (p. 364). CLT

depicts, that the lack of knowledge about distant targets (remote people, events, entities, or places) requires that these are represented on a more abstract and higher construal level than if they were proximate (Henderson, et al., 2006). This logic goes in line with the theories of categorization, concept formation, and action identification. These state that high-level construals trigger core characteristics of an object in the perceiver's mind (Trope & Liberman, 2010). These are abstract, decontextualized, and superordinate²⁸ representations that extract the gist from the available information (Liberman & Trope, 2008). Thus, the closer a person feels toward a target, the more likely will the person build lower-level mental construals. These are more concrete, contextual, and subordinate²⁹ compared to high-level construals (Wilson, et al., 2012). The following table illustrates the differences between high-level and low-level construals in the perceivers' minds.

Table 5-1: *Differences between high-level and low-level construals*

	High-level construals	Low-level construals
Focus of the perceiver	“On the forest”	“On the trees”
Description of construal	Abstract	Concrete
	General	Specific
	Essential	Incidental
	Simple	Complex
	Structured	Unstructured
	Decontextualized	Contextualized
	Core, primary	Surface, Secondary
	Superordinate (“why”)	Subordinate (“how”)
	Goal relevant	Goal irrelevant

Sources: Trope & Liberman, 2000; Wilson, et al., 2012.

Trope and Liberman (2000) explain that the construal level also influences the extent to which people evaluate targets, e.g., on the basis of abstract or concrete issues (Trope & Liberman, 2000). The process of abstraction can be considered as a continuum and not as an all-or-none phenomenon (Trope, et al., 2007).

²⁸ These reflect the “why” of an action (Liberman & Trope, 1998).

²⁹ These reflect the “how” of an action (Liberman & Trope, 1998).

Table 5-1 illustrates that high-level construals are used to evaluate central, decontextualized, and goal-related issues (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In this context, the explanation of behavior is viewed in abstract dispositions rather than based on specific situational factors (Fujita, 2006; Henderson, et al., 2006). The more abstract the disposition, the simpler, the less ambiguous, and more prototypical representations will be created. This is because abstract representations omit irrelevant details. Therefore, they are less detailed about behaviors, objects, circumstances and result in more schematic and coherent judgments (Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007b). An example of a high-level construal is the mental evaluation “John is open-minded.” Here, non-central features are omitted. Low-level construals rather focus on local deviations and are presumably used to navigate direct experiences with objects and events (Henderson, et al., 2006; Wilson, et al., 2012). Moreover, low-level construals are relatively unstructured and contextualized representations that include multiple, subordinate, and concrete features such as “John talked to everyone at the reception” or “John was very interested in my work.”

Trope (2007) explained construal levels by giving the example of two children playing in a garden. The depiction for a high-level construal would be “two kids having fun.” In contrast, a low-level construal of this activity would be “two kids with blue shirts,” or “two young kids play ball.” The high-level construal thus involves implicit central aspects of the perspective of the viewer, e.g., the kids have fun when they are playing in the garden. However, in another context, the same situation might be interpreted differently by the perceiver. If the two kids should be studying instead of playing ball, the viewer could interpret the exact same situation as “two kids wasting time” (Trope, et al., 2007). Therefore, moving to a higher construal omits features (e.g., context) that are not perceived as crucial by the viewer. Moving from a low-level to a high-level construal thus accompanies a decontextualization that links the target to a more general set of features. These bring in a new meaning and definition that has not been included in low-level representations. Thus, the more unique and incidental features are omitted, the more abstract and schematic the construal becomes in the mind of the perceiver (Trope, et al., 2007).

Trope et al. mention two main criteria for distinguishing between higher- and lower-level construals (2010). The first criterion is centrality, e.g., changing a high-level feature has more impact on a target than changing a low-level feature. A business meeting would probably change more if the responsible counterpart would change than if the meeting room number would change. The second criterion, as mentioned before, is its subordination. The action “studying for an exam” has a superordinate

level that gives the answer about “why” an action is executed (e.g., “achieving a degree”) and a subordinate level that answers “how” the action is executed (e.g., “reading notes”). The high-level construal thus gives information on the valence of the action, while the low-level construal gives details on its realization (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In this context, Trope and Liberman (2010) mention that the impact of high-level features on low-level features is greater than the impact of low-level features on high-level features. For example, when a person is deciding whether to go to a lecture, its location on campus would be just as important as whether the topic is interesting. If its topic is interesting, it would probably be important regardless of the information concerning its location.

5.1.2 Psychological distance

The basic premise of CLT is that the more psychologically distant a target is, the more it is construed at a high-level of abstraction in the mind of the perceiver. Therefore, CLT proposes that there is a direct connection between psychological distance and level of abstraction (construal level).

Trope and Liberman define psychological distance as a “subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here and now” (2010, p. 440). According to most literature on CLT, there are four objective distances that influence psychological distance (temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypothetical distance³⁰). Table 5-2 outlines and describes them briefly.

Table 5-2: *Four key dimensions of objective distance*

	Dimension	Description
Objective distance	1. Temporal	The difference in time (past or future) between the perceiver’s present time and the target.
	2. Spatial	The distance in space between the target and the perceiver.
	3. Social	The distance of the social target and the perceiver’s self (e.g., self versus others, friend versus stranger).
	4. Hypothetical	The likeliness of the target event to happen, or how close it is to reality, as construed by the perceiver.

Sources: Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2000.

³⁰ Hypothetical distance is also called “probability” in some studies.

Literature further states that the objective distances are interrelated in the minds of perceivers. For example, when people are asked to fill in the gap in the following sentence: “A long time ago in a _____ place,” most people would fill the gap with the words “far away”, rather than “nearby.” The reason for this is that people are influenced in their evaluations by their perceived distance from a target (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Welpe, et al., 2010). Thus, they associate temporal and spatial distance cognitively, even though there is no objective linkage.

The literature underlines that all four objective distances influence psychological distance in a similar manner (Bar-Anan, et al., 2006; Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007b; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, et al., 2007). Trope states that “a target is more psychologically distant, as it takes place further into the future, as it occurs in a more remote location, as it happens to people less and less like oneself, and as it is less likely to occur” (Trope, et al., 2007, p. 84). These dimensions therefore represent different paths that distance a target from the “egocentric reference point.” Numerous scholars mention that if any of these objective distances increases (e.g., temporal, spatial, social, or hypothetical) people construe targets more abstractly.

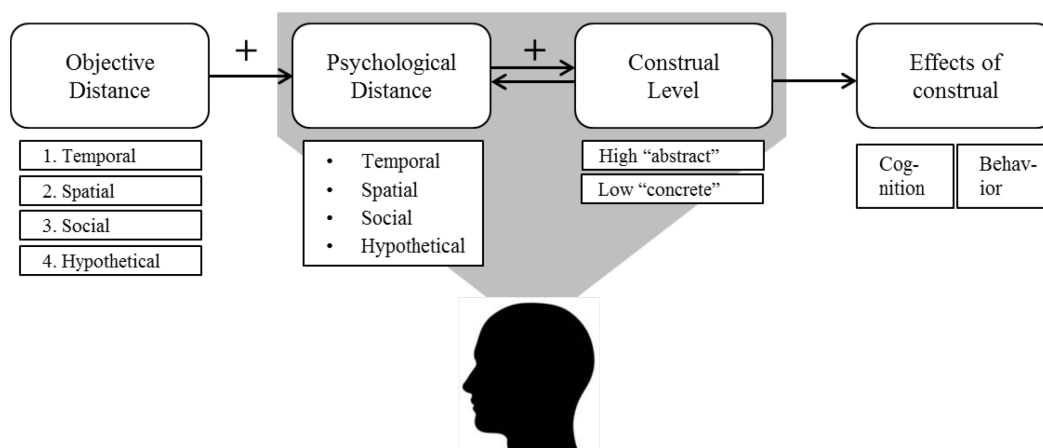
However, the literature underlines that this effect not only works in one direction but that it is rather bidirectional. Psychological distance is also affected by the construal level (Trope, et al., 2007). Thus, high-level stimuli also increase perceived distance. In a series of studies, Liberman and colleagues showed that when people are asked about the superordinate “why” (rather than subordinate “how”) aspects of actions, or about other abstract (rather than concrete) aspects of actions, perceivers expect these actions to be performed in the more distant future (Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007). Thus, if targets are perceived on a higher level of construals, these targets seem more psychologically distant.

Figure 5-2 illustrates the findings on CLT that were derived so far. Starting on the left side, the figure shows that there are four objective dimensions of distance. These four dimensions of distance are highly associated with each other and increase psychological distance, respectively. Psychological distance, which represents a subjective construct in the mind of the perceiver, then influences the level of mental construal. The higher the psychological distance, the higher is the level of construal. However, this relationship is bidirectional. High construal levels also trigger perceived distance. The changes in the construal level consequently triggers effects on cognition and behavior of the perceiver (these are addressed in section 5.1.3).

Although psychological distance and construal level are highly interrelated, they are distinct from each other. While psychological distance refers to *when*, to *where*, and to

whom, and *whether* an event occurs, construal level refers to the *what* that will occur. The latter is related to the inherent properties of the event but not to its distance in, e.g., time or space (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Figure 5-2: Process model of CLT



Based on Wilson, et al., 2012.

5.1.3 Effects on cognitive processes and behavior

CLT argues that objective distance increases psychological distance, which in turn influences the construal level. The change in construal level might then result in certain effects. After introducing CLT and its conceptual underpinnings, the section consequently focuses on the actual effects of the changes in construal level. These can be cognitive or behavioral. Cognitive processes are defined as higher mental processes, such as perceptions, memory, language, problem solving, and abstract thinking. Cognitive processes occur internally in the mind of the perceiver. The interplay of psychological distance and construal level is such a cognitive process. On the contrary, behaviors are defined as actions by which an organism adjusts to its environment. Here, the perceiver derives an observable reaction from a stimulus. Behaviors are thus characterized by an interaction of an individual with the external environment (or other individuals) (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). However, there is often no clear distinction in the literature between cognitive/behavioral effects. Some studies focus on cognitive processes but mention behavioral aspects incidentally as well; others apply different wording for one and the same processes.

The section is divided in three parts. Part one illustrates the effects of psychological distance on human cognition and behavior on the basis of numerous studies in the field

of psychology. Part two illustrates the effects on CLT (when manipulated directly) on cognitive processes and behavior and also underlines its effects on psychological distance. Lastly, part three summarizes the findings of the effects on human cognition and behavior.

5.1.3.1 Psychological distance

In this section the dissertation draws on the literature on each of the four objective distances and their effects on cognition and behavior of perceivers. For the analysis it mainly reviewed literature that has been published in highly ranked journals in the field of psychology.

The rationale of CLT is that there exist various objective distances that all influence psychological distance in an equal manner (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In daily life, people are often confronted with decisions that involve various forms of distances. For instance, for planning a vacation, people might be interested in whether political struggles are “likely” to occur, or “unlikely” to occur (hypothetical distance), “now” or “in one year” (temporal distance), as well as “here” or in “another continent” (spatial distance). Although these pieces of information are objectively independent from each other, in the mind of the perceiver they are all related and relevant for cognitively processing the event (political struggles). However, contrary to valence, distance does not influence the inherent aspects of a target (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Distance thus does not influence the political struggles above in a way such that these become better or worse. It influences the subjective perception of the perceiver in a way that they think more abstractly about the event when psychological distance is large, or more concrete when the target is close (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003). Thus, the effect is that targets are perceived differently but not necessarily better or worse. The following sections profoundly analyze the effects of distance.

5.1.3.1.1 Temporal distance

Temporal distance describes how large the time difference (e.g., in the past or the future) between the perceiver’s present time and the target is (Bar-Anan, et al., 2006). The smaller the time gap, the lower the temporal distance is. There exist numerous studies that have investigated the field of temporal distance and the construal level. Most of this research concludes that temporal distance increases the level of construal of targets.

Liberman et al. (2002) show that distant future (or distant past) targets lead to more abstract, higher-level representations than temporally close targets. They found that thinking about temporally future targets makes people categorize them into broader groups (e.g., “food”), while thinking about temporally close targets makes people categorize these in more and narrow groups (e.g., “hot dogs” and “potato chips”).

Nussbaum and colleagues (2003) discovered that with increased temporal distance, people increasingly characterize behavior of others in terms of dispositional traits and rely less on situational constraints. This effect goes along with the attribution effect (or correspondence bias) developed by Ross and colleagues (1977) that describes the tendency of perceivers to overestimate the effects of personality and dispositional traits and to underestimate the effects of situational factors in explaining social behavior. This is also in line with the findings of Antonakis and Jaquart (2013) on distance in leadership, who stated that followers tend to overestimate the leaders influence in situations when distance is large (see section 2.3).

Further studies that investigated the effects temporal distance on attribution were conducted by Wakslak and colleagues (2006) who show that near future self-representations are less simple and less integrated than distant future self-representations, and Semin and Fiedler (1988) who mention that people use more abstract linguistic terms when they describe targets from the distant past, compared to targets in the near past. Those studies all suggest that correspondence bias is more prevalent in the evaluation of distant targets.

Eyal and colleagues (2008) accentuate that distant future targets are more likely to be represented in terms of high-level principles compared to near future targets (Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007a). When participants were asked to describe the exact same situations but in different temporal settings, they more often used global principles to describe the distant situation and low-level actions terms to describe the temporally closer situation (e.g., “endorsing affirmative action” versus “making changes to admission list”). The authors thus conclude that the less distant a target, the more principles lose their relevance (Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007a).

In line with CLT, Eyal and colleagues (2009) predict that when people evoke high-level construals, they are more susceptible to abstract patterns of behavior (such as values). The authors therefore performed several studies where they showed that values have greater impact on temporally distant than temporally near-behavioral intentions (Eyal, et al., 2009; Nakatani & Zhou, 2009). Values are thus linked to high-level construals and large perceived distance; therefore, they are more likely to influence behavior in temporal distance.

Ledgerwood and Callahan (2012) investigated whether psychological distance increases sensitivity to social influences that are dispositional (and thus relatively context-independent) such as group norms. In their experimental study participants were primed with either high or low temporal distance. The authors show that when high psychological distance (and thus a high-level construal) was evoked, participants were more likely to follow the norms and policies of their group than with low temporal distance. Here, participants tend to follow their personal attitudes that diverged from those of their group (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012).

5.1.3.1.2 Spatial distance

Spatial distance covers how far away in space the target is from the perceiver (Bar-Anan, et al., 2006). The relationship of spatial distance and level of construal is also investigated in the literature. The findings conclude that high levels of spatial distance lead to high-level mental construals.

In spatially distant situations, people have less information about a certain target. CLT assumes that the closer in space individuals get toward a certain target, the more detailed and context-dependent information they construe about it. In their paper “You focus on the forest when you’re in charge of the trees,” Smith & Trope (2006) explain the effects of spatial distance on mental representation, by showing that from a distance, people see the forest, but when they get close, they see the trees.

Fujita and colleagues tested in a recent study the effects of spatial distance on the level of abstractness (Fujita, et al., 2006). They showed students from the USA (the video was shown in the USA) a video where two individuals interacted with each other. The students who saw the video then had to describe the actions they saw in the video. Fujita and colleagues (2006) let half of the students believe the film was set in the USA (close scenario), and the other half that the film was set in Europe (distant scenario). As result of the study, the researchers found that the students in the distance scenario described the action of the protagonists with more abstract language³¹.

Henderson and colleagues investigated in a recent study whether spatial distance can improve negotiation outcomes (2011). In the context of non-face-to-face communication they let one group of participants think that the person they negotiated with was spatially proximate, while participants of the other group thought that their negotiating partners were spatially distant. The scholars found that when people

³¹ They applied content analysis based on a coding scheme for abstractness of language called the linguistic categorization model (LCM). LCM is well-established in the literature and was developed by Semin and Fiedler (1988).

perceive themselves to be distant (“several thousand feet away”) rather than close (“a few feet away”) from their opponents, they achieved more integrative agreements in negotiations (Henderson, 2011). The rationale for their findings is that distance evokes high-level construals. Thus, the negotiators focus on superordinate, high-priority issues, which gives the flexibility to log roll in negotiations because their goal is to “expand the pie” instead of profiting on every single (secondary) issue (low-level construals).

5.1.3.1.3 Social distance

Social distance describes the distance between individuals and others. It covers distinctions such as between the self and others, in-group and out-group members, and status differences, as well as familiar and unfamiliar others (Bar-Anan, et al., 2006; Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007a). The basic assumption in the literature on CLT is that the more dissimilar someone is to oneself, the higher the social distance and the higher the level of construal.

Analyzing the effects of social distance is very prominent in attribution research (Nussbaum, et al., 2003). In this context, scholars mention that people construe others at a higher level than themselves. When they have to judge their own behavior, people are more likely to describe the causes on the basis of concrete situational factors, as compared to when they judge the behavior of others (Semin, 1989). A reason for judging others differently than oneself might be due to differences in knowledge. People know more about themselves and the situational factors they deal with than about others. Therefore, in cognition they link others’ behavior to dispositional rather than to situational factors. Moreover, scholars found that people not only judge their own behavior and others’ behavior differently, but they also judge their own behavior differently when they take a third-person perspective (Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007a). Research on group perceptions states similar effects as above. There are exemplary experiments where people had to describe in-groups and out-groups (Fiedler, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995). An in-group is defined as a social group to which a person psychologically identifies as being a member; by contrast, an out-group is a social group a person does not identify with. When people construe out-groups, they apply more abstract representations compared to descriptions of in-groups. Moreover, out-groups are perceived as being more homogenous (Liberman, et al., 2007b).

Smith and Trope (2006) examined the relationship of social power and level of abstraction. Social power describes the amount of control a person has over others (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). They found that there is a link between higher power and

abstract thinking. Participants that were primed with a high level of social power activated more inclusive categorizations than low-level participants. Thus, when people have more social power over others, they tend to think more abstractly and focus on central aspects of situations. The rationale of this effect is that the more powerful people get, the more they feel independent and different from others, and this affects perceived distance. In the course of time the effect might even increase and the powerful individual become more distant from the group (Liberman, et al., 2007b). Guinote (2001) even discovered that people with higher social power apply more abstract language.

Overall, as Liberman and colleagues (2007a) conclude, according to CLT it seems that social power increases the distal perspective of individuals, which leads to an increased abstractness of information processing. The result of this mental process is that people are more likely to focus on superordinate and central features.

Further interesting findings stem from research that analyzed interpersonal communication and social distance. For instance, Holtgraves and Kashima (2008) found that there is an association of politeness in interpersonal communication and social distance. Stephan and colleagues (2010) discovered in this context that the more socially distant speakers are from their counterpart, the more polite language they use. Moreover they state that while speakers use more polite language when they are socially distant from their opponents, they also use more high-level statements. Thus, with increased social distance, politeness of communication increases and in turn construals on a higher level are triggered.

5.1.3.1.4 Hypothetical distance

Hypothetical distance describes how likely a target event is to happen, or how close it is to reality, as construed by the perceiver (Bar-Anan, et al., 2006). Independent of its temporal, spatial, or social distance, an event is removed further from direct experience when it did not happen versus when it happened. The rationale of the effects of hypothetical distance on mental representation works in a similar way as the effects of the other objective distances. Thus, decreasing probability of an event to occur increases its distance from the perceiver and thus triggers a higher level of construal. Therefore, individuals represent events with low probabilities more abstractly and focus more on their general features (Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006)

Trope and colleagues investigated the effects of hypothetical distance and mental representation. In a set of experimental studies they show that people in the high-

hypothetical distance condition create broader groups and thus evoke higher construal levels in a categorization task³², than their counterparts in the low-hypothetical distance condition (Trope, et al., 2007). Wakslak and colleagues (2006) mention that participants in a high-likelihood scenario preferred to identify with a task that was described in general terms, while the participants in the low-likelihood scenario preferred to identify with specific terms. These effects are consistent with CLT. But these effects also work the other way round. Wakslak and colleagues (2009) conducted a series of studies where they found that participants that were primed with high-level construals made higher hypothetical distance assessments of certain targets than their opponents who were primed with low-level construals (Wakslak & Trope, 2009).

5.1.3.1.5 Interrelation of distances

Most studies that analyze distance and CLT focus on one dimension of psychological distance such as temporal (Trope & Liberman, 2003) or spatial distance (Fujita, et al., 2006) and its effects on cognition and its consequences. A question that arises is what happens when several distance dimensions are evoked jointly. Research on the interrelation of objective distances and their effects on psychological distance is less mature than research on their isolated effects (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The following section aims to shed light on the interrelation of distances and provides some unexplored avenues of research.

Very prominent among scholars in the field of CLT is the study of Bar-Anan and colleagues (2007), who showed their participants a photograph that evoked different distances. Their findings showed that all dimensions of psychological distance have a common meaning which is evoked automatically, even when there is no direct relation to a situation (Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, & Algom, 2007). Additionally, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Stephan and colleagues (2010) provide evidence that distance on one dimension of distance affects perceptions of distance of other dimensions. In this context, Trope and Liberman (2010) show that it might be even possible that some distance dimensions are more influential than others. Casasanto and Boroditsky (2008) revealed, for example, that spatial distance may be superior to temporal distance.

Liberman and Trope mention that the more proximal a target, the higher its sensitivity toward changes in distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Zauberman and colleagues provide evidence for the above and show that there may be a concave function

³² They applied the categorization task of Liberman and colleagues (2002), with the intention to group targets into categories with a similar abstraction level.

between objective distance and its effects on psychological distance instead of a linear function (2009). Likewise, Kyeongheui and colleagues write that psychological distance may not increase linearly with an increase of distance induced by a further dimension (Kyeongheui, et al., 2008, p. 707). They state that the effect may be “subadditive” – when one dimension increases the other may lose its effect on psychological distance. However, the research is in its early stages here. Trope and Liberman (2010) state that distances may be more interrelated at the proximate side of the distance continuum than at the removed end. The reason for that is that there only exists one place in the “here and now” in the mind of the perceiver. But there are many places far away. They thus conclude that variations from the proximate “here and now” may have a larger impact on psychological distance as compared to the case when distance already exists.

5.1.3.2 Construal level

Most studies in the field of CLT investigate the effects of psychological distance on the construal level. However, the logic of CLT is that psychological distance and construal level are bi-directionally related. An increase in construal level therefore also triggers psychological distance.

When construal level is manipulated directly, for instance by asking participants to think about the “why” (high-level) versus the “how” (low-level) of an action, the participants assume that the enactment time of this action is temporally more remote than the participants of the low-level condition (Nira Liberman, et al., 2007).

Vallacher and Wegner (1989) state that actions can be primed in various ways and defined a list of actions with their higher- and lower-level associations, respectively. For example, the action “reading” can be construed as “following lines of print” (low-level) or “gaining knowledge” (high-level) (p. 664). Another way of priming the construal level is to use pictures versus words. Amit and colleagues found that words evoke more abstract construals than pictures (2009). When perceivers read the word “jersey” they have less information about it than if they would see a picture of a jersey. Vess and colleagues (2011) investigate whether construal level has influence on the ability to cope with negative feedback. Their hypothesis is that when people are evoked with high-level construals they are less likely to be sensitive to negative feedback. In their experimental study they found that negative feedback did not weaken the self-esteem of participants that were primed with high-level construals, while negative feedback weakened the self-esteem of participants in the low-level condition. Thus, there is a linkage between level of abstraction and self-esteem. When

people adopt a high-level construal, their perception of themselves is based on superordinate and primary factors, while people who adopt a low-level construal define their self-esteem more on subordinate task-related factors.

Rim and colleagues (2013) investigated whether construal level has an influence on people's attention when they think about events. They assume that abstract construals rather lead to a focus on causes of an event, while concrete construals lead to a focus on its effects. The rationale is, therefore, that causes are more central than effects. The presence of effects depends on the presence of the causes while the presence of causes does not depend on its effects (Rim, et al., 2013). Causes of an event thus evoke higher level construals compared to consequences.

Hansen and Wanke (2010) found that the construal level also affects the level of perceived credibility of a content. The same content written in concrete terms instead of abstract terms will be perceived as more truthful. As a rationale for their hypothesis the authors accentuate that concreter words are recognized more quickly and thus may be more quickly processed. Moreover, they proposed that concrete statements seem to be more likely to occur. In an experimental setting, they tested two statements with exactly the same content but different formulations (1. low-level; 2. high-level): "1. The poet C. Dickens wrote the play Miss Sara Sampson"; 2. "The play Miss Sara Sampson is by the poet C. Dickens" (Hansen & Wänke, 2010, p. 1579). Even though in both statements the content was incorrect (the author was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing), more people perceived the low-level statement to be truthful. Thus, construal level had an influence on perception of credibility.

In a study in 2009, Sanna and colleagues found that when people are primed with a high-level construal (in this case the "why" of an action) instead of a low-level construal (here the "how" of an action), they behave in a more cooperative manner. In this study, both groups could decide whether they were willing to return certain items that they received. The group that was triggered with the high-level construal was more cooperative – they returned more items voluntarily (Sanna, 2009).

In a recent study, Luguri and colleagues (2012) show that when people adopt an abstract rather than concrete mind-set (primed with a categorization task), the tolerance for other groups with deviating self-values increased. When they were primed with abstract construals they had much more positive attitudes than in the concrete construal condition.

Fujita and colleagues (2006) investigated whether activating high-level construals leads to greater self-control compared to activating low-level construals. They found that high-level construals lead to greater physical endurance, higher intentions to exert

self-control, and less positive evaluations of temptations that undermine self-control (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006).

On the basis of CLT, Freitas and colleagues (2009) suggest that when people adopt high-level construals, they are more likely to perceive their personal goals in life as being consistent with each other (as compared to when they adopt low-level construals). This is because they assume that when a high-level construal is adopted, more (different) goals can be integrated in a superordinate aspiration. Moreover, they found that high construal levels and congruence of goals enhance the emotional well-being of participants (Freitas, et al., 2009).

5.1.3.3 Overview of effects on cognition and behavior

This section gives an overview of the literature on the effects of CLT. The effects comprise cognitive processes as well as behaviors. The following tables summarize the key effects on cognition and behavior. Some of these effects are highly relevant for the cross-case exploration of many-to-one communication.

Table 5-3 illustrates the effects of construal level on mental perception, categorization, interpretation, and attribution of targets.

Table 5-3: Cognitive processes

Processes	High construal level	Low construal level
Perception of targets (Smith & Trope, 2006; Trope, et al., 2007)	Global Focus on “forest”	Local Focus and “trees”
Categorization of targets (Liberman, Trope, & Wakslak, 2007; Smith & Trope, 2006; Trope, et al., 2007)	Abstract Broad groups	Concrete Narrow groups
Interpretation of targets (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Sanna, 2009)	Superordinate “Why”	Subordinate “How”
Attribution of targets (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Nussbaum, et al., 2003; Wakslak, et al., 2006)	General Dispositional	Specific Situational

Source: Wilson, et al., 2012, p. 3.

Table 5-4 illustrates behavioral effects of construal levels on perceivers. These represent an overview of the vast studies in the field of psychology that have been

described in chapter 5. Again, CLT suggests that perceived distance changes the way individuals perceive targets. Distance is therefore not better or worse per se.

Table 5-4: Behavioral intentions and actual behavior

Triggered behavioral intentions / behaviors by construal level		
High construal level	Relevance of principles (Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007b)	Morality in evaluation (Eyal, et al., 2008)
	Consistency in prediction (Nussbaum, et al., 2003)	Alignment of values and behavior (Eyal, et al., 2009)
	Conformity with groups (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012)	Negotiation agreements (Henderson, 2011)
	Politeness in communication (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008)	Information processing (Overbeck & Park, 2001)
	Coping with negative feedback (Vess, et al., 2011)	Causes of events (Rim, et al., 2013)
	Tolerance toward others (Luguri, et al., 2012)	Cooperation in groups (Sanna, 2009)
	Congruence of goals and well-being (Freitas, et al., 2009)	Physical endurance and self-control (Fujita, et al., 2006)
Low construal level	Credibility of targets (Hansen & Wänke, 2010)	Consequences of events (Rim, et al., 2013)

5.2 Construal level theory and psychological distance in leadership research

The section above gave an extensive literature overview on CLT and psychological distance and gave insights on CLT's core underpinnings and its effects on individuals' cognition and behavior. These were mainly derived from the literature in the field of psychology. This section provides insights about CLT in leadership research by giving an overview of recent studies that combined both fields. As indicated before, research that works with CLT in leadership is scarce and immature.

In a literature review, the author discovered a modicum of studies in leadership research that applied CLT as its core theory. Popper (2012) and Wilson and colleagues (2012) published just two of these studies in high-ranked international journals. However, in contrast to this dissertation, both of these studies are solely of conceptual manner and are not supported by field evidence. Moreover, these studies concentrate

on the group level and did not cope with the organization. By introducing literature on CLT on the group level, this section aims to bridge CLT as a theory at the micro-level of analysis with leadership research at the macro-level of analysis (see section 2.1).

5.2.1 Literature on psychological distance in leadership

Very recently, CLT has appeared in leadership research. Popper (2012) investigated the influence of psychological distance in leadership and Wilson and colleagues (2012) derived propositions on the influence of distance in virtual teams. However, both studies derive their propositions on the basis of a literature analysis on CLT and leadership and do not provide empirical evidence.

Popper (2012) proposes that the more distant a leader is perceived the more abstract and less detailed he is construed in the mind of the follower. This is in line with the findings of CLT in the field of psychology, which state that high construal levels lead to abstract mental descriptions.

Wilson and colleagues state in this context that distant collaborators perceive larger within-member homogeneity (to perceive a distant collaborator positively or negatively as a whole) as well as larger across-member homogeneity (to perceive employees of a distant site as similar) than close collaborators (2012). This rationale is also in line with the findings in the field of CLT, because distant collaborators are construed more abstractly and are thus perceived in fewer but broader groups.

Popper (2012) also mentions that the more temporally close the relation of the leader with a follower, the more specific are the followers' perceptions of the leader. This finding is directly derived from CLT. It implies that temporal proximity decreases psychological distance leading to a lower construal level and thus more specific perceptions of a target. Popper (2012) further suggests that when a leader is perceived as distant, followers put more value on personality than situational factors. Followers thus tend to exaggerate the personal influence of leaders in explaining situations (e.g., "this happened due to the CEO"), rather than concrete situational factors (e.g., "this happened due to the current influence of the economy"). This is because they do not have enough concrete information and attribute the leader's impact as an explanation for a certain event.

Psychological distance also influences whether followers evaluate leaders on the basis of inferences of traits (e.g., "the CEO is fair/unfair") or on concrete behavior (e.g., "in this situation the CEO acted fairly/unfairly") (Popper, 2012). The rationale here is that when a leader is proximate he becomes more observable for employees because they can experience his concrete behavior. On the basis of this information, employees then

link the leader's behavior to certain effects (e.g., organizational performance). However, if the leader is distant, e.g., in time, employees have less concrete information, and they thus make inferences of traits for evaluating outcomes.

Lastly, Popper (2012) mentions that the more distant leaders are in time, the more they can “serve as symbolic representations [...] which are relevant to the followers construction of their self-worth” (p. 5). His proposition is rooted in social psychology. It claims that human beings have the need to locate the self in social categories in order to derive meaning from situations. These categories are represented more abstractly when they are stored in long-term memory (Popper, 2012). When leaders are perceived as highly distant, they can be more easily transformed into sagas and stories, because perceivers cannot observe concrete information that may contradict these stories. This phenomenon was also described in the theory of charismatic leadership by Shamir (1995). He stated that to be perceived as “larger than life” in leadership, a certain distance is necessary.

These findings are insightful for the exploration of the virtual interaction between CEOs and employees in this dissertation. They reveal that the underpinnings of CLT and objective and psychological distance in particular can be also applied in the context of leadership.

5.2.2 Factors that influence psychological distance and construal level in virtual team context

This section describes literature that combines the fields of CLT and leadership in virtual teams. It aims to derive components that can be used for developing a theoretical lens which supports the cross-case exploration. First, it outlines literature that links communication and psychological distance. Second, it draws on literature that mentions an influence of contextual factors on perceptions of distance.

5.2.2.1 Communication as an influencing factor of psychological distance

Wilson and colleagues investigated the phenomenon of being “far but close” in a team context (Wilson, et al., 2008). They wanted to find out why team members who work physically closely with each other perceive themselves as being distant from each other (e.g., some “treasury teams”), while team members of other teams that work in a physically dispersed context perceive themselves as being close (e.g., some “open-source teams”). They derive a dyad model that conceptualizes the phenomenon. Some of their findings are relevant for the analysis of many-to-one communication as a

means of communication between CEOs and employees. Wilson and colleagues (2008) state that increased frequency, depth, and interactivity of communication decreases psychological distance by three cognitive phenomena: 1.) increasing cognitive salience, 2.) reducing uncertainty, and 3.) envisioning the others' context (p. 7):

- 1.) The term cognitive salience describes how often something comes into the mind of the perceiver (2008). The more frequent the communication with another person is, the more often this person is processed by the perceiver. This frequency of information processing then leads to increased levels of proximity. This finding is in line with Popper (2012) and the literature on CLT that state that regular and frequent communication with another person reduces temporal distance and consequently reduces psychological distance (see section 5.1).
- 2.) They authors further propose that communication makes working together with others more predictable. In this context they describe a study by Berger and Calabrese (1975) who found that communication reduces uncertainty about others. According to them, communication enhances information flow and thus reduces doubts, resulting in higher levels of proximity (Wilson, et al., 2008). This is also in line with CLT, because similarity and knowledge of another person may reduce social distance and therefore decrease psychological distance (see section 5.1).
- 3.) Wilson and colleagues argue that communication gives insights on the context of others and on their situation (2008). Perceivers thus get more detailed and contextualized information about others and develop more concrete images leading to higher proximity in perception. This is also in line with CLT, because specific and contextualized information about another person triggers low-level construals and therefore influences psychological distance (see section 5.1).

The findings of Wilson and colleagues (2008) are very insightful for the exploration of many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees. They indicate that many-to-one communication may influence psychological distance by directly changing the status quo of various objective distances. However, Wilson and colleagues (2008) further underline that a minimum level of communication is necessary to influence the perceptions of distance. Unfortunately, they do not further specify this proposition.

Wilson and colleagues also suggest that contextual factors influence the communication process in a team context (2008). In their study they found that two contextual factors, network density and structural assurance (p. 6), influence the communication process in teams. Network density refers to the strength of the relationships in groups. Their proposition is that higher network density leads to higher levels of cooperation and communication and may thus increase perceived proximity. Structural assurance in organizations refers to fairness and standards in

communication. According to the authors, these lead to more open, fair, and personal communication that may further increase perceived proximity.

These findings are very relevant for analyzing many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees. They indicate that there may be factors in the context of the leader/employee dyad that trigger the communication process.

5.2.2.2 Contextual factors as influencing factors of psychological distance

Wilson and colleagues (2012) investigated the context of distributed groups and its influences on psychological distance. They found that context is a moderator of the relationship between objective distances and psychological distance (p. 8).

One contextual factor that they mention is “group stability”. According to Wilson and Colleagues (2002) group stability triggers greater feelings of closeness, because it enhances information about distant team members and familiarity with them (Leana, 1985; Wilson, et al., 2012). Therefore, high stability in group memberships reduces the effects of objective distance on psychological distance. This insight may also be relevant for the analysis of the research phenomenon. It indicates that factors such as organizational stability trigger feelings of closeness among the employees that may also influence the perceptions of distance toward the leader in the context of many-to-one communication. Further, they mention the impact of “prior group performance.” The better a group performs, the less strong may be the impact of the objective distances on psychological distance. This is because group members tend to perceive their groups as more cohesive when they perform well (Wilson, et al., 2012).

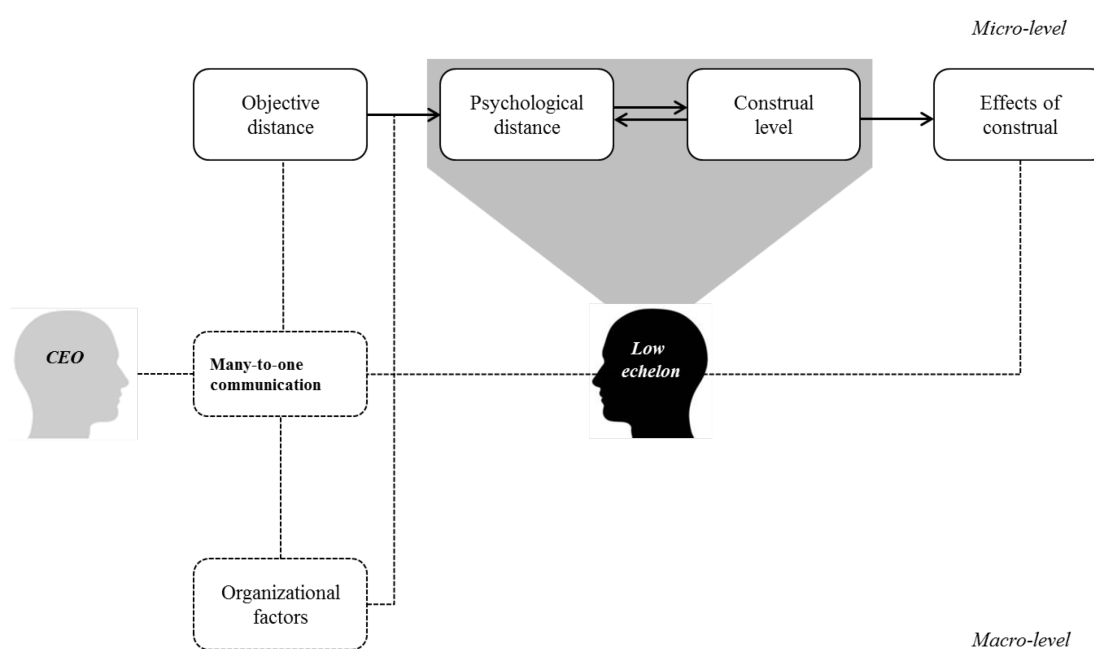
These findings are also very relevant for the following analysis. They indicate that organizational factors such as stability or performance may influence the employees’ perceptions toward the leader.

Wilson and colleagues (2012) state that there may exist more contextual factors at the organizational level. However, according to Wilson and colleagues (2012), all of them work in a similar fashion. These factors moderate the relationship between objective distance and psychological distance.

6 Derived theoretical lens

This section integrates the findings of the previous chapters in a theoretical lens that is applied to coherently explore the research phenomenon. Pan and Tan (2011) define a theoretical lens as a “preliminary stage of theorizing” (p. 168). They suggest using a theoretical lens to obtain guidance in the research process and to develop an insightful and robust conceptual framework. This lens does therefore not represent a validated theory, but instead it comprises components and linkages that seem to be appropriate at this stage of research to guide the exploration process. Figure 6-1 illustrates the theoretical lens for the analysis.

Figure 6-1: *Theoretical lens for many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees*



Own figure based on Wilson and colleagues (2012).

The figure is composed of findings that have been derived from the literature on CLT (section 5.1) and leadership (chapter 2 and section 5.2). Those were adapted to the context of many-to-one communication through the theoretical lens (section 2.4 and chapter 4). This procedure is in line with Gibbert and colleagues (2008) who suggest integrating existing literature in explorative analysis to strengthen the internal validity of the findings. The combination of CLT and leadership is in line with Popper (2012) who underline that the underpinnings of CLT and psychological distance can also be applied in the context of leadership (see section 5.2).

In the following the author draws the literature that explains the scope of the theoretical lens, and presents its components and linkages. This section is rather brief, because all literature has been previously outlined.

At the center of the preliminary theory (see Figure 6-1) is the many-to-one communication process between CEOs (grey shaded head) and lower echelons (black shaded head) via many-to-one communication.

In the first step, findings from previous literature and the narrative case analysis are integrated in the theoretical lens in order to explain the possible direct effects of the many-to-one communication on the employees' perceptions. The author suggests that many-to-one communication may directly influence various objective distances between the CEOs and employees. This linkage grounds in literature and in the findings of the narrative case analysis. In two studies Wilson colleagues (2008; 2012) show that communication reduces distance among team members and that virtual communication in teams influences the team members' perceptions of distance towards each other. Moreover, the findings of the narrative case studies underline a.) that by communicating with each other, both CEOs and employees aim to enhance proximity and b.) the potential of many-to-one communication for CEOs to reduce distance towards employees in their organizations.

Literature in the field of CLT further shows that psychological distance is a meta-construct of various objective distances (Lieberman, Trope, et al., 2007a; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Based on this literature, the following linkage is integrated in the theoretical lens: A change in objective distances triggered by many-to-one communication will influence the psychological distance in the employees' minds. Moreover, these scholars reveal that the reduction of psychological distance towards a target triggers lower level construals in mind of the perceivers (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The theoretical lens therefore illustrates that CEOs trigger low-level construals in the employees' minds by reducing objective and subsequently psychological distances. This linkage among the objective distances, psychological distance, and construal level is already profoundly verified in the field of psychology and is therefore integrated in the theoretical lens (see section 5.1).

Further literature on CLT shows that changes in employees' construal levels of the CEO triggers cognitive and behavioral effects (Lieberman, Trope, et al., 2007a; Trope & Liberman, 2010). This is because employees may perceive the CEO differently e.g., on the basis of concrete and contextual information instead of abstract and decontextualized information. This linkage is also integrated in the theoretical lens.

Popper (2012) states in this context that altered perceptions of attributions about a target influence the perceivers' behavior towards the target. Thus, the author integrates this effect in the theoretical lens and suggests that the altered perceptions and attributions of the employees about their CEO – that are triggered by lower level construals – may also influence the employees' behaviors in the many-to-one communication process.

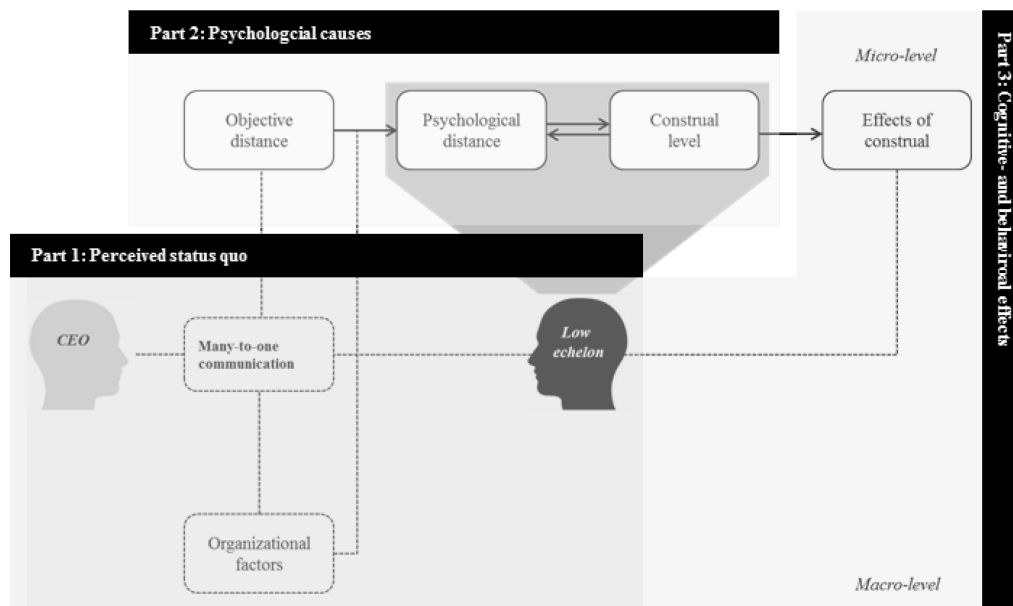
Finally, the theoretical lens integrates findings from Wilson and colleagues (2008; 2012) and suggests that various factors in the context of many-to-one communication may influence a.) the application of many-to-one communication, and b.) the perceptions of objective distances (see section 5.2). a.) In team context Wilson and colleagues (2008) show that factors such as network density and structural assurance enhance communication. The lens thus draws that factors in the organizational context may increase the extent to which CEOs and employees communicate in the platform. b.) In a virtual team context, Wilson and colleagues (2012) show that factors such as prior group performance and group stability trigger feelings of closeness among the members by moderating the influence of objective distance on psychological distance. The lens therefore draws that there may be further factors in organizations that influence the employees' perceptions of distance toward their CEO, regardless of the actual many-to-one communication process.

The lens with its components and linkages is applied as a grid for the subsequent cross-case analysis.

7 Multiple-case analysis

This chapter explores many-to-one communication across the three cases with the aim to develop a conceptual framework. For the exploration process, it applies cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989b; Yin, 2003). “The idea of cross-case searching tactics is to force investigators to go beyond initial impressions, especially through the use of structured and diverse lenses on the data” (Eisenhardt, 1989b, p. 541). Following the logic of Eisenhardt (1989b) in case study research, the cases are first assessed on the basis of many-to-one communication performance before the causes are identified that led to differences of the performance across the cases. This analysis is guided by the theoretical lens. The author uses the components of the theoretical lens as patterns to explore similarities and differences across the cases (Yin, 2009). Therefore, each component is juxtaposed across the cases, and the role of many-to-one communication is explored and assessed, respectively. The cross-case analysis is divided into three parts (see Figure 7-1).

Figure 7-1: *Cross-case comparison based on theoretical lens*



Note: Own figure based on Wilson and colleagues (2012).

Part 1 uncovers the status quo on how the employees assess the many-to-one communication process with their CEO. It profoundly explores the employees' perceptions of the many-to-one communication process within each case and compares the findings across the cases. In a first step, the performance is assessed and the cases

are subsequently divided according to their performance. Then, part 1 further explores and assesses the employees' perceptions of their CEO and their organization. The theoretical lens indicates that both, the CEO and further organizational factors may influence the many-to-one communication process. The analysis of the perceptions of the CEO and the organization give comprehensive insights on the status quo of the organizations and therefore help exploring the influencing factors of many-to-one communication across the cases.

On the basis of the above, part 2 explores the psychological processes that were triggered by the virtual communication process between CEOs and employees. It investigates the reasons - the "why" - for the performance differences between the cases and offers an explanation by integrating further literature (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Therefore, it explores the platform traffic and the actual leadership behavior of the CEO in the platform. For the analysis, it applies the categories of CLT.

Lastly, part 3 explores the actual effects of the electronic leadership process. It outlines the effects on employee cognitions and behaviors and how these may directly influence the many-to-one communication process with the CEO. Part 3 analyzes the effects by revealing evidence from the cases and by integrating further literature (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

For enhancing rigor in the exploration, quantitative measures are integrated in the qualitative analysis (Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008). Moreover, the full evidence of the cases is outlined in tables that enhance cross-case comparability (Eisenhardt, 1989b).

7.1 Part 1: Status quo of employee perceptions and assessment of the platform, the CEO, and the organization



This section first assesses many-to-one communication at the three companies and consequently explores the employees' perceptions of their CEOs and their organizations. The aim of this section is to outline the status quo of the employees' perceptions at the respective organization before the second part analyzes the causes for these perceptions. The key statements and measures are illustrated in tables.

7.1.1 Perceptions and assessment of the many-to-one communication performance

For the cross-case exploration, many-to-one communication performance is applied as the key dimension to distinguish between high- and low-performing cases (Langley &


Abdallah, 2011). The single-case analysis in chapter 4 gave first insights on the internal development of platform traffic at the respective company. This section reveals further data on platform usage and compares the findings across the cases. As proposed by various scholars, the author measured the overall performance comprehensively on the basis of three dimensions (Martin & Eisenhardt, 2010; Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009). First, the author investigated objective usage data (e.g., frequency, information flow). High interactivity and frequent usage of the platform indicate positive platform performance. This is in line with Wilson and colleagues (2008) who mention that it needs an appropriate level of communication to trigger psychological distance. Second, the author gathered qualitative assessments from the informants. High performance was indicated by positive comments, low performance by negative comments. Third, the author revealed quantitative assessments of the informants on the usefulness of and their satisfaction with the platform. High ratings from the employees on usefulness³³ and satisfaction³⁴ indicated high performance of the platform. On the basis of these three dimensions, the author rated the overall performance on a five-point scale that ranged from very weak (1 point) to very strong (5 points). All the evidence is shown in Table 7-1.

Table 7-1: Comparison and assessment of many-to-one communication

Com-pany	Platform traffic		Employee statements		Employee ratings	Overall assessment ^D
X						
	# questions 582	# CEO answers 112 (19 percent)	<i>"I believe [the CEO] has been really clear with his statements [these were] really well described."</i> (Informant X7)	<i>"[...] There is a tool to tell when something goes wrong."</i> (Informant X1)	Usefulness ^B 4.86**	High performance 
	Ø questions per month ^A 29	Ø answers per month ^A 5.3	<i>"[The platform] is very good for speaking about strategic things. To point out large and global problems."</i> (Informant X10)	<i>"The good thing about the tool is that you can see [...] what's happening in Company X."</i> (Informant X7)	Satisfaction ^C 4.00**	
	# votes 72,305	# comments 2,558				
Y						
	# questions 115	# CEO answers 100 (86 percent)	<i>"There appeared many questions that could not have interested the CEO at all."</i> (Informant Y8)	<i>"By the way the CEO behaved we were not of the opinion that he would push the topic dialogue-orientated culture by himself."</i> (Informant Y3)	Usefulness ^B 2.00*	Low performance 
	Ø questions per month ^A 3.6	Ø answers month ^A 3.0	<i>"I liked that the platform opens new paths to communicate. [...] But the quality of the questions was too</i>	<i>"Sometimes it was so far away from my desk</i>	Satisfaction ^C 2.50*	
	# votes 39,951	# comments 499				

³³ see appendix B.2.1; question 9

³⁴ see appendix B.2.1; question 15

		<i>predictable.”</i> (Informant Y2)	<i>or from us that we did not know whether the employees were right or not.”</i> (CEO of Company Y)		
Z					
# questions 44 ³⁵	# CEO answers 39 (89 percent)	<i>“At the moment nothing happens in the platform. As an outsider you could say it is a dead platform.”</i> (Informant Z3)	<i>“Nobody speaks about the platform; it became quiet.”</i> (Informant Z7)	Usefulness ^B 3.00*	Low performance 
Ø questions per month ^A 1.8	Ø answers month ^A 1.6		<i>“[The board] does not fully stand behind the platform. I heard from many older colleagues that it is for sake of doing things, as usual at Company Z.”</i> (Informant Z4)	Satisfaction ^C 2.50*	
# votes 430	# comments 22	<i>“Not really world-shaking information is shared [for certain questions] I was wondering, “What kind of answer do you want to get here?””</i> (Informant Z8)			

** Significant differences between all three companies at $p < 0.1$; * Significant difference between two companies at $p < 0.1$

^A The platforms were investigated for a time period of 21 months at Company X, 33 months at Company Y, and 24 months at Company Z.

^B (5 point Likert-scale, 1 item, closed question by author) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.38$) and Company Y ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.69$); $t(13) = 2.268$, $p = 0.021$. ii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.38$) and Company Z ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.71$); $t(10) = 5.934$, $p = 0.000$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.69$) and Company Z ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.71$); $t(11) = 0.466$, $p = 0.325$.

^C (5 point Likert-scale, 1 item, closed question by author) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$) and Company Y ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.76$); $t(13) = 3.305$, $p = 0.003$. ii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$) and Company Z ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.58$); $t(10) = 2.714$, $p = 0.012$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.76$) and Company Z ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.58$); $t(11) = 0.000$, $p = 1.0$.

^D Rating conducted by the author (as in Martin and Eisenhardt, 2010) on the basis of objective evidence of platform traffic and subjective perceptions of the informants.

The figures on platform traffic (column 2) indicate high differences in platform activity between the three cases. At Company X there appeared on average 29 questions per month, at Company Y 3.6 questions, and at Company Z there were less than 2 questions asked monthly. The participation of the users via voting shows even greater differences. While the questions at Company X received nearly 3,500 votes per month, Company Y received around 1,200 votes monthly, much less, and at Company Z there were not even 10 votes per month. Active participation in the platform communication was consequently the lowest at Company Z. The average amount of votes per question was 258 at Company Y, and this figure is even higher than 124 votes per question at Company X. However, there appeared approximately eight times as many questions per month at Company X than at Company Y. Moreover, the amount of comments on the questions at Company X was nearly 10 times as high as at Company Y; at Company Z this function was basically not used at all.

A glance at the CEO answers across the companies underlines the findings above. At Company X, there appeared more than 5 CEO answers per month; at Company Y there were 3 answers, and at Company Z only 1.6. The amount of CEO answers at Company X was thus more than three times higher than the amount of answers at

³⁵This figure excludes 13 questions that were posted by the communication department at Company Z in order to increase traffic in the platform.

Company Z. Interestingly, at Company X, the CEO just answered 19 percent of the questions that appeared on average, while at Company Y and Company Z the CEOs answered more than 85 percent of the questions. A reason for these differences may be again the much higher amount of questions per month at Company X. Thus, just the top-rated questions were answered by the CEO of Company X. At Company Y and especially at Company Z there were not enough questions asked (see section 2.4.3) and the CEO consequently was able to answer nearly all questions that came up.

It can be drawn from the above that the amount of traffic and the user participation at Company X was the highest among the three cases. Section 4.1 moreover indicated that this high level of traffic remained relatively stable throughout the operation time. Company Y revealed a moderate level of traffic and user participation in their platform; here, section 4.2 also indicated a relatively constant development. On the contrary, Company Z had very low monthly traffic and the user participation via comments or votes was basically nonexistent. As already indicated in section 4.3 the platform was not frequented any more after the first months of operation.

The statements of the informants (column 3) underline the above findings on platform traffic (Table 7-1). In total, the statements indicate that the many-to-one communication process was perceived much more positively at Company X than at Company Y or Company Z. At Company X, the employees mentioned, for instance, that their CEO made clear statements, or that the interaction with the CEO worked well especially for strategic topics (section 4.1 illustrated some of these Q&A). Moreover, the employees appreciated that by using the platform they got to know the opinion and position of colleagues from other divisions and countries that they never had the chance to hear about before. Here, they especially appraised the comment function that was frequently used at Company X. The informant ratings (column 4) of the usefulness of and their satisfaction with the platform consequently revealed high values. These were also significantly higher than for both other companies. Platform usefulness was perceived with a mean of 4.86 as very high and platform satisfaction ($M = 4.00$) as high.

The employees' perceptions of the platform were rather negative at Company Y. Some employees stated that they liked the main purpose of the platform, which is developing a dialogue in the organization. However, according to them, the traffic was mostly negatively predictable. Moreover, they were not satisfied with "*bad*" and "*inauthentic*" answers and stated that they did not have the impression that the CEO wanted to openly to communicate with them. The CEO stated that many questions in the platform dealt with rather minor issues. He even said that some of these questions

were so far away from his desk that he did not even know whether the questions were meant seriously. Section 4.2 illustrated some of these questions, e.g., the employees asked about changing the toilet paper. The quantitative figures underline the above. The employees judged platform usefulness ($M = 2.0$) and satisfaction ($M = 2.5$) rather negatively. These ratings were significantly lower than the values for Company X. At Company Z all employees stated that not much interesting information emerged. Some employees even mentioned that “*it is a dead platform*” (Informant Z3) because there was no traffic. This can be underlined by the fact that some of the informants actually never used the platform and other employees didn’t even know what it was for. Many informants mentioned that they could not take the initiative seriously. Most of them already had the chance to get to know the CEO beforehand. For them there was no need for such an initiative; one informant called it “*another initiative for the sake of doing something*” (Informant Z4). At Company Z usefulness of and satisfaction with ($M = 3.0$; $M = 2.5$) the platform of were perceived rather neutrally. However, both factors were significantly worse rated than those at Company X.

The comprehensive evidence reveals that the platform at Company X performed well. There was frequent traffic in the platform and rather positive employee perceptions of the platform. The overall performance was therefore rated with four points. The platform at Company Y was frequently used by the employees for nearly three years. However, the virtual dialogue was perceived negatively by many users; its overall performance was therefore considered as lower and was rated with two points. Due to the lack of traffic in the platform at Company Z and rather negative ratings of the employees’ the overall rating of platform performance was poor and therefore rated with one point.

7.1.2 Perceptions and assessment of the CEO and the organization

At this point the dissertation outlined large differences across the three cases in terms of their overall platform performance. The theoretical lens indicates that perceptions of the CEO as well as further organizational factors may influence the many-to-one communication process. The employees’ perceptions of the CEO and the organization are consequently explored and assessed in order to reveal information on the context of many-to-one communication at the cases. Due to the explorative approach of the analysis both factors were measured comprehensively. First, the author gathered qualitative assessments from the informants. A high rating of the CEO/the organization was indicated by positive statements and a low rating by negative statements. Second, the author revealed quantitative assessments of the informants on

CEO behavior/the organization (e.g., CEO charisma, organizational climate). High ratings of CEO charisma/organizational climate indicated positive perceptions of the CEO/the organization. On the basis of these dimensions, the author assessed the overall perceptions on a five-point scale that ranges from very weak (1 point) assessments up to very strong (5 points) performance.

7.1.2.1 CEO perceptions as a potential influencing factor

This section explores the overall perceptions of the CEOs and compares the similarities and differences between the cases. The perceptions do not necessarily need to correlate with the CEO appearance in many-to-one communication platform. They can be based on direct (e.g., meetings) and indirect (e.g., stories) (Shamir, 1995) experiences the informants had with the CEO (see chapter 2). The subsequent assessment therefore represents how the CEOs are currently perceived by their employees. As indicated in the theoretical lens, these perceptions may influence the employees' behavior in the many-to-one communication process.

Table 7-2 illustrates the full evidence. The second column draws illustrative statements from the interviews. Column three outlines several measures of the CEOs and their leadership behaviors that are provided to strengthen the rigor of the findings (e.g., CEO charisma³⁶, satisfaction³⁷ with the CEO). The fourth column shows the overall assessment of the CEO that was based on the qualitative and quantitative data.

Table 7-2: Comparison of employees' perceptions of the CEOs

Company	CEO perceptions	Further measures	Assessment ^A
X	"He is the CEO, and he is someone who delegates and trusts." (Informants, X1 & X2)	"He [is] extremely direct and open minded and he says what bothers him." (Informant X3)	"He is a very good people-person [...] and I think a lot of his charisma was build up through his military experiences." (Informant X5)
	"He is the right CEO for this company, and I expect a lot from him." (Informant X6)	"It was nice to see that there was somebody who trustfully showed interest in improving the atmosphere in the organization." (Informant X4)	Charisma ^B 3.73* Satisfaction ^C 3.86*
Y	"The CEO has a double-edged image. On the one side he often showed that he is a top manager. On the other side he is known as a	"In my opinion he was principally a CEO that is close to employees. The problem is that he was not perceived as being close. Just the tight circle of made it difficult to get	"He was a rather cold, financially driven manager. The way he was perceived
			Charisma ^B 2.93** Satisfaction ^C

³⁶ see appendix B.2.2

³⁷ see appendix B.2.1; question 13

	<i>hardliner a top restructurer. Employees may be afraid of him and afraid of losing their jobs.” (Informant Y5)</i>	<i>people who worked with him perceived him as being close. The problem was that he never went to the staff canteen, he never did employee round tables.” (Informant Y2)</i>	<i>accepted by the employees. [...] He was not the leader that enables or motivates people.” (Informant Y9)</i>	2.14**	
Z	<i>“His charisma makes him seem approachable and employee orientated, even though he is the CEO.” (Informant Z7)</i>	<i>“He says: “Do not worry, send me an email when there is anything bothering you”. For me this is very authentic, nobody can complain that he would not have the chance to directly get in contact with him.” (Informant Z6)</i>	<i>“[The way I got to know it here] is that you meet the board members somewhere [by coincidence] in the building.” (Informant Z4)</i>	Charisma ^B 3.76*	●●●●●
	<i>“He is a very calm, cool person. He seems to be very intellectual and intelligent.”; “He knows what he is doing and is very organized.” (Informant Z10)</i>	<i>“He is a person who you can talk to.” (Informant Z4)</i>		Satisfaction ^C 4.40*	

** Significant differences between all three companies at $p < 0.1$; * Significant difference between two companies at $p < 0.1$

^A Rating conducted (subjectively) by the author on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data.

^B (5 point Likert-scale, 10 items, shortened MLQ-scale) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.49$) and Company Y ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.89$); $t(13) = 2.108$, $p = 0.028$. ii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.49$) and Company Z ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.49$); $t(10) = -0.088$, $p = 0.466$. iii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.89$) and Company Z ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.49$); $t(11) = -1.882$, $p = 0.044$.

^C (5 point Likert-scale, 1 item, closed question by author) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.07$) and Company Y ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.22$); $t(12) = 2.803$, $p = 0.080$. ii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.07$) and Company Z ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.55$); $t(10) = -1.033$, $p = 0.163$. iii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.22$) and Company Z ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.55$); $t(10) = -3.844$, $p = 0.002$.

Interestingly, the overall assessments of the CEOs do not correlate with the overall performance of the many-to-one platforms (see section 7.1.1). Data reveals that at Company X and Company Z the CEO was perceived as highly positive. On the contrary, at Company Y the CEO was perceived as rather negative.

At Company X, the CEO was perceived as a very “honest” and “open” personality who sought the dialogue with employees. Interestingly, nearly all informants mentioned his “authenticity.” They consequently ascribed the virtual dialogue as an authentic activity through which the CEO trustfully showed interest in improving the organization. The informants further described the CEO as being “trustful” and very “charismatic.” The quantitative measures underline the positive statements. Data reveals that they perceived the CEO as being highly charismatic ($M = 3.73$), and that they were very satisfied with him ($M = 3.86$). One of the employees put the above in a nutshell: “He is the right CEO for this company, and I expect a lot from him” (Informant X6).

On the contrary, the CEO at Company Y was perceived rather negatively. The informants described him as a “hardliner”, “restructurer”, and a “cold manager.” Interestingly, one of the informants who experienced the CEO more privately mentioned that he was actually a very open and approachable person. According to this informant, the CEO did not manage to transmit his real personality to the employees. “Just the tight circle of people who worked with him perceived him as close [...] he never went to the staff canteen; he never did employee round tables.” (Informant Y2). Many informants stated that the CEO was never really accepted by the

employees. The leadership characteristics' measures underline the rather negative picture of the CEO at Company Y. The informants rated the CEO as being significantly less charismatic ($M = 2.93$) than the informants at Company X did. However, the greatest differences can be observed in the values for satisfaction with the CEO. The mean of 2.14 (versus mean of 3.86 at Company X) underlines that the employees were unsatisfied with the CEO.

At Company Z, the CEO was perceived as highly positive. This is surprising given the poor performance of their many-to-one communication platform (see section 4.3), but it underlines that the perceptions of the CEO do not necessarily need to correlate with the performance of the platform. The statements underlined that the CEO is highly appreciated at Company Z. The informants describe him as being "*charismatic,*" "*employee orientated,*" "*calm and cool,*" and "*authentic.*" The interviews also revealed that many informants perceived the CEO as being close to them. According to these employees, they met him regularly at the company either in skip-level dialogues, or just when he coincidentally passed by. For them, the CEO was very approachable, "*a person who you can talk to*" (Informant Z4). The informants at Company Z rated the CEO as being highly charismatic ($M = 3.76$) and they underlined that they are highly satisfied with him ($M = 4.40$). All means significantly differ from Company Y.

The statements of the CEO at Company X and Z were highly positive and so were the ratings of CEO charisma and satisfaction. At Company Z overall satisfaction with the CEO was even higher than at Company X. They were consequently rated with five and four points, respectively. At Company Y, the evidence reveals that the CEO was perceived less positively than at the other companies. The perceptions of the CEO at Company Z were rated with two points.

7.1.2.2 Organizational perceptions as a potential influencing factor

This section investigates the employees' perceptions of their organizations. The theoretical lens shows that certain organizational factors may influence the many-to-one communication process. In order to uncover these organizational factors, the aim is here to openly and broadly gather and explore the current employees' perceptions of their organization. Table 7-3 illustrates the qualitative and quantitative evidence. Column two displays key statements of the informants. Column three draws several constructs of the organizational climate scale (OCM)³⁸ (Patterson, et al., 2004) such as

³⁸ see appendix B.2.3

e.g., organizational involvement, welfare, goal clarity, and pressure. This data is used to strengthen the rigor of the evidence. The fourth column draws the overall assessment of the employees' perceptions of their organizations.

Table 7-3: Comparison of employees' perceptions of the organizations

Company	Organization perceptions	Further measures	Assessment ^A		
X	<p><i>"When there was the Gallup survey [...] the atmosphere was recognized at the top level. They seriously tried to change something."</i> (Informant X4)</p> <p><i>"They often spoke about trust and that we need a cultural change in the organization."</i> (Informant X3)</p>	<p><i>"Company X and the work council guaranteed that all employees have job security until 2020. But employees have to deliver. They have to come up with ideas about how to be more efficient, faster, and better."</i> (Informant X10)</p> <p><i>"Our company did develop highly positively. We got multicultural. The development toward a "European corporation" lasts now a long time. [...] Today [all subsidiaries] are an integral part of one company."</i> (Informant X9)</p>	<p><i>"We are doing very well at Company X. We cannot say that we are hit by a crisis. Of course we have certain problems here and there. But it did not hurt as it did in other companies. [...] For instance nobody got fired at our company."</i> (Informant X3)</p>	<p>Involvement^B 2.07*</p> <p>Welfare^C 2.64*</p> <p>Goal clarity^D 2.74</p> <p>Pressure^E 2.82</p>	●●●●○
Y	<p><i>"Since the CEO is here, there is a large uncertainty and no silence any more. There were various cost-saving programs. [...] Before it was much more quite. [...] Then of course the financial crisis came along as well. It got very conservative and fear came into the organization. We did not know what is going to happen with our organization. Nobody knew what the CEO is doing here at Company Y."</i> (Informant Y4)</p>	<p><i>"Our business [retail and wholesale] is very hierarchical: "you, that, here". [...] We are much more blue-collar than a bank or an IT organization [...] and so is our culture."</i> (Informant Y3)</p>	<p><i>"In former times we had a spirit that was also part of our slogan, but both changed. [...] Today we operate in [more than] 32 countries and have 280 thousand employees and so many cultures. [There is so much potential] but the spirit got lost."</i> (Informant Y4)</p>	<p>Involvement^B 2.21</p> <p>Welfare^C 2.94</p> <p>Goal clarity^D 2.58</p> <p>Pressure^E 2.93</p>	●●●○○
Z	<p><i>"Business is going strongly upwards. In 2010 we were broken, even, there was a huge relief [...]"</i> (Informant Z4)</p> <p><i>"Since a couple of years we work heavily on transparency and communication culture. [We have] different pieces of one puzzle that we put together. I think we have a transparency today that we never had before."</i> (CEO Company Z)</p>	<p><i>"The working culture is very positive. We work very well and fairly with each other. I have the feeling that there is a high openness in the organization."</i> (Informant Z7)</p> <p><i>The employees are very good informed."</i> (Informant Z6)</p>	<p><i>"[Chinese employee states:] We define the strategy at the beginning of every year. We also have strategy workshops in China at the beginning of every year. Concerning the local strategy, I think people are informed about what we will do in the next year, what our focus is and what our strategy is. From a global point of view, I think that people are not really informed about the global strategy."</i> (Informant Z9)</p>	<p>Involvement^B 2.57*</p> <p>Welfare^C 3.10*</p> <p>Goal clarity^D 2.76</p> <p>Pressure^E 3.08</p>	●●●●○

** Significant differences between all three companies at $p < 0.1$; * Significant difference between two companies at $p < 0.1$

^A Rating conducted (subjectively) by the author on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data.

^B (4 point Likert-scale, 6 items, full scale from OCM) Independent samples t-test: i.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.07, SD = 0.42) and Company Y (M = 2.21, SD = 0.68); $t(13) = -0.465$, $p = 0.325$. ii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.07, SD = 0.42)

and Company Z (M = 2.57, SD = 0.40); $t(10) = -2.059$, $p = 0.033$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y (M = 2.21, SD = 0.68) and Company Z (M = 2.57, SD = 0.40); $t(11) = -1.061$, $p = 0.156$.

^C (4 point Likert-scale, 4 items, full scale from OCM) Independent samples t-test: i.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.64, SD = 0.59) and Company Y (M = 2.93, SD = 0.42); $t(13) = -1.126$, $p = 0.141$. ii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.64, SD = 0.59) and Company Z (M = 3.10, SD = 0.29); $t(10) = -1.583$, $p = 0.072$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y (M = 2.93, SD = 0.42) and Company Z (M = 3.10, SD = 0.29); $t(11) = -0.761$, $p = 0.232$.

^D (4 point Likert-scale, 5 items, full scale from OCM) Independent samples t-test: i.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.74, SD = 0.32) and Company Y (M = 2.58, SD = 0.75); $t(13) = 0.547$, $p = 0.274$. ii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.74, SD = 0.32) and Company Z (M = 2.76, SD = 0.43); $t(10) = -0.079$, $p = 0.469$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y (M = 2.58, SD = 0.75) and Company Z (M = 2.76, SD = 0.43); $t(11) = -0.496$, $p = 0.315$.

^E (4 point Likert-scale, 5 items, full scale from OCM) Independent samples t-test: i.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.82, SD = 0.24) and Company Y (M = 2.93, SD = 0.62); $t(13) = -0.383$, $p = 0.354$. ii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X (M = 2.82, SD = 0.24) and Company Z (M = 3.08, SD = 0.71); $t(10) = -0.891$, $p = 0.197$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y (M = 2.93, SD = 0.62) and Company Z (M = 3.08, SD = 0.71); $t(11) = -0.417$, $p = 0.343$.

Interestingly, the overall assessment of the organizations reveals similar results as the overall assessment of the CEOs. The assessment indicates that Company X and Company Z are perceived more positively by their employees than Company Y.

At Company X, nearly all informants mentioned their “*trustful*” and “*fair*” organizational atmosphere. The informants appreciated for instance that their company did not launch a large restructuring program during financial crisis, and that employees were not forced to leave the company. Moreover, many informants stated that the company culture developed highly positively within the past couple of years and that they performed very well; they even outperformed their key competitor today. At Company X the employees “*were guaranteed jobs until 2020*” (Informant X10), which made the informants feel safe. However, the informants stated that the pressure to fulfill the high expectations and the need for efficiency increased simultaneously. After the internal survey revealed a negative organizational atmosphere some years ago (see section 4.1), the board actively pushed an organizational change process. The informants recognized that the CEO and the board seriously tried to improve the organizational culture within the past years. Therefore, they put a lot of trust in the board. Company X was also perceived as a highly international corporation. Many employees stated that the various subsidiaries were an integral part of one company. However, some informants who worked at the smaller markets stated in this context that the two key markets still highly dominate their organization. “*When I joined [Company X], I did it mainly for the great opportunity to work and evolve in an international/multicultural environment. Now [...] I realize that diversity can be a handicap for career development.*” (Company X, released from platform traffic). Opposed to the platform and CEO perceptions, the quantitative measures of organizational climate could not reveal significant differences between all three cases. At Company Y the overall perceptions were less positive than at Company X. Many informants actually reported a highly negative organizational development since the CEO joined the company. “*Since the CEO is here, there is a large uncertainty and no silence any more. There were various cost-saving programs. [...] before it was much more quiet. [...] Then of course the financial crisis came along as well. It got very*

conservative and fear came into the organization. We did not know what is going to happen with our organization. Nobody knew what the CEO is doing here at Company Y." (Informant Y4). Some informants were rather nostalgic; they mentioned that the company lost the spirit it used to have. They underlined that their industry was always very hierarchical and direct but because of the restructuring program and the rather negative reputation of the CEO (see section 4.2) there was fear in the company. Moreover, according to some informants the strategic orientation toward international expansion and the resulting cultural melting pot also negatively influenced the organizational DNA. However, there were also employees that saw a need for the actions above. *"The ideal world that existed does not exist anymore – in many organizations. [...] Most organizations have to restructure and to adjust in order to prepare for the future. This always means changes [...] and causes disturbances."* (Informant Y5).

At Company Z the organization and its climate were perceived highly positively. As for Company X, the informants stated a very positive development in the organization throughout the last couple of years. *"In 2010 we were break-even, there was a huge relief [...] we had a good feeling here."* (Informant Z4). The informants also stated that the working culture is very *"kind," "transparent,"* and *"communication-oriented."* In this context they underlined that there existed a high horizontal but also a high vertical transparency. The informants from subsidiaries in China and in India accentuated the positive perceptions of the organization. However, they also underlined that their culture is rather nationally orientated. They did not perceive influences from their CEO or their headquarters at all in their country. Data underlined the positive organizational climate at Company Z. The levels of organizational involvement ($M = 2.57$) and welfare ($M = 3.10$) were even significantly higher than those at Company X ($M = 2.07$; $M = 2.64$).

Due to the positive statements of the informants about their organization, Company X and Company Z were rated with four points. At Company Y, the statements were rather negative, especially in comparison to Company X and Z. The organization was therefore rated with two points.

7.2 Part 2: Influence of many-to-one communication on objective distances and construal level

Part 1 outlined that there are significant differences across the three cases concerning the employees' perceptions of 1. the many-to-one communication platform, 2. their

CEO, and 3. their organization. This section subsequently explores the causes that might have triggered the performance differences of the many-to-one communication across the cases. Therefore, it applies CLT as a mechanism for the analysis that links the many-to-one communication process with effects on employees' cognitions and behaviors. All data is derived from the informants and platform traffic.

This part is divided in two sections that both explore the influence of many-to-one communication on the employees' perceptions of distance. However, they highlight the process from different paths. The first section explores the direct influence of the CEO's behavior in many-to-one communication on objective distances to the employees. Section two explores the direct influence of the CEO's communication behavior on the level of construal in mind of the employees. The second path emerged inductively in the explorative analysis process. It therefore represents a novel linkage that extends the theoretical lens.

7.2.1 Influence of many-to-one communication on objective distances

Various scholars suggest that there is a link between leader and follower communication and their perceptions of distance. The theoretical lens therefore draws that by establishing direct communication between the CEO and employees, many-to-one communication decreases various objective distances.

7.2.1.1 Procedure to assess the influence of many-to-one communication on the objective distances

The literature in the field of psychology reveals that there are four objective distances that influence the perceiver's psychological distance to a target in a similar manner (temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distance). Any objective distancing triggers psychological distance. The theoretical lens outlines that by applying many-to-one communication, CEOs may directly influence various objective distances to the employees and consequently influence psychological distance.

This section subsequently explores whether many-to-one communication had an influence on the objective distances between the CEO and the employees in the three cases. The objective distances are well-defined in the psychological literature. In order to ensure theory alignment in the analysis, this section first defines the objective distances and adopts them to the context of many-to-one communication. As a basis for the definition it uses the studies of Bar-Anan and colleagues (2006) and Trope & Liberman (2000) (see chapter 5). Then, it outlines the influence of many-to-one

communication on each objective distance before it develops a grid that is applied for the cross-case comparison. Table 7-4 outlines the above.

Table 7-4: Influence on objective distances

Objective Distance	Definition	Influence	Grid for the analysis
1.) Temporal	“The difference in time between the [employee’s] present time and the [CEO].”	Reduction of time-gap to CEO.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How frequent is the communication between the CEO and the employees in the platform? • Does the CEO become more visible than before the platform?
2.) Social	“The distance of the [CEO] and the [employee’s] self.”	Increase of social similarity to the CEO.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of social information does the CEO reveal in the platform? • Is the CEO perceived as being more similar than before the platform?
3.) Hypothetical	“The likeliness of [experiencing the CEO], or how close [the CEO] is to reality, as construed by [employee].”	Increase of real experience with the CEO.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the participation in the platform influence the employees’ insights and relevancy of the CEO’s behavior? • Do employees perceive relevant insights from/about the CEO by participating in the platform?
4.) Spatial	“The distance in space between the [CEO] and the [employee].”	<i>No direct influence</i>	

Source: (Bar-Anan, et al., 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2000).

1.) CLT reveals that the smaller the time gap between a perceiver and a target person is, the lower is their temporal distance. By enhancing the communication flow between CEOs and employees many-to-one communication may consequently directly reduce their objective time gap, because employees can more often and regularly experience the CEO than before (e.g., the employees experience the CEO every three days in the platform versus twice a year before).

2.) CLT reveals that the more similarly a target person is perceived to oneself, the lower is the social distance to the perceiver. By virtually communicating with each other, the CEO and the employees may perceive the other party as being more similar compared to before the implementation of the platform. Moreover, employees may experience further similarities with the CEO in the dialogue. The platform may consequently directly increase social similarity among the CEOs and the employees.

3.) CLT reveals that the more likely a target is to be real, the lower is the perceiver’s hypothetical distance toward the target. The literature analysis shows that in most organizations, CEOs and employees do not directly interact (see section 2.3.1). By

establishing many-to-one communication, the employees may suddenly directly experience the CEO in reality. The actual behavior of the CEO and its consequences (also for the employees) may thus become less hypothetical and consequently more relevant. The platform may therefore directly decrease hypothetical distance between the CEO and the employees.


4.) CLT further reveals that the closer in space a perceiver and a target person are, the lower their spatial distance. The theoretical lens does not support a direct link between many-to-one communication and perceptions of distance in space. The reason is simple: No matter how often or intensive CEOs and employees communicate virtually; their objective distance in space will remain constant. Even though many-to-one communication may influence perceptions of spatial distance indirectly (e.g., via the interrelation of the objective distances (see section 5)) there is no direct link. The influence on spatial distance is consequently omitted from the analysis.

7.2.1.2 Assessment of the observed influence on the objective distances

This section explores the influence of many-to-one communication on the objective distances between the CEO and employees. Table 7-5 draws key statements from the informants at the respective company and outlines an overall assessment.

Table 7-5: Comparison of observed influence on the objective distances

Com-pany	1.) Temporal Distance	2.) Social Distance	3.) Hypothetical Distance	Assessment ^A
X	<p>"The answers came fast, this was never a problem." (Informant X9)</p> <p>"[Answering time] was generally OK, but [sometimes] it took up to 6 weeks [...] this was not interactive enough." (Informant X6)</p> <p>"By launching specials [...] traffic increased, they started to more actively address the employees." (Informant X3)</p>	<p>"[His answer showed] that we were totally at eye level [...] it was a matter of course for him." (Informant X4)</p> <p>"He showed that he is not god up there, but instead a team player who knows when other people in his team can answer a question better. That is positive. He is not "Mr.-I-know-it-all". (Informant X6)</p>	<p>"The outcome was really nice. The answer had a lot of information in two phrases." (Informant X7)</p> <p>"The intention of the answers is good, but we know actually that they do not lead to much." (Informant X10)</p>	●●●●○
Y	<p>"The answering periods were very long. Questions stuck for three weeks in the platform but there came no answers. [...] The consequence is that the platform loses what it was intended for."</p>	<p>"The courage of the CEO to [seek the dialogue with the employees] was perceived positively." (Informant Y6)</p> <p>"I think there is a match between</p>	<p>"Nothing was insightful! I could have answered all by myself." (Informant Y6)</p> <p>"It was mostly a political answer. Softened, without</p>	●○○○○

<p>(Informant Y5)</p> <p><i>“The problem was that it sometimes took months until questions were answered. You lose the overview. I do not remember what I found interesting one or two months before.”</i> (Informant Y9)</p> <p><i>“The intended answering period was never followed.”</i> (Informant Y10)</p>	<p><i>the unwillingness of the CEO to deal with employees and the fact that he gets a nice tool where he organizes two people from the corporate communication [to interact with employees]. He does not want to deal with the tool himself.”</i> (Informant Y3)</p>	<p><i>substance.”</i> (Informant Y2)</p> <p><i>“[A typical answer is] “thanks for the notice but we proceed as before due to the following advantages.” Then the official statement and that is it.”</i> (Informant Y10)</p>	
Z			
<p><i>“At the moment nothing happens in the platform. As an outsider you could say it is a dead platform.”</i> (Informant Z3)</p>	<p><i>“There were questions where we said: “poor guys, how to answer this?””</i> (Informant Z8)</p> <p><i>“I expect that the distance between [the CEO and us] is not large. This is how I got to know it here. When I meet the CEO, e.g., in the main building, he knows me by name. The platform is a part of this.”</i> (Informant Z4)</p>	<p><i>“At the beginning I thought great initiative. When I saw the answers I was disappointed. [...] There were no new insights.”</i> (Informant Z8)</p> <p><i>“The CEO sometimes sent mails, where he stated that if we have a question or issue - we can write him a mail, or ask him directly in the cafeteria.”</i> (Informant Z4)</p>	

^A Rating conducted by the author on the basis of qualitative statements from the interviews.

At Company X the interviews revealed that many-to-one communication had an influence on temporal, social, and hypothetical distance. Most of the informants stated that the answers of the CEO in the platform came quickly. According to the employees, the answering process in the platform did not work well at the beginning, but it improved toward the end. This is in line with section 4.1, where the CEO and internal platform manager revealed that they had issues with the timing of the answers in the first phase of the platform. Moreover, the informants stated that the communication flow in the platform was steady. Here, they pointed out that the specials - where the CEO asked the employees for their opinion of certain topics - were perceived well. *“With the specials [in the platform] there came more traffic again”* (Informant X2); *“I enjoyed that the CEO changed the actual process of the platform toward being more active”* (Informant X6). Many-to-one communication thus influenced the employees temporal distance to the CEO. According to the informants, the CEO was perceived very positively and personal in the platform. The employees even stated that they felt *“totally at eye level”* with the CEO (Informant X4), that he showed that *“he is no god up there”* (Informant X6), or that *“proved that he is actually a human being”* (Informant X5). The statements underline that communication in the platform had an impact on social distance. The CEO was consequently perceived being approachable and on *“eye level.”* The statements regarding the influence on hypothetical distance were more diverse than those on

temporal or social distance. For many informants, the answers of the CEO were helpful and contained insightful information. They appreciated getting the chance to experience the CEO and “*to get insights in the thoughts of the top management*” (Informant X10). However, some informants underlined that the communication did “*not lead to much*” (Informant X10). According to these informants, the intention of the platform was good, but it did not decrease hypothetical distance to the CEO. Moreover, some employees complained that it was difficult to reach the CEO via the platform: “*It was really frustrating for me. I made comments, I voted [...], but I didn't get an answer. [Now], I look for a topic that is close to mine and I vote for it and make comments.*” (Informant X6). The analysis of the platform traffic at Company X revealed that the CEO solely answered approximately 19 percent of the questions. The chance to reach the CEO by getting voted among the top answers was consequently much lower at Company X as opposed to the other cases where more than 85 percent of the questions were answered (see section 4.2).

At Company Y, the effects of the platform on temporal distance seemed to be much weaker compared to Company X. The statistics on platform traffic at Company Y revealed that the CEO answered three questions per month on average. However, for most employees, the answering process was not fast enough. They stated that it took a long time until they received answers from the CEO. “*The key problem was that the answering process of the questions took too long. This diminishes the interest of the people in the platform.*” (Informant Y10). Moreover, some employees stated that they often were stuck in the platform and nothing happened. Consequently, they lost the overview of the questions and answers in the platform. The CEO could not influence social distance. Some of the informants stated that they were surprised that the CEO sought the dialogue, but they perceived the initiative and the courage of the CEO as positive. However, the majority of the informants did not observe similarities with the CEO. In their opinion, the communication process of the CEO was managed by the communication department. For them the behavior of the CEO was actually inauthentic and “*underlined the unwillingness of the CEO to deal with the employees*” (Informant Y3). The effects on hypothetical distance also seemed to be very low at Company Y. For the employees the participation in the platform did not reveal many insights. “*The employees posted questions, ideas and wishes. When just political babbles and softened answers come back [...] we do not need this [...]. The hours we spend for the platform – and we spend quite some amount of time – could have been used differently.*” (Informant Y10).

At Company Z, neither the employees nor the platform statistics revealed any effects on temporal distance. Most informants stated that nothing happened on the platform. There were barely any questions from the employees, and consequently there were no answers from the CEO. One of the informants mentioned in this context a general problem of the platform: *“When my kids post on Facebook, they get an answer one or two hours later. At the platform it takes two weeks.”* (Informant Z3). What makes Company Z special is that the distance between the CEO and the employees seemed to be much lower in comparison to the two other companies (see section 4.3, organizational structure). The informants from the headquarters stated that that they, e.g., met the CEO by coincidence in the building, in the cafeteria, in skip-level dialogues, or that he invited them to send him an e-mail. One of the employees stated: *“I expect that the distance to the CEO is low [...] this is how I got to know it here”* (Informant Z4). However, the employees from Asia and India did not feel being as close to the CEO as their colleagues from the headquarters, but given the high presence of the CEO in the headquarters, this is a matter of course. Many informants stated that they thought the platform was a great idea. But quickly they realized that it did not deliver any new insights. *“The answers were one hundred percent correct, but zero percent helpful.”* (Informant Z3). Due to the low traffic in the platform and the various touch points of many employees with the CEO at Company Z, there is no evidence for an influence of the platform on temporal, social, or hypothetical distance. At Company X the dialogue between the CEO and employees seemed to decrease their perceptions of temporal, social, and hypothetical distance. The influence of many-to-one communication on the objective distances between the CEO and employees is therefore rated with four points. At Company Y and Z, evidence does not reveal an influence of many-to-one communication on temporal, social, and hypothetical distance. Both are therefore rated solely with one point.

7.2.2 Influence of CEO communication behavior in many-to-communication on construal level

The previous analysis proposed that many-to-one communication had influence on objective distances between the CEO and employees at Company X but not at Company Y and Company Z. During the exploration process of the case studies, the informants revealed various factors that seemed to further influence their perceptions of distance. The interviews particularly indicated that the communication behavior of the CEO in the platform directly altered the level of construal in the employees' minds. In order to further explore the impact of the above, the author conducted an

iterative literature analysis. The analysis revealed four factors that may have directly triggered the employees' construal level. These factors are explored in the following.

7.2.2.1 Procedure to assess the influence on construal level

Chapter 5 revealed that psychological distance and construal level are correlated (see section 5). Psychological distance therefore not only triggers the level of mental construal, but the construal level also triggers psychological distance. The analysis outlined several studies in the field of psychology that directly triggered different construal levels in the mind of perceivers, which consequently influenced psychological distance.

The exploration process of the cases revealed that the CEO's communication behavior differed highly across the cases regarding their level of granularity, personality, visibility, and emotions. A subsequent literature analysis indicated that each of these factors may be directly linked with the employees' construal level.

This section first draws the potential influence of these factors on employees' construal level in the context of many-to-one communication. Then, it outlines a grid for analyzing and comparing the factors across the cases. Table 7-6 illustrates the above.

Table 7-6: Influence of many-to-one communication on construal level

Mental construal	Definition	Influence	Grid for the analysis
Low level	“Concrete, situational, and subordinate descriptions of the [CEO].”	High levels of 1.) granularity, 2.) personality, 3.) visibility, and 4.) emotions in CEO appearance trigger low level construals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the CEO apply a high level of granularity in this statements (e.g., concreteness, “how”)? (Lieberman & Trope, 1998, Trope & Liberman, 2000) • Does the CEO reveal a high level of personality in his statements (e.g., “pronouns nondrop”, informal language)? (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008) • Does the CEO enhance personal visibility (e.g., videos, pictures) in the platform? (Amit et al., 2009) • Does the CEO apply affective statements? (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008)
High level	“Abstract, dispositional, and superordinate descriptions of the [CEO].”	Low levels of 1.) granularity, 2.) personality, 3.) visibility, and 4.) emotions in CEO appearance trigger high level construals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the CEO apply a high abstraction level in his statements (e.g., dispositional, “why”)? (Lieberman & Trope, 1998, Trope & Liberman, 2000) • Does the CEO reveal a high level of formality in his statements (e.g., “pronouns drop”, formal language)? (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008) • Does the CEO “solely” apply written statements in the platform? (Amit et al., 2009) • Does the CEO damp emotions in his statements? (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008)

In various studies, Liberman and Trope outlined that abstract, decontextualized, and superordinate representations of targets directly trigger high-level construals in mind of the perceiver (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Liberman & Trope, 2008), and that concrete, contextual, and subordinate representations of targets directly trigger low level construals. This section is based on these findings.

Liberman and Trope (1998) as well as Trope and Liberman (2000) underline in their research that the level of granularity of information about targets influences the perceiver’s construal level. In the context of many-to-one communication this implies that concrete information (e.g., “how” versus “why”) from/about the CEO may trigger low-level construals in mind of the employees.

Holtgraves & Kashima (2008) state that explicitly mentioning personal information in a speech (e.g., via personal pronouns), influences the person in a way that it gets contextualized. In the context of many-to-one communication this finding implies that a high amount of personal information of the CEO triggers low-level construals in the minds of the employees.

In a study on mental processing, Amit and colleagues (2009) found that pictures are examples of low-level construals and words are examples of high-level construals. According to the authors, pictures convey closeness of targets because pictures contain

detailed and concrete information. Words, however, are less concrete and impose distance. This indicates that when CEOs enhance their visibility in the platform (e.g., via video statements or pictures) they trigger low-level construals in the minds of the platform users.


In a study on language and cognition, Holtgraves and Kashima (2008) reveal that the use of language also plays a role in the perception of others' emotions. Lieberman (2007) specifies that affective labelling triggers the reflective neural system in the minds of perceivers and this is linked to their level of construal. In context of psychological distance, van Boven and colleagues (van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010) add that perceived emotional intensity reduces psychological distance. "People perceive events of equal objective distance as less psychologically distant when people feel more rather than less intense emotions about those people." (p. 872). In context of many-to-one communication this indicates that emotionality in the CEO's statements trigger low level of construals.

7.2.2.2 Assessment of the observed influence on construal level

This section explores the influence of CEO behavior in many-to-one communication on the employees' construal level by applying the grid that was introduced before.

Table 7-7 draws key statements and outlines the overall assessment of the influence of the CEO's communication on the employees' construal level.

Table 7-7: Comparison of observed influence on construal level

Company	1.) Level of granularity	2.) Level of personality	3.) Level of visibility	4.) Level of emotions	Assessment
X	<p>"I believe Bill³⁹ has been really clear with his statements. [...] When it is a global one, a position for everybody, it is really well-described. [His answer on my question] had a lot of information in two phrases." (Informant X7)</p> <p>"Sometimes there were really straight answers." (Informant X4)</p>	<p>"Especially sympathetic about [the CEO] is that he is not afraid of showing weaknesses." (Informant X1)</p> <p>"It is relatively informal. You do not have to write 'Dear Mr. CEO' but instead you write 'Dear Bill'. I like this a lot." (Informant X10)</p>	<p>"The videos did not make him more personal. [...] You could see that he tried to appear natural and spontaneous." (Informant X4)</p>	<p>"He showed that he is a human being - he put in place what he felt." (Informant X5)</p> <p>"Dear [first name of an employee], your question cuts right to the bone and I will be completely open with you: our position in the market [XY] is indeed quite weak and our strategy "incomplete", to put it mildly..." (CEO in the platform)</p>	

³⁹ Due to confidential reasons the first name of the CEO is masked. The author named the CEO of Company X Bill.

Y					
	<p>“I would have expected more concrete answers and clear statements.” (Informant Y10)</p> <p>“The answers were very clean. [...] The distance between the CEO and [many parts of the organization] is too large. Therefore, just superordinate topics are discussed.” (Informant Y7)</p>	<p>“There were mainly political phrases used.” (Informant Y7)</p> <p>“We received PR-answers. It was never the CEO personally who answered. The people knew that.” (Informant Y10)</p>	<p>“I remember a video the CEO uploaded [in the platform]. It was the first time I got to see him since he became CEO. My impression was relatively bad. It seemed rather artificial and not authentic.” (Informant Y8)</p>	<p>“You could see that questions were answered by the communication department. [...] This way trust gets lost.” (Informant Y5)</p>	●○○○○○
Z					
	<p>“The answers were Solomonian and not insightful.” (Informant Z6)</p> <p>“The answers seemed like answers from politicians. Broad and not sufficient.” (Informant Z4)</p>	<p>“There was no personal dimension, no personal insights.[...] I would have appreciated to get insights on the personal opinion of the CEO on topics.” (Informant Z8)</p>	<p>“I would have liked to see more videos. To make him appear closer.” (Informant Z7)</p>	<p>“There was not enough emotionality in the platform. [...] When I met the CEO live he was much more emotional. He said for instance that he is proud of us. The platform took all emotions.” (Informant Z8)</p>	●○○○○○

^A Rating conducted by the author on the basis of qualitative statements from the interviews.

At Company X, most of the informants revealed that the answers of the CEO in the platform were concrete, fruitful, and contained detailed information. *“I like the platform. It was very fresh [...] especially because the CEO made some open and direct statements”* (Informant X4). One of the informants asked the CEO, for instance, whether he could work in a site abroad and what problems may occur. According to the informants the answer was very satisfying. It contained a lot of helpful information, and was still to the point. However, the interviews revealed that the answers of the CEO were not always as concrete and detailed as described above. *“There were answers on the working conditions [in country A]. These were bad, rather general in manner such as ‘yes we got your point, we are working on this.’”* (Informant X6). Most of the informants underlined the high level of personality the CEO revealed in the platform. As opposed to Company Y and Company Z the CEO at Company X was always called by his first name⁴⁰ in the platform. *“You do not have to write Dear Mr. CEO but instead you write Dear Bill. I like this a lot.”* (Informant X10). The informants mentioned additionally that the CEO was never afraid of showing personal weaknesses in the platform. *“He was authentic [in the platform]. He made the tool special.”* (Informant X1). Even though the CEO revealed a high level of personality, some employees stated that they experienced him as being even more open and direct in a face-to-face context. As drawn in the narrative case description in section 4.1, the CEO at Company X uploaded several videos where he asked the

⁴⁰ The original first name of the CEO has been changed to Bill due to disclosure promises.

employees for their participation in the platform on a given topic. Even though theory indicates that visibility triggers low-level construals, the informants' statements did not reveal a direct impact. When asked about the videos, most informants stated that these did not enhance their perceptions of the CEO as being more personal, authentic, or close. But instead they stated that the videos seemed rather artificial and that they *"could see that he tried to appear natural and spontaneous"* (Informant X4). According to the employees, the CEO managed to transform his emotions well in the platform. *"He showed that he is a human being – he put in place what he felt"* (Informant X4). The following expressions were directly derived from one answer of the CEO in the platform, and they underline the high level of emotionality in his messages: *"I will be completely open with you"*, *"your question cuts right to the bone"*, or *"our position is weak [...] to put it mildly..."* (CEO of Company X).

At Company Y and Company Z the informants' opinion concerning the level of granularity and the level of personality in the statements of the CEO were almost identical. In both cases the informants claimed that the answers should have been much more clear and concrete. *"The answers seemed like answers from politicians - broad and not sufficient."* (Informant Z4). One of the informants at Company Y mentioned in this context that the distance to their CEO was too large to discuss concrete topics, instead these were rather superordinate and so were the answers of the CEO. The informants from Company Y and Company Z moreover claimed that the answers of their CEO did not contain personal elements. At Company Y the informants revealed that the answers mainly contained political phrases. The employees said they knew that the CEO did not answer the questions by himself, but instead the communication department did. The answers were *"PR-answers. It was never the CEO personally who answered."* (Informant Y10). The statements at Company Z pointed in a similar direction. *"In my opinion the answers were too clean, too management-like, too much like press releases."* (Informant Z3). The informants mentioned that they would have appreciated more personal insights from the CEO instead as well as his personal opinion on current topics. *"I would have been interested in the personal opinion of [the CEO] on [for instance] our latest post-merger integration process [...] I would have appreciated if he would have stated his experiences."* (Informant Z8).

At Company Y, none of the informants were of the opinion that the videos boosted their perceptions of closeness toward the CEO in any way. Similar to Company X, they said that the videos seemed rather artificial and consequently not authentic. Interestingly, some of the informants at Company Z stated that they would have

appreciated to see more videos. However, the reason therefore might be mainly because the CEO just uploaded very few videos and not because the videos triggered their perceptions of proximity.

On the contrary to Company X, there is no evidence that the CEO statements triggered the emotions of the employees at Company Y. The feedback of the employees was homogenous. All informants stated that the answers did not reveal the CEO's emotions *"You could see that questions were answered by the communication department. [...] This way trust gets lost."* (Informant Y5). At Company Z statements were more diversified. As indicated before in the section, most employees at Company Z did not perceive the CEO as being highly emotional or personal in the platform. However, they state that they actually got to know the CEO before as a positive and very emotional person. Therefore, they rather regret that the CEO could not transmit his emotions via the platform. *"There was not enough emotionality in the platform. [...] When I met the CEO live he was much more emotional. He said, for instance, that he is proud of us. The platform took all emotions."* (Informant Z8).

Due to the high level of personality and emotions the CEO applied in his statements at Company X as well as the moderate level of granularity, the influence is rated with four points. At Company Y and Company Z, there is no evidence that indicates an influence of the CEO communication behavior on decreasing the construal level in mind of the employees. Both cases are therefore solely rated with one point.

7.3 Part 3: Effects of many-to-one communication on multiple levels

This part explores the effects of many-to-one communication across the three cases. In the literature, many-to-one communication and its effects in organizations is still a black box. The theoretical lens proposes that changes in psychological distance and in construal level trigger cognitive and behavioral effects (Liberman, Trope, et al., 2007a; Trope & Liberman, 2010). The analysis in part 2 outlined that many-to-one communication altered the objective distances between the CEO and the employees at Company X and that it directly triggered low level construals of the CEO in mind of the employees. Subsequently, this part aims to explore the effects of these changes in employees' perceptions.

It first explores the micro-level effects of many-to-one communication on the employees' cognitions and the behavior toward the CEO before it reveals macro-level effects. The macro level effects emerged inductively in the cross case exploration. Therefore, these represent a novel link that extends the theoretical lens.

7.3.1 Effects on micro-level of analysis

This section explores the micro-level effects of many-to-one communication. It explores the employee's reactions toward the behavior of the CEO in the platform and focuses here on the CEO/employee dyad (Danserau, 1995; Boyd & Taylor, 1998). During the exploration process an inductive approach was applied. It first revealed the single effects of each case, before the findings were compared across the cases and the overall effects were assessed.

7.3.1.1 Introduction of the effects at the micro-level

The exploration of the case studies indicated that the virtual dialogue with the CEO had various effects on employees' cognitions. In order to give the effects a coherent structure, the author iteratively integrated literature. Consequently, the process revealed three cognitive effects at the micro-level of analysis: 1. CEO authenticity, 2. trust in the CEO, and 3. appreciation by the CEO. Before these are compared across the cases, this section introduces each effect on the basis of the literature. Table 7-8 summarizes the findings. It draws the definitions of authenticity, trust, and appreciation in leadership and reveals distinct leader behaviors that influence employees' perceptions of authenticity, trustworthy, and appreciation toward leaders.

Table 7-8: Introduction of micro-level effects

Factor	Definition	Leader behavior
1.) CEO authenticity	“Authenticity involves both owning one’s personal experiences (values, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs) and acting in accordance with one’s true self (expressing what you really think).” (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005, p. 344)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing transparency, openness, trust, and guidance toward worthy objectives (Gardner, et al., 2005, p. 345). • Endorsing values that promote the interests of the larger community and transparently convey these values to followers (Eagly, 2005, p. 461).
2.) CEO trustworthiness	“A relationship with another identifiable party who is perceived to act and react with volition toward the trustor.” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing openness, competence, and caring (Mayer, et al., 1995). • Revealing reliability, concern for others, and empathy in relationships (Mayer, et al., 1995).
3.) Appreciation by CEO	“Appreciation of others reflects fundamental personal values that esteem and honor people.” (Russell, 2001, p. 80)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening is a key way through which leaders demonstrate appreciation of others (Russell, 2001, p. 80). • Showing concern for others and putting their needs and interests as priorities (Russell, 2001, p. 80).

For the analysis of the effects of many-to-one communication at the micro-level of analysis, the literature gives interesting insights. It indicates that CEOs are perceived as authentic when they act in accordance with their true self by communicating in the platform (see table 7-8). According to Gardner and colleagues (2005) and Eagly (2005), CEOs trigger the employees’ perceptions of CEO authenticity when they endorse the values of the employees and transparently convey these values in their organization. The authors further state that leader authenticity is associated with various positive employee outcomes such as commitment, meaningful engagement, and well-being.

Literature suggests that CEOs are perceived as being trustworthy when they act and react with volition toward the employees in the platform (see table 7-8). Mayer and colleagues (1995) outline that by showing openness, competence, caring, reliability, concern for others, and empathy in relationships, CEOs can trigger the employees’ perceptions of trustworthiness. Trust is linked to various positive follower outcomes such as, e.g., enhanced ability, benevolence, or integrity toward the CEO.

Scholars further propose that employees feel appreciated by the CEO when they experience honor and self-esteem by communicating with the CEO (see table 7-8). According to Russell (2001) appreciation can be triggered by listening, showing concerns, and prioritizing the employees’ needs and interests. Russell (2001) further

outlines that appreciation is associated with positive employee outcomes such as, e.g., trust, commitment, kindness, and forgiveness toward the CEO.

7.3.1.2 Assessment of the observed micro-level effects

In the following, this section reveals the effects of many-to-one communication at each company and compares the findings across the cases. The analysis is based on evidence from the interviews as well as on platform traffic. The analysis further integrates the two quantitative measures CEO authenticity⁴¹ and CEO transparency⁴² that both reveal significant differences among the cases. Gardner and colleagues (2005) propose that both measures give insights in the employees' perceptions of CEO authenticity. Table 7-9 outlines the qualitative and quantitative evidence for the comparison and assessment of the effects.

Table 7-9: Comparison of micro-level effects

Company	1.) CEO authenticity	2.) Trustworthiness of CEO	3.) Appreciation by CEO	Further measures	Assessment ^A
X	<p>"It was wonderfully honest, authentic, and direct." (Informant X3)</p> <p>"I enjoyed the approach of the CEO [...]. This guy is not perfect, he also got weaknesses and he was not afraid to show these in the platform. He was authentic." (Informant X4)</p> <p>"It is interesting to get further information about the company." (Informant X8)</p> <p>"[Before] there were really few communications coming from Bill. So this is a way to get closer to him." (Informant X7)</p> <p>He got visible on my level. I had the chance to get my personal impression of him. [Without the platform] he would be too far away." (Informant X4)</p>	<p>"I am the CEO, I take care about you." This was the message. He is there, he takes care." (Informant X6)</p> <p>"He brought in personality that made him trustful." (Informant X4)</p> <p>"By the development of the questions you can see that the communication with the CEO became more open." (Informant X3)</p> <p>"A question that came up was from an employee [of country X] who complained that they supply [product] but they never got to see it live. The answer from the CEO was: "We cannot promise when – but I will send it to you" – and it came!" (Informant X3)</p>	<p>"It is something different whether you get just an official letter from the communication department [or an answer of the CEO]. This platform was charming and more special." (Informant X4)</p> <p>"He takes the time to answer questions on eye-level and this very honesty, this [shows his] appreciation for us." (Informant X10)</p> <p>"I knew there is somebody in top-management who gave me an answer. And – which is even more important – thought about what I live. important – thought about what I live." (Informant X9)</p>	<p>Authenticity^B 3.86*</p> <p>Transparency^C 3.57*</p>	●●●●○
Y	<p>"By the manner the CEO behaved we were not the opinion that he would push the topic dialogue orientated culture by himself."</p>	<p>"Most people recognized that [the CEO] did not write the statements by himself. The consequence is that people lose their trust. Then it ends"</p>	<p>"I think there is a match between the unwillingness of the CEO to deal with employees and the fact that he gets a nice tool where he"</p>	<p>Authenticity^B 2.00**</p>	●○○○○

⁴¹ See appendix B.2.1, question 14

⁴² See appendix B.2.1, question 2

<p>(Informant Y3)</p> <p><i>“When you launch such a platform the CEO has to be authentic [...] but when I can see in the answers that the CEO did not write these personally - this is not authentic.”</i> (Informant Y5)</p> <p><i>“I think there is a match between the unwillingness of the CEO to deal with employees and the fact that he gets a nice tool where he organizes two people from corporate communication [to interact with employees]. He does not want to deal with the tool himself.”</i> (Informant Y9)</p>	<p><i>up being a platform to get rid of distress.”</i> (Informant Y5)</p> <p><i>“Even if something important came up the answers were of such a general matter. [...] I cannot remember that anything changed with the platform.”</i> (Informant Y7)</p>	<p><i>organizes two people from the corporate communication [to interact with employees]. He does not want to deal with the tool himself.”</i> (Informant Y9)</p> <p><i>“It did not have any impact. Neither it showed [the CEO] from a different perspective, nor could it realize the desires or needs of the employees.”</i> (Informant Y5)</p>	<p>Trans- parency^C 2.50*</p>
<p>Z</p> <p><i>“[The board] does not fully stand behind the platform. I heard for many older colleagues that it is for sake of doing things, as usually at Company Z.”</i> (Informant Z4)</p> <p><i>“It is not really authentic when you get softened and politically correct statements.”</i> (Informant Z8)</p>	<p><i>“I can imagine that it is difficult to find an answer for critical, strategic, or political questions in the platform. often [the CEO] does not answer a public answer is definitely difficult. the questions personally.”</i> (Informant Z7)</p> <p><i>But the person that asks the question might say “ok, this does not help me at all – I can skip this!”.”</i> (Informant Z6)</p>	<p><i>“I get my information through other channels and I know that [the CEO] does not answer the questions personally.”</i> (Informant Z7)</p>	<p>Authen- ticity^B 3.25*</p> <p>Trans- parency^C 3.25*</p> <p>●○○○○</p>

** Significant differences between all three companies at $p < 0.1$; * Significant difference between two companies at $p < 0.1$

^A Rating conducted by the author on the basis of qualitative statements from the interviews.

^B (5 point Likert-scale, 1 item, closed question by author) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.69$) and Company Y ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.07$); $t(13) = 3.927$, $p = 0.001$. ii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.69$) and Company Z ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.96$); $t(9) = 1.227$, $p = 0.13$. iii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.07$) and Company Z ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.96$); $t(10) = -1.969$, $p = 0.04$.

^C (5 point Likert-scale, 1 item, closed question by author) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.79$) and Company Y ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.93$); $t(13) = 2.395$, $p = 0.016$. ii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.79$) and Company Z ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.79$); $t(10) = 0.61$, $p = 0.28$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.93$) and Company Z ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.79$); $t(10) = -1.309$, $p = 0.11$.

The case analysis revealed that the CEO at Company X could trigger the employees' perceptions of authenticity by using many-to-one communication. Basically, all informants revealed directly or at least indirectly that his behavior in the platform was authentic. Many informants directly stated that the CEO was “*honest, authentic, and direct*” in the platform. The quantitative data underline this finding. The employees emphasized that they perceived the CEO as being authentic in the platform ($M = 3.86$) and that many-to-one communication enhanced transparency of the CEO ($M = 3.57$). The informants especially appreciated the openness of the CEO: “*This guy has is not perfect, he also has weaknesses and he was not afraid to show these in the platform. He was authentic.*” (Informant X4). Due to the enhanced transparency of the CEO the employees could directly experience the CEO's behavior. “*He was visible on my level. I had the chance to get my personal impression of him. [Without the platform] he would be too far away.*” (Informant X4). For the employees, the enhanced transparency of the CEO in the platform was authentic and in accordance with the CEO's true self. At Company Y and Company Z the evidence does not reveal any effects of many-to-one communication on the employee's perceptions CEO

authenticity. Quantitative data indicates that the CEO at Company Y was perceived as being unauthentic and nontransparent in the platform (M = 2.00; M = 2.50). At Company Z the measures were not as negative as at Company Y, however, data reveals that the platform could only marginally affect the employees' perceptions of CEO authenticity and transparency (M = 3.25; M = 3.25). At Company Y nearly all informants mentioned that the many-to-one communication process of the CEO was not authentic. Most employees were of the opinion that the CEO did not even personally participate in the platform. *"When you launch such a platform the CEO has to be authentic [...] but when I can see in the answers that the CEO did not write them personally - this is not authentic."* (Informant Y5). For other employees, the CEO even showed that he is unwilling to deal with employees. *"There is a match between the unwillingness of the CEO to deal with employees and the fact that he gets a nice tool where he organizes two people from corporate communication [to interact with employees]. He does not want to deal with the tool himself."* (Informant Y9). At Company Z the perceptions of CEO authenticity in the platform were not as negative as in Company Y, but they were still weak. The appearance of the CEO in the platform was *"not really authentic"* as the informants claimed, but the answers were *"softened and politically correct statements."* (Informant Z8). These arguments are in line with Gardner and colleagues (2005) and Eagly (2005) who stated that perceptions of authenticity only emerge by open and transparent behavior. CEO authenticity in the platform may therefore only emerge when the CEO behaves in accordance to the original idea of the platform which is direct interaction between CEO and employees. The cases analysis further revealed that the CEO at Company X was perceived as being trustworthy. Some informants stated that for them, the key message of the CEO in the platform was that *"he is there, he takes care."* (Informant X6). Some mentioned that the questions became more and more open, which underlines the growing amount of trust towards the CEO among the employees. According to Mayer (1995), trust emerges when leaders show empathy in relationships as well as reliability. The following example illustrates why the CEO at Company X was perceived as being trustful. It outlines a question that appeared in the platform and the subsequent answer of the CEO.

"Dear Bill, I wanted to know when it would be possible to see the [product X] coming to [country X]. A lot of people have been working on this project for years and have not been able to see the final product. I am sure you understand how important is to encourage people to see what they made and they perhaps

jump from the back of the door if they are allowed in.” (Question from the platform)

“Dear John, I fully understand that those of you who worked so hard to make [product X] become reality are longing to see the product of your efforts up-close. [Product X] is indeed a crowd pleaser. [It is] heavily tied up in [...] test programs, it is hard to pinpoint an exact time for such a visit right now. I promise to you, however, that we will see the [product X] visiting [country X] this year. You, along with all our colleagues in [country X], will be informed by our internal communication department once this visit is scheduled. Best regards Bill.” (CEO answer in the platform)

In the perception of the employees, the CEO acted very empathically by mentioning that he understands their desire to see [product X] live. The answer was not just a saying. The CEO really held to his promise and sent [product X] in the same year to [country X]. Therefore, he also acted reliably, which is another key driver of trust (Mayer, 1995). At Company Y and Z the CEO could not enhance trustworthiness by communicating in the platform. At Company Y the informants complained for instance about the lack of personal commitment of the CEO in the platform. The answers were perceived as very broad and generic and did therefore not enhance openness or concern for his employees. Moreover, the informants stated that nothing at all changed with the platform. *“The consequence is that people lose their trust. Then it ends up being a platform to get rid of distress.”* (Informant Y5). The lack of trustworthiness of the CEO was consequently one reason for the array of negative statements in the platform. At Company Z, the employees did not directly mention any trust or mistrust toward their CEO in the interviews. However, evidence indicates that the appearance of the CEO in the platform did not improve the employees’ perceptions of CEO trustworthiness. The answers of the CEO were perceived as being too abstract and too political. *“I can imagine that it is difficult to find an answer for critical, strategic, or political questions in the platform. A public answer is definitely difficult. But the person that asks the question might say “OK, this does not help me at all – I can skip this!””* (Informant Z6). Moreover, data did not reveal evidence for CEO behavior that triggered CEO trustworthiness such as openness, competence, or reliability. *“The insights were not surprising. When you look at our traffic – this is not enough.”* (Informant Z2).

Lastly, the exploration process revealed that many-to-one communication affected the employees' perceptions of appreciation by the CEO. Again, this effect only emerged at Company X. Many informants directly stated that they feel appreciated by communicating with the CEO in the platform. *"He takes the time to answer questions on eye-level and this very honesty, this [shows his] appreciation for us."* (Informant X10). The employees felt appreciated by discussing their issues on eye-level with the CEO, because this underlined that he cares for them. *"I knew there is somebody in top management who gave me an answer. And – which is even more important – thought about what I wrote."* (Informant X9). This is in line with Russell (2001), who stated that listening and showing concerns for others demonstrates appreciation for them. At Company Y and Company Z, data did not reveal any evidence that the employees felt appreciated. At Company Y, the dialogue did not even reveal that the CEO was actually caring and listening. *"Neither it showed [the CEO] from a different perspective, nor could it realize the desires or needs of the employees."* (Informant Y5). At Company Z, the analysis revealed that the CEO was perceived as a caring leader who sought a direct dialogue with his employee even without the platform (see section 4.3). According to the informants, he did not reveal any further appreciation for them in the platform. *"I get my information through other channels and I know that [the CEO] does not answer the questions personally."* (Informant Z7).

The exploration of the cases revealed that solely at Company X many-to-one communication had effects on the employees' perceptions of their CEO. The analysis showed that the CEO was perceived as being authentic and trustful as well as that the employees felt appreciated by the dialogue with the CEO. The overall effects on the micro-level of analysis were therefore rated with four points. At Company Y and Z the analysis could not reveal effects that were triggered by many-to-one communication. Therefore, both were rated with one point.

7.3.2 Effects on macro-level of analysis

The analysis of the micro-level effects outlined that many-to-one communication positively affected the employees' perceptions of their CEO – at least at Company X. However, the exploration of the cases revealed that the scope of the platform was not only limited to the CEO/employee dyad. By participating in the platform (e.g., via questions, comments, or rating) the employees did not only exchange information with the CEO (vertical communication), but also with other employees that took part in the communication process (horizontal communication). Therefore, many-to-one communication might also have triggered effects on the employees' perceptions of the

whole organization. This section aims to shed light into these effects at the macro-level of analysis.

7.3.2.1 Introduction of the effects at the macro-level

The exploration process of the cases revealed various effects of many-to-one communication at the macro-level of analysis. In order to structure the findings coherently, the author iteratively integrated literature and consequently worked out three main dimensions that were affected by many-to-one communication: 1.) organizational communication, 2.) organizational climate, and 3.) organizational proximity. This section introduces each dimension before it reveals evidence and compares the findings across the cases. Table 7-10 outlines literature on the three dimensions. It draws definitions and reveals several influencing factors of the respective effects.

Table 7-10: Introduction of macro-level effects

Dimension	Definition	Influencing factors
1.) Organizational communication	“Organizational communication comprises “the sending and receiving of messages among interrelated individuals within a particular environment or setting to achieve individual and common goals.”” (Hahn, et al., 1984)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in- and creation of communication between organizational members (Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004). • Dissemination of organizational goals (Jones, et al., 2004).
2.) Organizational climate	“Organizational climate describes how organizational members experience their organization [...] climate perceptions focus on the processes, practices, and behaviors which are rewarded and supported in an organization.” (Patterson, et al., 2004, p. 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widely sharing information across the organization (Patterson, et al., 2004). • Involving members in the future of the organization (Patterson, et al., 2004). • Integration of departments (Patterson, et al., 2004).
3.) Organizational proximity	“Organizational proximity is the proximity between employees [...] who identify with each other as a result of belonging to the same firm and of their knowledge of firm specific routines.” (Knoben & Oerlemans, 2006, p. 75)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural features such as structural equivalence of actors (Torre & Rallet, 2005). • Characteristics of relationships such as the ability to interact (Knoben & Oerlemans, 2006).

Organizational communication is well explored in the organizational research. It describes the overall communication processes in organizations. The literature reveals that the intensity of organizational communication is linked to employees’ satisfaction with and their participation in organizations, and it is subsequently the core to creating

effective organizations (Hahn, et al., 2011). Scholars further outline that factors such as e.g., a rich communication flow between the organizational members, or the dissemination of the organizational goals, positively influence organizational communication.

Organizational climate is the second dimension that may be affected by many-to-one communication. It describes the employees' experiences of the organizational processes and behavior. In the literature perceptions of organizational climate are associated with various positive outcomes such as, e.g., job satisfaction, employee performance, and even organizational performance (Patterson, et al., 2004, p. 5). There exist various influencing factors for organizational climate. Some of these were already outlined such as e.g., the level of involvement, welfare, goal clarity, or pressure (Patterson, et al., 2004). For the subsequent case exploration two further factors are relevant; the level of information sharing as well as the integration of departments.

The third dimension that may be affected by many-to-one communication is organizational proximity. Organizational proximity describes the perceptions of proximity between the members of an organization. According to the research literature organizational proximity leads to various positive outcomes in organizations such as inter-organizational collaboration, information and knowledge, or innovation (Knoben & Oerlemans, 2006, p. 75). Organizational proximity can be triggered by structural features such as, e.g., the equivalence of the employees, and relational features such as, e.g., the ability of the employees to interact.

7.3.2.2 Assessment of the observed macro-level effects

This section explores and compares the macro-level effects of many-to-one communication across the cases. The analysis is based on evidence from the informants, from platform traffic, and from the literature. The analysis integrates the quantitative measure “important issues”⁴³. This outlines whether “the employees feel better informed about important organizational issues by applying the platform”. Table 7-11 outlines the full evidence of the cross-case comparison and the assessment of the macro-level effects.

⁴³ See appendix B.2.1, question 4

Table 7-11: Comparison of macro-level effects

Com-pany	1.) Organizational communication	2.) Organizational climate	3.) Organizational proximity	Further measure	Assess-ment ^A
X	<p>“There is a large amount of people that come up with serious suggestions or that criticize things – the tool is perfect for this.” (Informant X9)</p> <p>“I think it shortens the communication streams. It makes them a lot quicker. And I am sure changes are being brought up by actually having the tool there. I would say it is a good tool to have.” (Informant X5)</p> <p>“My impression is that communication became more open. [...] But also that management tries to discuss open with employees. [...] Now, you can ask the CEO questions without being afraid to suffer of the consequences.” (Informant X10)</p> <p>“A chance to uncover points that would not have appeared otherwise.” (Informant X1)</p>	<p>“Going through [the platform] you actually find out who you could get hold of to resolve a problem. And more often not the problem was raised, it was a solution to a perceived problem that we had.” (Informant X5)</p> <p>“It was positive for the organizational climate. Especially because of the direct and open statements that appeared.” (Informant X10)</p> <p>“The platform is established in a positive sense. [...] People know it and – this is my opinion – think positive about it.” (Informant X3)</p> <p>“It gives much more insight than a survey or other initiatives. [...] It gives a very good insight in the soul of the company.” (Informant X10)</p>	<p>“Those who used it felt they had the means of getting questions to the top. From having years of having questions that were always blocked or swapped under the carpet.” (Informant X5)</p> <p>“I have colleagues in England, in Germany and in Spain, but I only have technical contact. [...] It is difficult to speak with them about general conditions of work. And now [with the platform] I am able to understand some of their problems.” (Informant X8)</p> <p>“In a big organization you become a barcode or just a number that is controlled by human resource department. But this tool gave people a sense of belonging, I think.” (Informant X5)</p> <p>“There were not just questions directed to [the CEO]. There were also comments that were answering other comments. I think this effect was much stronger than expected, the internal communication that took place.” (Informant X6)</p>	Important issues ^B 3.86**	●●●●○
Y	<p>“Much ado about nothing. [...] I do not post any question because the answers are standardized.” (Informant Y4)</p> <p>“I do not know anybody who took the platform seriously. The answers were broad we felt not been taken serious. [...] We had the feeling to talk to a wall.” (Informant Y9)</p>	<p>“I think it is interesting to get to know the atmosphere of the organization. Otherwise I would not get such insights. Therefore the platform was good.” (Informant Y5)</p>	<p>“There were also some positive aspects. On one post I received mails from people that thought about this topic as well and that told me that they liked what I wrote. I saw that I am not alone.” (Informant Y10)</p>	Important issues ^B 2.38*	●●○○○
Z	<p>“The impact was low. [...] It brings not much additional benefits. There was resignation, because the answers were too meaningless.” (Informant Z6)</p> <p>“Last September was the last time I checked the platform. I do not remember any topic; the depth of information was low.” (Informant Z7)</p>	<p>“The publicity of the platform is not large enough. [...] I guess not even one out of ten employees uses the platform. Without a certain amount of users it cannot develop.” (Informant Z4)</p>	<p>“From time to time I checked the platform to see questions and answers. Somehow it helps me to understand the concerns and situations from other locations from their questions.” (Informant Z9)</p>	Important issues ^B 2.00*	●○○○○

** Significant differences between all three companies at $p < 0.1$; * Significant difference between two companies at $p < 0.1$

^A Rating conducted by the author on the basis of qualitative statements from the interviews.

^B (5 point Likert-scale, 1 item, closed question by author) Independent samples t-test: i.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.07$) and Company Y ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.06$); $t(13) = 2.268$, $p = 0.1$. ii.) Significant difference in the mean ratings for Company X ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.07$) and Company Z ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.00$); $t(10) = 3.830$, $p = 0.002$. iii.) No significant difference in the mean ratings for Company Y ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.06$) and Company Z ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.00$); $t(11) = 0.777$, $p = 0.226$.

At Company X, the informants underlined that many-to-one communication positively influenced organizational communication. They stated that there was generally high traffic in the platform with a broad array of topics and statements. According to the employees, the vertical communication stream (CEO/employees) worked very well: *“My impression is that communication became more open. [...] But also that management tries to discuss things openly with employees”* (Informant X10). However, they further mentioned that the horizontal communication stream (employee/employees) was equally fruitful because it revealed further insights: *“The scope of questions that appear is large. Things you never heard of [...]. This is very informative. Even through the comment function. [...] There developed traverse dialogues even without the question being voted up or the CEO giving his statement.”* (Informant X4). The quantitative measure supports the findings. The informants underlined that they feel better informed about important organizational issues at Company X ($M = 3.86$). On the contrary to Company X, the informants at Company Y ($M = 2.38$) and Company Z ($M = 2.00$) did not feel better informed about important organizational issues. The means significantly differ from each other. The interviews underline the quantitative findings. Neither at Company Y not at Company Z did many-to-one communication seem to positively influence organizational communication. At Company Y most informants stated that they did not use the platform anymore after a while, because it did not reveal insights. For them, the answers of the CEO were meaningless and so was the online dialogue. *“I did not have the feeling that a lot happened. I spoke with many colleagues about the platform and all of us were the opinion [...] that it is not worth reading. [...] The opinion about the platform became worse.”* (Informant Y8). Some informants also revealed that they became frustrated and therefore did not take the platform and its discussions for serious any more. At Company Z, the employees revealed that the communication process via the platform did not affect organizational communication at all. *“The impact was low. [...] It brings not much additional benefits. There was resignation, because the answers were too meaningless.”* (Informant Z6). The low impact of the platform is actually not surprising given the low traffic of the platform. Consequently, the platform was not used at all any more toward the end. *“Last September was the last time I checked the platform [...] I do not remember any topic, the depth of information was low.”* (Informant Z7).

Next, the interviews revealed that many-to-one communication had effects on organizational climate at Company X. Some informants stated that the openness in the platform and the direct information flow positively influenced the organizational

climate. For them the platform “*gives very good insight in the soul of the company*” (Informant X10). One of the employees revealed insightful evidence for the effects of the platform on the integration of departments. The informant stated that he once posted a question on the platform that dealt with issues of the applicability of software tools at Company X. Surprisingly, several employees commented on the post and started to discuss the problem of the software tools. They further began to exchange mails about the topic and even met personally after a couple of weeks to discuss the issue. Consequently, they decided to write a letter to the Chief Information Officer (CIO) of Company X, where they listed the issues and gave various suggestions. In the letter they referred to the answer of the CEO in the platform that read as follows: “*We are trying to change IT, but I am asking you to be patient. I further ask you to give your best to help us.*” (Informant X10). Once the CIO received the letter, he called them immediately and suggested that they meet. After they met several times the CIO was so enthusiastic about their ideas that they jointly launched a pilot program on software tools. This successful example shows that platform not only affected the employees’ perceptions of climate but also triggered an actual organizational initiative. At Company Y the effects on organizational climate were just marginal. The only positive aspect the informants revealed was that they got certain insights on the organizational atmosphere that they would not have without the platform. At Company Z there is no evidence for any effect of the platform on organizational climate. “*The publicity of the platform is not large enough. [...] I guess not even one out of ten employees uses the platform. Without a certain amount of users it cannot develop.*” (Informant Z4). Due to the lack of usage/users in the platform it did not seem to trigger any effect on macro-levels of analysis.

The exploration of Company X further revealed that many-to-one communication also affected organizational proximity. Torre and Rallet (2005) outlined that organizational proximity is influenced by structural as well as relational features among the actors. The informants provided evidence that the platform affected both structural and relational features at Company X. One informant stated, for instance, that they finally had “*the means of getting questions to the top. From having years of having questions that were always blocked or swapped under the carpet.*” (Informant X5). The informants further stated that the platform gave the employees the feeling that they are more than a barcode; it gave them an actual sense of belonging. The platform may therefore have positively influenced the structural equivalence of the members in the organizations, because each employee had a chance to bypass information or issues directly and to be “*on eye-level*” (Informant X10) with the top management. Many-to-

one communication also affected the employees' ability to interact with each other. Various informants revealed that by communicating in the platform they get fruitful information about colleagues and are therefore able to better understand them. *"I have colleagues in England, in Germany, and in Spain, but I only have technical contact. [...] It is difficult to speak with them about general conditions of work. And [with the platform] I am able to understand some of their problems."* (Informant X8). At Company Y, most informants revealed that the platform affected proximity in the organization only marginally. However, some employees also revealed success stories. One of the informants mentioned, for instance, that he once posted a question in the platform that dealt with the influence of green energy at Company Y. Even though the post did not lead to obvious changes at Company Y it had positive effects for the employee: *"I received mails from people that thought about this topic as well and that told me that they liked what I wrote. I saw that I am not alone."* (Informant Y10). Thus, also at Company Y the platform now and then increased interaction between employees and may have therefore triggered aspects such as, e.g., identification with each other and belonging. At Company Z nearly all informants stated that they appreciated the idea of the platform but they just used the platform sporadically. Moreover, the traffic in the platform was so low that the amount of information the users got from their colleagues was in fact zero. Evidence does therefore not reveal effects of many-to-one communication on organizational proximity at Company Y. The exploration of the cases indicates that at Company X, many-to-one communication had various effects at the macro-level of analysis. Evidence revealed that it positively triggered communication culture, organizational climate, and organizational proximity. The overall effects were consequently rated with four points. At Company Y, the many-to-one communication could establish at least a rather steady flow of traffic and may therefore have triggered organizational proximity to some extent. However, the exploration did not reveal major organizational effects. The effects were therefore rated with two points. At Company Z, the analysis could not reveal any macro-level effects that were triggered by the many-to-one communication process. The effects were consequently rated with one point.

PART C: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

8 Discussion

The main purpose of this dissertation is to increase theoretical and managerial understandings of the direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees in organizations. This chapter addresses the research purpose by outlining the conceptual framework that is derived from the case exploration and by drawing success factors for many-to-one communication in organizations.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins with summarizing the overall findings of the cross-case exploration in chapter 7. These findings address RQ2.2 of this dissertation and provide the basis for the conceptual framework and the success factors. The conceptual framework draws and explains the linkages of the behavior of the CEO in many-to-one communication, employees' perceptions of distance to the CEO, and effects at the micro- and macro-level of analysis. The framework contributes to the theoretical understanding of the research phenomenon and addresses RQ2.1 of this dissertation. Based on the rich findings of the cross-case comparison and the explanations of the conceptual framework the author consequently develops success factors for the application of many-to-one communication in organizations. This part addresses RQ2.3.

8.1 Summary of the cross-case exploration

This section summarizes the findings of the cross-case exploration. The analysis was divided into three parts that were structured as follows. In order to get coherent insights of the respective case, the author first investigated and assessed the performance of the many-to-one platform at each company and outlined the employees' perceptions of their CEO and their organization. Then, the author examined the causes for the differences in platform performance by analyzing the CEO's behavior in the many-to-one communication. Lastly, the author explored the overall effects of the many-to-one communication in each organization.

The overall findings of the cross-case exploration are presented in Table 8-1. It juxtaposes the evaluations of the dimensions that were applied in the cross-case analysis.

Table 8-1: Findings of the cross-case comparison

Com- pany	Part 1: Status quo of employee perceptions and assessment	Part 2: Influence of CEO behavior in many-to-one communication on objective distances and construal level	Part 3: Effects of many-to-one communication on multiple levels
X			
	1. Platform¹: High performance ●●●●○	2.1 Reduction of objective distances: ●●●●○	3.1 Micro-level effects: ●●●●○
	1.1 CEO: ●●●●○	2.2 Trigger of low level construals: ●●●●○	3.2 Macro-level effects: ●●●●○
	1.2 Organization: ●●●●○		
Y			
	1. Platform¹: Low performance ●●○○○	2.1 Reduction of objective distances: ●○○○○	3.1 Micro-level effects: ●○○○○
	1.1 CEO: ●●○○○	2.2 Trigger of low level construals: ●○○○○	3.2 Macro-level effects: ●●○○○
	1.2 Organization: ●●○○○		
Z			
	1. Platform¹: Low performance ●○○○○	2.1 Reduction of objective distances: ●○○○○	3.1 Micro-level effects: ●○○○○
	1.1 CEO: ●●●●●	2.2 Trigger of low level construals: ●○○○○	3.2 Macro-level effects: ●○○○○
	1.2 Organization: ●●●●○		

¹Many-to-one communication platform

Part 1: Status-quo of employee perceptions and assessment

Part 1 assessed the performance of many-to-one communication and compared the employees' perceptions of key influencing factors (the CEO and the organization) across the cases (see section 7.1). The assessment of the many-to-one communication process revealed that its performance – measured iteratively by quantitative and qualitative evidence – differed highly across the three organizations (see Table 8-1). At Company X, the many-to-one communication process was perceived very well and applied frequently. On the contrary, in Company Y and in Company Z, the analysis showed that the many-to-one communication platform was not used as intensively (especially in Company Z) and that most informants considered its implementation as a failure. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the employees' perceptions of their CEO and their organization differed highly across the cases. The evidence showed that both factors, the CEO and the organization, were perceived highly positive at Company Z (where the platform performed poorly), while at Company Y (where the platform also performed poorly) the CEO was perceived negatively and so was the organization. Moreover, the analysis revealed that both influencing factors seemed

even more positive at Company Z than at Company X (where the platform performed well). The dissertation subsequently explored the behavior of the CEO in the platform to find out whether it gives answers on the drivers of many-to-one communication performance.

Part 2: Influence of CEO behavior in many-to-one communication on objective distances and construal level

Part 2 investigated the CEOs behavior in many-to-one communication. It applied constructs of construal level theory to explore the connection between the behavior of the CEO in many-to-one communication and the implications of its usage on distance and construal level. Therefore, it juxtaposed the components of the CLT across the cases and explored their similarities and differences. The aim was to find out whether the CEO at Company X – where many-to-one communication performed well – behaved in a different manner compared to the other CEOs.

The findings of the cross-case exploration revealed that the CEO at Company X altered various objective distances and triggered low level construals in the employees' minds (see section 7-2). As opposed to the CEOs at Company Y and Z, the CEO at Company X altered three objective distances to employees: 1.) temporal distance, 2.) social distance, and 3.) hypothetical distance. 1.) The CEO altered temporal distance by reducing the time gap to the employees. Thus, compared to the situation before the implementation of the platform, the employees now experienced the CEO more often and regularly. Compared to the Companies Y and Z, the CEO at Company X participated more frequently in many-to-one communication and was more interactive. 2.) The CEO at Company X further addressed social distance by revealing social information in the platform. The employees got to know the CEO personally and on eye-level in the platform, which was perceived very positively. On the contrary, in Companies Y and Z the CEOs did not reveal any social information. 3.) The CEO at Company X further moderately triggered hypothetical distance. Hypothetical distance represents the employees' chance to experience the CEO and to gain relevant insights. At Company X the influence of many-to-one communication on hypothetical distance was assessed only as moderate because there was a large fraction of messages that were not answered by the CEO. On the contrary, in Companies Y and Z, the CEOs answered nearly all questions. However, this was mainly because in the latter the traffic was much lower and nearly all questions were rated among the top three⁴⁴. In particular, the informants at Company Y and Z claimed that the traffic did

⁴⁴ See chapter 4 for more information on the "rules" of many-to-one communication

not reveal much relevant insights. The impact of many-to-one communication at Company Y and Company Z on hypothetical distance was thus even lower than at Company X.

The exploration of the cases further revealed that the CEO at Company X not only influenced psychological distance by decreasing various objective distances, but he also directly influenced the employees' construal level (see section 7.2). The analysis showed that the CEO at Company X applied a higher level of 1.) granularity, 2.) personality, 3.) visibility, and 4.) emotions in his statement compared to the CEOs at the Companies Y and Z. An iterative literature analysis revealed that these factors are linked to lower level construals and psychological distance. 1.) The CEO at Company X communicated more concrete and more detailed information in many-to-one communication than the CEOs at Companies Y and Z. In line with theory, granularity triggers low level construals of the CEO. 2.) The CEO at Company X further appeared more personal in the platform by using more informal language and personal expressions. Literature reveals that personal/informal information in statements contextualizes the CEO and therefore triggers low level construals in the employees' minds. 3.) The CEO at Company X uploaded various videos on the platform. Videos can enhance the visibility of the CEO and further trigger low level construals. 4.) As opposed to the CEOs at Company Y and Z, the CEO at Company X also more often used affective statements in the platform and therefore triggered low construal levels in mind of the employees.

Hence, the analysis in part 2 revealed that – opposed to Companies Y and Z – the CEO at Company X triggered psychological proximity and low level construals in the employees' minds with his behavior.

Part 3: Effects of many-to-one communication at multiple levels

Part 3 explored the effects of many-to-one communication across the cases. Based on an iterative exploration process it revealed that various effects could be observed at the micro- as well as the macro-level of analysis. These effects were juxtaposed across the cases in order to identify whether these could only be observed at the high performing case or also at the low performing cases. Furthermore, research literature was integrated to ensure the linkage of these effects to CLT.

The analysis revealed three effects at the micro-level of analysis that could be observed at Company X, but not at Company Y and Z (see section 7-3): 1.) CEO authenticity, 2.) CEO trustworthiness, and 3.) appreciation by the CEO. These effects are explained in the following. 1.) The CEO at Company X gained authenticity by

applying many-to-one communication. In line with previous research findings, authenticity was triggered by the openness and directness of the CEO in the platform that also decreased the construal level of the CEO in the employees' minds. By communicating with the employees, the CEO at Company X could further transparently convey his values and showed that he promotes the same interests as the followers (Gardner, et al., 2005). 2.) Moreover, evidence from the cross case analysis showed that the CEO gained trust among the employees by behaving in an open, reliable, and empathetic manner. This is in line with the findings of Hansen and Wänke (2010) who conclude that trust needs certain proximity. 3.) Finally, the analysis of the micro-level effects drew that the employees felt appreciated by their CEO. This appreciation arose because the CEOs showed concerns for the employees through direct communication and gave them the feeling of being special (Russell, 2001).

The exploration process across the cases further revealed that there were effects at the macro-level of analysis that were triggered by many-to-one communication at Company X, but not at Companies Y and Z (see section 7-3). Evidence showed that many-to-one communication positively affected 1.) organizational communication, 2.) organizational climate, and 3.) organizational proximity. 1.) In the platform at Company X, there was a high level of communication frequency between the CEO and the employees (vertical) but also between the employees (horizontal). For the employees, both communication streams were very informative and most users were of the opinion that they were better involved in the organization and better informed about its issues than before. 2.) Evidence further shows that many-to-one communication influenced organizational climate at Company X by increasing the degree of communication openness within the organization. It triggered the amount of information that was shared across the organizational members by bringing together people from different departments and hierarchies. 3.) Many-to-one communication also triggered organizational proximity at Company X. The analysis outlined that the communication process enhanced the structural equivalence of the employees and the top management by communicating on eye-level. Furthermore, the exploration revealed that many-to-one communication enhanced the relationships among the employees in the organization as it enabled interaction across traditional borders (e.g., international borders, hierarchical borders).

8.2 Theoretical contribution: Conceptual framework that is derived from the cross-case exploration

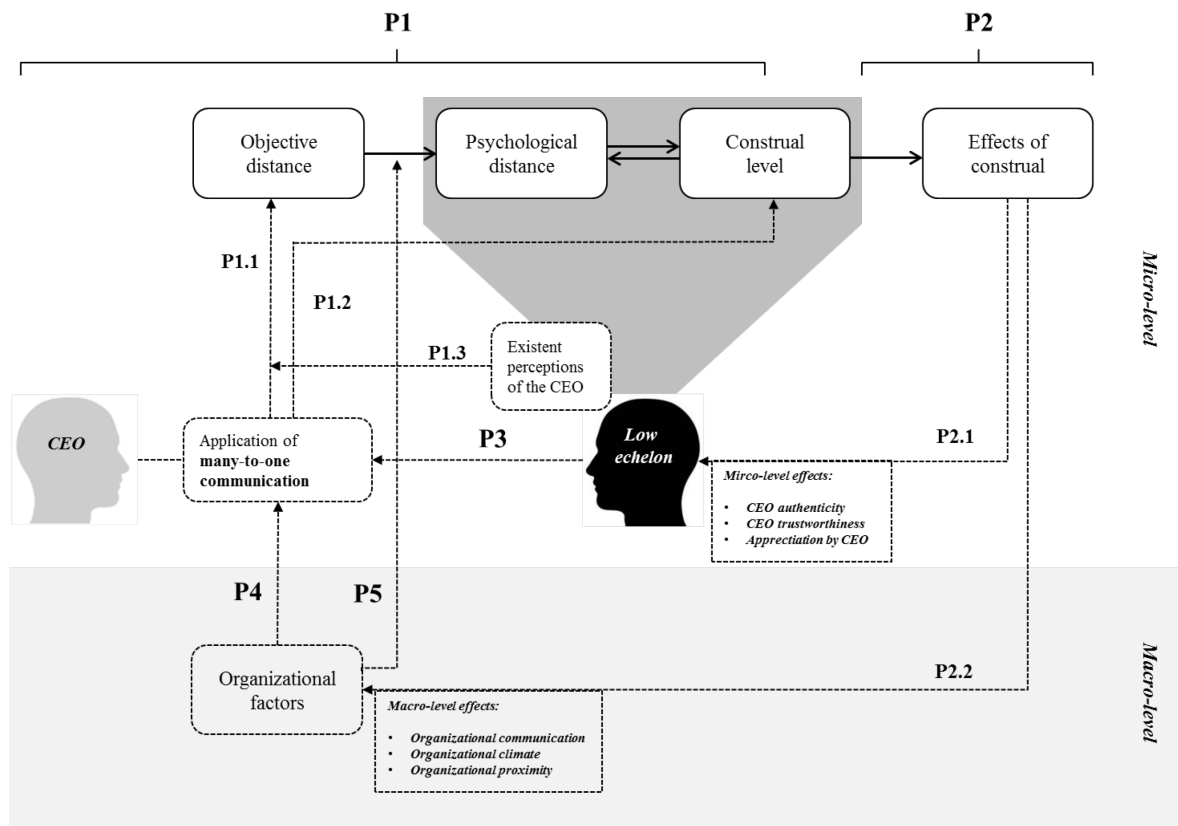
This section discusses the conceptual framework that is derived from the cross-case exploration before it draws its contributions for academia. The framework provides coherent insights on the research phenomenon by explaining the influence of CEO behavior in many-to-one communication on employees' perceptions of distance, by linking this influence to effects in organizations, and by drawing further influencing factors.

Discussion of the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is developed on the basis of the theoretical lens that was applied throughout the exploration process to guide the analysis. The lens represents a “preliminary stage of theorizing” and has been iteratively developed in the exploration process by integrating findings from data and theory. A key component of the theoretical lens is construal level theory (CLT). CLT links objective dimensions of distance with perceptions of distance and explains cognitive and behavioral effects on perceivers (see section 5).

Figure 8-1 illustrates the conceptual framework that was derived from the cross-case exploration. In the following its components and its proposed linkages (P1-P5) are explained in detail.

Figure 8-1: *Conceptualization of many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees based on CLT*



Note: Own figure based on Wilson and colleagues (2012).

At the heart of the framework stands the many-to-one communication process between CEOs and employees (left box in the middle of the framework). The author starts explaining the framework by outlining proposition 1. P1 states that by communicating with employees in the many-to-one communication platform, CEOs can reduce various objective distances and trigger low level construals.

Proposition 1: *By applying many-to-one communication in organizations, CEOs can reduce various objective distances and trigger low level construals.*

This proposition grounds in literature of Wilson and colleagues (2008) who underline that there is a linkage between communication in virtual teams and the psychological distance among the team members. Based on the findings of the cross-case exploration, the framework proposes that there are two distinct paths for CEOs to reduce psychological distance in mind of the employees. First, by reducing objective

distances (P1.1), second, by triggering low level construals (P1.2). Both paths are integrated in the framework with separate propositions.

The cross-case exploration revealed that CEOs can reduce various objective distances (temporal-, social-, and hypothetical distance) to their employees by communicating via many-to-one communication.

Proposition 1.1: *CEOs can reduce temporal-, social-, and hypothetical distances to their employees by applying many-to-one communication. The reduction of these distances reduces psychological distance which subsequently triggers lower level construals.*

Section 7.2 profoundly revealed how the CEO at Company X reduced temporal distance, social distance, and hypothetical distance to the employees. CLT draws that all of these objective distances have a common meaning, which is psychological distance. Moreover, various scholars revealed that the reduction of psychological distance towards a target triggers lower level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2010) (see section 5). The reduction of these objective distances therefore triggers low level construals in the employees' minds by reducing psychological distance.

The cross-case exploration next revealed that the CEO at Company X directly triggered low level construals in mind of the employees by applying a high level of granularity, personality, visibility, and emotions in his statements.

Proposition 1.2: *CEOs can directly trigger low level construals in the minds of their employees by applying a high level of granularity, personality, visibility, and emotions in many-to-one communication.*

The logic of this proposition is in line with many experimental studies in the field of CLT that use primes such as pictures instead of words (Amit and colleagues, 2009), or informal- versus formal language (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008) to directly trigger low level construals (see section 5.1).

The cross-case exploration further indicates that the existent perceptions of CEOs influence the degree to which the objective distances can be altered in many-to-one communication.

Proposition 1.3: *Existent perceptions of CEOs in the minds of the employees may influence the degree to which objective distances can be altered in many-to-one communication.*

The analysis in section 7.1.2 indicated that the employees across the three organizations had highly different perceptions of their CEO before the implementation of the platform. The CEOs at Company X and Z were perceived as very charismatic and the employees were very satisfied with them. On the contrary, the CEO of Company Y was perceived negatively. These perceptions of the CEOs may have altered the extent to which they can influence the objective distances when communicating via many-to-one communication. Literature on CLT shows, for instance, that the more dissimilar and unfamiliar someone is to oneself, the higher is the perceived social distance (see section 5.1). For the CEO at Company Y, who was already perceived negatively, it may have been more difficult to reduce social distance via many-to-one communication than for the CEO at Company X, who was initially perceived more positively. This argument is also in line with research on “temporal self-appraisal theory” that indicates that people “perceive desirable past selves as less psychologically distant” than “undesirable past selves” (van Boven, p. 877). Further evidence for this proposition gives Company Z. The CEO at Company Z was perceived as being closer to the employees because he was initially more present in the organization than the CEOs in both other companies (see section 7.1.2). This also influenced the extent to which the CEO could alter the objective distances by applying the platform. It seems therefore more difficult for the CEO at Company Z to reduce the existing distances by applying many-to-one communication than for the CEO at Company X.

Based on the findings of the cross-case exploration, the framework next proposes that lower level construals of CEOs that are triggered by many-to-one communication have various effects on employees’ cognitions and behaviors.

Proposition 2: *Lower level construals of CEOs that are triggered by many-to-one communication influence employees’ cognitions and behaviors.*

Theory shows that triggering low level construals leads to effects on cognitions and behaviors among members in virtual teams (Wilson, et al., 2012). The cross-case exploration underlines this finding. It revealed effects at both the micro and the macro-

level of analysis at Company X. The conceptual framework therefore proposes that there are effects at the micro-level of analysis (P2.1) and effects at the macro-level of analysis (P2.2) that were triggered by lower level construals of the CEO.

Based on the findings at company X, the framework proposes that CEOs can gain authenticity and trustworthiness among their employees, and enhance their perceptions of appreciation by reducing distance through many-to-one communication.

Proposition 2.1: *At the micro-level of analysis, as a result of the reduced level of construal, CEOs can gain authenticity and trustworthiness in perceptions of their employees, and give them the feeling of being appreciated.*

CLT offers explanation for these effects at the micro-level of analysis (see section 7.3). In order to perceive the CEO as being authentic and trustworthy, employees need a certain level of proximity and concrete information. Scholars in the field of leadership underline, for instance, that perceptions of authenticity depend on the degree of transparency and openness of leader behavior (Gardner, et al., 2005) and that the development of trust in leadership needs a context of proximity (Shamir, 1995) (see section 2). Moreover, literature in psychology draws that low level construals trigger credibility of targets in the perceivers' minds (Hansen & Wänke, 2010) (see section 5). These findings underline the linkage of lower level construals and the employees' perceptions of the CEO's authenticity and trustworthiness. The effect on perceptions of appreciation among the employees can also be explained with CLT. Perceptions of appreciation are triggered by factors such as esteem and honor (Russell, 2001, p. 80). By taking the time and the effort to concretely and openly communicate with the employees, the CEOs show esteem and honor for their employees, and therefore show their appreciation.

The framework next proposes that the enhanced perceptions of the CEO such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and appreciation trigger the employees' willingness to take part in the virtual discussion with the CEO.

Proposition 3: *Enhanced perceptions of the CEO such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and appreciation trigger the employees' willingness to communicate with the CEO in many-to-one communication.*

This proposition is in line with Brown, Poole, & Rodgers (2004), who show that individuals high in affiliation⁴⁵ towards each other exhibit higher levels of trust- and higher levels of the intention to participate in virtual collaboration (p. 127). The cross-case exploration reveals further evidence for this proposition. The case analysis shows that opposed to Company Z (but also to some extent to Company Y) where no effects could be observed at the micro-level of analysis, the employees at Company X constantly kept posting questions to the CEO. The findings at Company X even indicate that the openness of the employees in the many-to-one communication process was increasing (see section 7.3).

Based on the evidence of the cross-case analysis, the framework further proposes that CEOs can trigger organizational communication, organizational climate, and organizational proximity (see section 7.3).

Proposition 2.2: *At the macro-level of analysis, as a result of the reduced level of construal, CEOs can trigger organizational factors such as organizational communication, organizational climate, and organizational proximity.*

An explanation of these effects based on CLT is that through the reduction of distance to employees and by triggering lower level construals, CEOs disseminate concrete, contextualized, and rich personal- as well as organizational insights. These insights enhance communication, climate, and proximity in the organization because they increase the equivalence in knowledge among the organizational members (Torre & Rallet, 2005) and therefore provide a common basis of information within the organization. This shared knowledge in combination with a platform that enhances the employees' ability to interact with each other affects the perceptions of distance between the organizational members and the overall organizational climate. Company X underlines these findings. The exploration of many-to-one communication revealed that its usage positively influenced organizational communication, organizational climate, and organizational proximity.

The author next proposes that enhanced organizational factors (see P.2.2) at the macro-level of analysis trigger traffic in the many-to-one communication platform.

⁴⁵ Trustworthy, friendly, warm, trusting, open relationships (p.127)

Proposition 4: *Enhanced organizational factors such as organizational communication, organizational climate, and organizational proximity trigger traffic in many-to-one communication.*

This proposition is in line with Brown, Poole, & Rodgers (2004), who state that individuals high in affiliation⁴⁶ report higher intentions of applying new information technologies than individuals low in affiliation, and that they exhibit intentions to continue to use new information systems in virtual collaboration. Moreover, this proposition is in line with Wilson and colleagues (2008) who propose that network density leads to higher levels of cooperation and communication in groups. The cross-case exploration supports this finding. The example of Company X shows that horizontal communication, organizational climate, and organizational proximity resulted in a frequent use of the many-to-one communication platform. On the contrary was Company Z, where not many positive effects at the organizational level could be revealed, the use of the platform was less frequent and, the employees applied many-to-one communication just at the beginning and then not at all anymore. Finally, the framework proposes that there exist further factors in the organizations that directly influence the employees' perceptions of distance towards their CEO.

Proposition 5: *Further factors in the organizations may influence the employees' perceptions of distance to the CEO.*

This proposition grounds in literature in the field of virtual teams (Wilson, et al., 2012). Research findings in the field of virtual teams propose that group factors such as stability or performance increase their members' perceptions of proximity. Wilson and colleagues (2012) found that members of high performing and stable groups feel closer than members of low performing or unstable groups. According to the authors, stability and performance moderate the extent to which objective distances reduce psychological distance. These findings are insightful for this framework because they indicate that at Company X, where the organizational performance was high, organizational structures were stable, and the employees' perceptions of the organization were positive, such factors might have further influenced the degree to which psychological distance to the CEO could be altered. The findings also indicate that at Company Y, where the organizational structures were unstable, the performance moderate, and the employees' overall perceptions of the organization

⁴⁶ Affiliation describes interpersonal traits such as trustworthy, honesty, and openness (Brown, Poole, & Rodgers, 2004, p.127).

rather negative, these factors may have further negatively influenced the employees' perceptions of distances to the CEO. There may be many more factors in the organizations and their context that further trigger the employees' perceptions of distance to the CEO (Wilson, et al., 2012).

Theoretical contribution

The conceptual framework helps enhancing scholar's understanding of many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees. It contributes to various research streams in the fields of leadership and psychology that are listed in the following:

First, the developed framework contributes to research in leadership on CEOs. Most studies on leadership and CEOs ground in the notion of traditional face-to-face leadership. In these studies researchers assume that there is no direct linkage between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons in organizations (see section 2.2). Therefore, followers' perceptions of CEOs only emerge by attributions and ascriptions. The conceptual framework changes this status quo in leadership theory. By applying many-to-one communication, CEOs can directly communicate with employees and therefore influence employees not only indirectly by attributions but also directly with concrete behavior.

Second, the conceptual framework also contributes to research in the field of leader distance (see section 2.3) by explaining how concrete behavior of CEOs in the context of many-to-one communication influences different objective distances and by drawing that these objective distances have a common meaning, which is psychological distance. Moreover, the presented linkages between the constructs of objective distances, psychological distance, construal levels, and effects on cognitions and behaviors in organizations give scholars in the field of leader distance a coherent mean for generating new insights on distance and its influences.

Third, the conceptual framework further increases the scope of research in the field of electronic leadership. This research stream lacks theory on CEOs and theory on the organizational level of analysis (e.g., Fiol & O'Conner, 2005; Fjermestad, 2009; Ilze, 2003; Purvanova & Bono, 2009; Siebdrat, Hoegl, & Ernst, 2009; Sivunen, 2008; Niermann, 2008). This framework extends the scope of this research stream by providing empirical evidence that links CEO behavior in virtuality (micro-level of analysis) to effects in organizations (macro-level of analysis).

Fourth, the framework also contributes to research in the field of CLT. Before this dissertation, research on CLT was mostly applied in the individual context in the field of psychology. Recently, there appeared literature that applied CLT in the context of

virtual teams. This dissertation applied CLT to bridge the micro- and macro-levels of analysis in research on CEO leadership and virtuality. It therefore extends the scope of research on CLT to the organizational level of analysis. In this context it also extends the traditional notion of CLT which is that distance does not influence the inherent aspects of a target (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In leadership at the CEO-level, proximate behavior can improve the inherent aspects of the CEO in mind of the employees by making the CEO approachable and therefore relevant at the low echelon. Moreover, the framework contributes to the current research on the interrelation of distances in CLT, because it shows that various distances can be altered by many-to-one communication and that these jointly influence the employees' perceptions of distance to the CEO.

Finally, by applying CLT in the field of leadership the framework also contributes to the call of various scholars to integrate existing theories (Hambrick, 2007) and to use established theories in explorative research (Schiller & Mandviwalla, 2007).

8.3 Managerial contribution: Success factors that are derived from the cross-case exploration

This section addresses the research question 2.3 of this dissertation. It contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon in practice by outlining distinct success factors for many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees in organizations. The factors are directly derived from the cross-case exploration in the main part of this dissertation and from the findings of the sections 8.1 and 8.2.

The analysis shows that success of many-to-one communication is measurable by a high level- and insightful flow of traffic between the CEOs and employees. However, the analysis reveals that keeping traffic at a high level in many-to-one communication for a longer period of time seems to be difficult in practice.

The findings of the cases show that reducing distance between CEOs and employees plays a crucial role for the success of many-to-one communication in organizations. The case exploration revealed that opposed to the CEOs at Company Y and Z, the CEO at Company X applied behaviors that reduced psychological distance in the employees' minds and could therefore trigger effects in his organization. The author could identify various effects at micro-level of analysis (trustworthiness, authenticity, and appreciation by the CEO) and effects at the macro-level of analysis (organizational communication, climate, and proximity) that could be explained by the altered perceptions of distance between the CEOs and employees. The analysis further

outlined that these effects also triggered the employees' usage of many-to-one communication (see section 7.1 & 8.2).

Based on these findings the author elaborated distinct success factors for many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees in organizations. These are divided into two dimensions: 1.) CEO behavior, and 2.) internal organization. In the following, the author outlines thirteen success factors.

1.) CEO behavior

The cross-case exploration revealed that the CEO behavior in many-to-one communication is the key influencing factor for its success. The author elaborated eight distinct success factors that were directly derived from the conceptual framework in section 8.2. These success factors ground in its notion that by applying proximate behavior in many-to-one communication CEOs can trigger positive effects in their organizations.

1. *CEOs need to appear frequently in the platform and behave in an interactive manner*

The cross-case exploration revealed that by appearing frequently and by behaving interactively in many-to-one communication, CEOs can reduce temporal distance, which triggers the employees' perceptions of proximity (see section 7.2).

2. *CEOs need to reveal rich personal information and appear on eye-level with the employees*

The cross-case exploration showed that by revealing rich personal information and by communicating on eye-level with the employees, CEOs can reduce social distance in many-to-one communication, which triggers the employees' perceptions of proximity (see section 7.2).

3. *CEOs need to release insightful information that addresses issues and help improving these issues in the virtual dialogue*

The cross-case exploration showed that by releasing insightful information that addresses upcoming organizational issues and that help improving these issues, CEOs can reduce hypothetical distance and trigger the employees' perceptions of proximity (see section 7.2).

4. *CEOs need to apply a high level of granularity in their statements*

The cross-case exploration revealed that by applying a high level of granularity in their statements, CEOs trigger low level construals in the employees' minds and reduce psychological distance (see section 7.2).

5. *CEOs need to use personal and informal phrases in their statements*

The cross-case exploration revealed that by using personal or informal phrases in their statements, CEOs trigger low level construals in the employees' minds and reduce psychological distance (see section 7.2).

6. *CEOs need to increase visibility on the platform*

The cross-case exploration revealed that by appearing visible in the platform (e.g., via videos), CEOs can trigger low level construals in the employees' minds and reduce psychological distance (see section 7.2). However, in this context the cases revealed that CEOs need to appear natural and authentic in the videos as otherwise these will not reveal effects.

7. *CEOs need to show emotions in their statements*

The cross-case exploration revealed that by showing emotions in the platform, CEOs trigger low level construals in the employees' minds and reduce psychological distance (see section 7.2).

8. *CEOs need to fulfill the employees' expectations of direct virtual interaction*

The author suggests that before launching many-to-one communication in organizations, CEOs should thoroughly decide whether they can fulfill the employees' expectations of such a platform. Employees expect to get a direct, open, frequent, insightful, and interactive dialogue with the CEO. If they do not get what they expect, the employees will not use the platform for a long time – this is what case analysis of Companies Y and Z revealed. Therefore, CEOs need to address these expectations by comprehensively reducing distances to employees and by triggering low level construals. However, in “extreme” cases such as Company Y, where the distance between the CEO and employees seemed very large, or at Company Z where distance seemed relatively low, it seems to be difficult for CEOs to alter distance to the employees via many-to-one communication.

2.) Internal organization

This dissertation mainly concentrated on the direct influence of the CEO in many-to-one communication and its subsequent effects in organizations. However, the narrative case analysis (see chapter 4) outlined that the CEOs (especially the CEO at Company X) had a lot of important internal support in the virtual communication process. Therefore, the author compared the internal organization of many-to-one communication across the three cases and revealed five distinct success factors that help to increase traffic in many-to-one communication and to increase the employees' perceptions of proximity to the CEO.

9. Organizations need to install a (competent) communication manager who controls the processes and maintains the virtual platform

The narrative case study (chapter 4) at Company X showed that a competent platform manager can be a success factor by giving the CEO important support in the internal processes. The platform manager can coordinate and prepare answers with other departments, ensure that deadlines are held, and help maintaining the platform (e.g., filter reluctant traffic).

10. Organizations need to strongly advertise the virtual dialogue internally and to clarify its goals

The analysis revealed that especially at Company X, all informants knew the platform very well. This was also because there were advertising campaigns throughout the whole company for the dialogue between the CEO and employees. On the other hand, evidence at Company Z revealed that not all employees knew about the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the CEO. In order to ensure the success of the platform, organizations therefore need to make sure that all employees know about the virtual dialogue by launching internal advertising campaigns. Moreover, organizations need to ensure that the platform is introduced well. The narrative case analysis showed that in all three organizations there were uncertainties among the employees about the goals of the platform and whether the CEO himself takes part in the discussion. By clarifying distinct goals of the platform and underlying the personal participation of the CEO, organizations can directly address these uncertainties.

11. Organizations need to continuously develop and reinvent the virtual dialogue

A platform manager may also be helpful for keeping the virtual dialogue interesting and insightful. This is especially relevant when the platform has already run for a while and the interest for the dialogue begins to decrease. In such phases the platform manager at Company X regularly integrated new, virtual elements in the platform to gain back attention. They uploaded, for instance, videos of the CEO, invented “CEO specials”, and integrated further specialists from the top management (e.g., CIO) in the communication process. These elements ensured that the many-to-one communication remained interesting for the employees.

12. Organizations need to share success stories

The analysis at Company X revealed that many-to-one communication produced some really interesting success stories. Such success stories were that the CEO fulfilled the desire of many employees by sending a prominent product to one of their affiliates (section 7.3.1.2), or that the CEO brought together the CIO and employees to work on a pilot program of software tools (see section 7.3.2.2). However, the analysis revealed that even at Company X, most informants have never heard about those success stories. Organizations therefore need to find a way to share such stories on the platform. These would further strengthen the employees’ perceptions of the CEOs and the need for the virtual dialogue.

13. Organizations should make the virtual dialogue non-anonymous

The narrative case analyses showed that the decision concerning anonymity of traffic in many-to-one communication has to be considered thoroughly. When launching the platform there is a tradeoff for organizations between e.g., irrelevant questions, complaints, and even offenses in case of anonymity (see Company Y) or reluctance to show criticism in case of non-anonymous communication (see Company Z). However, at Company X, non-anonymous communication worked well and even triggered discussions between employees that could not have emerged in case of anonymity. Moreover, it is highly questionable whether distance between CEOs and employees can be reduced in the context of anonymity.

9 Conclusions

9.1 Conclusions of the explorative study

The purpose of this dissertation was to shed light into the black box of direct virtual interaction between CEOs and employees in organizations. Therefore, the author aimed to explore the phenomenon in practice, to integrate it in a conceptual framework, and to derive success factors for organizations and their CEOs (see section 1.3). Based on the purpose of this dissertation the author proposed two main research questions (RQ1.-2.).

- RQ1. How is the influence of direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees addressed in leadership research, and how is the phenomenon applied in practice?
- RQ2. How can direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees in organizations be conceptualized, and which insights can be revealed from cross-case comparisons?

In order to answer these research questions the author applied explorative case research based on the approach suggested by Eisenhardt (1989b) and Pan & Tan (2011). The flexibility of this methodology enabled the author to answer the research questions in an iterative process by working with deductive (theory driven) and inductive (data driven) elements (see section 3.2.4). Detailed information on RQ1. was drawn in the chapters 2 and 4. RQ2. was answered in detail in the chapters 5-8. In the following, the author draws the conclusions.

Findings on RQ1

In order to get first insights on the phenomenon, research literature in the field of CEOs, leader distance, and electronic leadership was intensively studied. The analysis revealed that literature at the CEO level is very broad with various theories that apply and combine different levels of analysis in research. However, all of these theories on CEOs ground in the notions of traditional face-to-face communication in organizations. Therefore, they do not conceptualize any direct interaction between the CEO and employees on lower hierarchical echelons in large organizations in any study published in a high-ranked journal. The analysis of leader distance revealed that this literature stream grounds in similar notions. The state of the art concept of Antonakis

and Atwater (2002), for instance, concludes that physical and social distance between CEOs and employees of lower hierarchical echelons is very large and that there is no direct interaction. Therefore, this literature stream does not reveal many insights on direct communication between CEOs and employees. However, literature on electronic leadership indicates that there is large potential of virtuality to bridge the traditional notions of distance. Recently, there appeared studies on virtual communication in team context. However, this literature does not reveal insights on the CEO level and the whole research field is still in its early stages.

Because of the lack of theory in the relevant fields, the author decided to apply explorative research with the aim to generate theory. As suggested by Pan & Tan (2011) the author began exploring the phenomenon in organizations in practice. For the exploration, three multinational organizations were selected that apply a similar information technology that mediates the direct virtual communication between CEOs and employees. This virtual solution is called many-to-one communication. It is implemented in large organizations in form of a virtual platform and gives a large number of employees the chance to directly communicate with the CEO. On the platform, they can directly ask questions to the CEO, express their opinion about given topics, or simply follow the opinions of their colleagues (chapter 4). The author collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data and could derive rich insights of the phenomenon in practice.

The cases analyses revealed that the drivers for the many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees in the organizations are similar. They all aim to bring the CEO closer to the employees, increase the overall level of communication in their organizations, and to follow the trend of social media implementation. However, the case analyses also revealed that the usage of many-to-one communication among the employees highly differed between the cases. One of the companies managed to have a fruitful dialogue between their CEO and the employees on the platform. In the other companies many-to-one communication failed because they could not generate traffic at all or because the traffic was destructive and not insightful. The author therefore applied explorative case comparisons to investigate the causes of these differences.

Findings on RQ2

In order to conceptualize phenomena in explorative research, various scholars suggest integrating well-established theories (Schiller & Mandviwalla, 2007) from other fields into the analysis that give focus and guidance. The author therefore integrated construal level theory (CLT), which is well-established theory in the field of social

psychology, in the analysis. CLT offers promising insights for exploring and conceptualizing many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees in organizations (Lieberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003). CLT is a theory at the micro-level of analysis. It illustrates the connection between various forms of distance, the levels of abstraction in human cognitions, and their subsequent effects on cognitions and behavior (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). Psychological distance plays a central role in CLT. Psychological distance serves as a meta-construct that comprises different dimensions of objective distance and directly links these to human cognitions. CLT was applied for the exploration because it gives coherent insights on the influence of many-to-one communication on perceptions of distance between CEOs and employees as well as on its effects in organizations. These are helpful for the understanding of the phenomenon. Applying CLT to the field of leadership is in line with various scholars that called for integrating psychological theories in leadership research (e.g., Hambrick, 2007) and scholars that called for applying micro-level theories to macro-level phenomena (e.g., House & colleagues, 1995; Waldmann & Yammarino, 1999).

For applying CLT in the research process, the author followed the suggestion of Pan and Tan (2011) to develop a theoretical lens that gives guidance in the research process and helps “avoiding death by data asphyxiation” (p. 170). The theoretical lens represents a “preliminary stage of theorizing” (p. 164) and links CLT to the context of many-to-one communication between CEOs and employees in organizations (chapter 6). It is mainly comprised by findings of CLT in the field of virtual teams (Wilson, 2008; 2012) and was supported by the author’s insights of the phenomenon in practice. The author consequently conducted explorative cross-case analyses that aimed to develop the theoretical lens into an appropriate theory. Therefore, the author first revealed performance differences of many-to-one communication across the cases and explored them accordingly. The analysis showed that in one case the application of the platform was successful, while in the other two cases the platform performed poorly. The author then explored similarities and differences across the cases based on the theoretical lens. The exploration revealed that – opposed to the CEOs in the low performing cases – the CEO in the high performing case altered three objective distances to the employees: 1.) temporal-, 2.) social-, and 3.) hypothetical distance, by applying many-to-one communication. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the CEO at the high performing case directly triggered low level construals in the employees’ minds by applying a high level of 1.) granularity, 2.) personality/informality, 3.) visibility, and 4.) emotions in his statement in many-to-one communication. According

to CLT, both reducing objective distances and low level construals decrease the employees' perceptions of distance towards their CEO and trigger cognitive and behavioral effects. The explorative comparison of the cases next revealed that in the high performing case three micro- and three macro-level effects could be observed and directly linked to the altered perceptions of distance between the CEO and employees. The findings revealed that at the micro-level of analysis, the CEO gained 1.) authenticity, and 2.) trustworthiness among the employees, and that the employees 3.) felt appreciated by communicating with the CEO via many-to-one communication. At the macro-level of analysis, the evidence at the high performing case revealed that the CEO positively affected 1.) organizational communication, 2.) organizational climate, and 3.) organizational proximity by triggering proximity to the employees via many-to-one communication. Both micro- and macro-level effects further triggered the employees' willingness to participate in the many-to-one communication process.

The findings were iteratively supported by the integration of further literature. Subsequently, the author derived a conceptual framework based on propositions. The conceptual framework outlines and explains the linkages of CEO behavior in many-to-one communication, employees' perceptions of distance, cognitive and behavioral effects at the micro- and the macro- levels of analysis, and further influencing factors.

Based on the findings of the cross-case exploration, the author lastly derived distinct success factors for CEOs and organizations in many-to-one communication. These are the following: 1.) CEOs need to appear frequently in the platform and behave in an interactive manner, 2.) CEOs need to reveal rich personal information and appear on eye-level with the employees, 3.) CEOs need to release insightful information that addresses issues and help improving these issues in the virtual dialogue, 4.) CEOs need to apply a high level of granularity in their statements, 5.) CEOs need to use personal and informal phrases in their statements, 6.) CEOs need to increase visibility on the platform, 7.) CEOs need to show emotions in their statements, 8.) CEOs need to fulfill the employees' expectations of direct virtual interaction, 9.) Organizations need to install a (competent) communication manager who controls the processes and maintains the virtual platform, 10.) Organizations need to strongly advertise the virtual dialogue internally and to clarify its goals, 11.) Organizations need to continuously develop and reinvent the virtual dialogue, 12.) Organizations need to share success stories, 13.) Organizations should make the virtual dialogue non-anonymous.

9.2 Critical reflections, limitations, and further research

The aim of this explorative study was to develop a conceptual framework that captures the phenomenon of direct interaction between CEOs and employees in organizations. The author therefore explored an electronic leadership solution called many-to-one communication that is applied by CEOs in practice. The analysis was conducted with multiple case studies and based on construal level theory (CLT) that gave guidance for the conceptualization of the research phenomenon. In the light of this study's findings, the appropriateness of the research approach is discussed in the following.

Qualitative research has been criticized for the lack of methodological rigor and the consequent lack of generalizability of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The author addressed methodological rigor comprehensively by ensuring internal validity, construct validity, external validity, and reliability (Gibbert, et al., 2008). Internal validity was addressed by integrating CLT in the analysis. Construct validity was triggered by triangulating qualitative and quantitative data. External validity was addressed by applying multiple case studies and reliability by intensive coding of data and profound documentation. However, the number of the cases that were included in the study and the number of informants for each case were not large enough for revealing statistical hypotheses. The author therefore suggests validating the derived propositions of the conceptual framework in a quantitative study. This would also reveal further support for the suggested causalities that were indicated in the framework based on the qualitative information and reveal the strength of the respective effects.

A limitation of this dissertation is the approach to case selection. Key selection criterion was that the CEOs at the respective organization needed to apply many-to-one communication. However, among the three selected cases, there was one organization that was significantly smaller in size than the others (Company Z). In this context, the findings showed that the CEO of this company was consequently more present in this (smaller) organization. This may have influenced the employees' many-to-one communication usage and therefore influenced the comparability of the cases to a certain extent.

Another limitation of this dissertation is researcher bias. The author designed the explorative case studies, collected, and analyzed data, which might have influenced the objective consideration of the research phenomenon. However, the author tried to minimize bias by integrating quantitative data such as informant ratings in the qualitative analysis. Another limitation of the application of qualitative research is the usage of retrospective data (Pan & Tan, 2011). The author tried to avoid this bias by

integrating real time information of many-to-one communication traffic in the analysis, but a large portion of the qualitative data remains retrospective. An avenue for further research therefore is that scholars could investigate the phenomenon of e-leadership in teams of researchers and gather real time data to strengthen the robustness of the findings.

Another limitation of this dissertation is the many-to-one communication itself. The exploration focused on many-to-one communication as a mechanism that mediates e-leadership applied by CEOs. The strict focus in the analysis on this technology enhanced internal validity of the findings, but it remains questionable that the findings of this dissertation can be fully transferred to other technologies that mediate the e-leadership process. Many-to-one communication is an electronic communication solution that applies distinct features such as ratings and aggregations. The findings showed that exactly these features enable CEOs to address a large amount of employees in their organization and that this is also a reason why CEOs apply this e-leadership solution in practice. However, the disadvantage of many-to-one communication tools is that these are limited to certain features that make communication not fully direct and open. These also limit the extent to which many-to-one communication can reduce distance. The author therefore suggests that scholars need to find out which e-leadership technologies that are applied by CEOs are most effective in reducing distances between CEOs and employees and investigate their effects in organizations.

The dissertation applied construal level theory as the theoretical basis for the conceptualization of the research phenomenon. CLT guided the research process and provided insights on the influences of many-to-one communication on the employees' perceptions of distance towards the CEO and its effects in organizations. Therefore, the present study has a high degree of novelty because it applies CLT as a mean to bridge the micro- and the macro-level of analysis. However, applying CLT to conceptualize the complex phenomenon also has its limitations. CLT is a theory that originates from the micro-level of analysis. Its constructs are well-defined and its focus is to some extent idiosyncratic. Linking the macro-level of the research phenomenon to CLT was insightful but it also narrowed the scope of the findings and their explanation power. An avenue for further research would be to apply a macro-level theory for further exploring the organizational influencing factors or even the organizational context on many-to-one communication and its perceptions. Another avenue for future research is the influence of many-to-one communication on the CEO himself. On the one side the findings at Company Y indicate that CEOs, who are initially perceived

negatively and highly distant have difficulties to decrease the objective distances to employees by applying many-to-one communication (in the conceptual model this factor was called “existent perceptions of the CEO”). On the other side, the findings at Company Z indicate that CEOs, who are already perceived positively and close, also have difficulties to alter the perceptions of distance by applying many-to-one communication (because of its limited features). In both cases many-to-one communication, therefore, could not trigger many positive effects in the organizations. The question that arises is whether there is an optimal level of psychological distance to the CEO in the employees’ minds that can be created and maintained by an efficient application of many-to-one communication and thus lead to positive effects in organizations.

Another avenue of research is the combination of established leadership theories such as transformational leadership and construal level theory. The CEO behavior that is derived in this dissertation shows various overlaps with transformational leader behavior, in particular, within the dimensions of individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. CLT could help, for instance, further explaining the impact of TFL on perceptions of followers in the context of distance.

As a final remark the author wants to refer to the – maybe provoking – title of this dissertation which is “eliminating distance between CEOs and employees”. The analysis shows that many-to-one communication cannot eliminate all objective distances between the CEO and employees. Eliminating the overall distance between the CEO and employees is actually not possible, as CLT underlines. But instead it can alter or even eliminate some of the existing distances by establishing direct communication. This reduction of distance through many-to-one communication can lead to positive effects regarding the perceptions of the CEOs in organizations and can even positively influence organizational climate, communication, and proximity. However, based on the findings of this dissertation, it is doubtful that many-to-one communication triggers any effects when there is no optimal symbiosis of a CEO, who puts a lot of effort in the virtual dialogue, and a positive organizational environment with respect to the organizational structures, performance, and climate.

10 LITERATURE

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11 APPENDICES

11.1 Appendix A. Interview overview

11.1.1 Appendix A.1 Detailed information on informants

a.) Preliminary interviews

The preliminary interviews were not transcribed. These aimed to give a first impression of the organizations and the performance of their platform.

Company	Number	Informant	Position	Date/ location	Type	Language/ duration
Platform provider	1	Platform experts	-	Germany	Focus group	2h / German
X	2	Informant X2	Platform manager	Switzerland/ France	Telephone interview	1h / English
Y	3	Informant Y3	Platform manager	Switzerland/ Germany	Telephone interview	1h / German
Z	4	Informant Z3	Platform manager	Switzerland/ Germany	Telephone interview	1h / German
Total: 1 focus group & 3 preliminary interviews						

b.) Interviews at company 1, 2, and 3

The interviews were fully transcribed. The interview transcripts are attached to this dissertation.

Company	Number	Informant	Position	Date/location	Type	Language/ duration
X						
	1	Informant X1	CEO assistant	17.12.2012/ Switzerland/ Germany	Telephone interview	German/ 1h
	2	Informant X2	Platform manager	13.09.2012/ France	Face-to-face interview	English/ 2h
	3	Informant X3	Lower echelon	13.09.2012/ France	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
	4	Informant X4	Lower echelon	23.09.2012/	Face-to-face	German/

			Germany	interview	45min
5	Informant X5	Lower echelon	13.09.2012/ France/ England	Telephone interview	English/ 45min
6	Informant X6	Lower echelon	14.09.2012/ France	Face-to-face interview	English/ 45min
7	Informant X7	Lower echelon	13.09.2012/ France/ Spain	Telephone interview	English/ 45min
8	Informant X8	Lower echelon	13.09.2012/ France	Face-to-face interview	English/ 45min
9	Informant X9	Lower echelon	23.09.2012/ Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
10	Informant X10	Lower echelon	23.09.2012/ Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
Y					
11	Informant Y1	Chief executive officer (CEO)	30.10.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 1,5h
12	Informant Y2	CEO assistant	21.09.2012 / Germany	Telephone interview	German/ 45min
13	Informant Y3	Platform manager	21.09.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 2h
14	Informant Y4	Lower echelon	05.10.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
15	Informant Y5	Lower echelon	21.09.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
16	Informant Y6	Lower echelon	21.09.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
17	Informant Y7	Lower echelon	05.10.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
18	Informant Y8	Lower echelon	05.10.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
19	Informant Y9	Lower echelon	05.10.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
20	Informant Y10	Lower echelon	05.10.2012 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 45min
Z					
21	Informant Z1	Chief executive officer (CEO)	12.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 1h
22	Informant Z2	Chief financial officer (CFO)	12.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 1h
23	Informant Z3	Platform manager	11.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 2h
24	Informant Z4	Lower echelon	12.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 40min
25	Informant Z5	Lower echelon	11.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 40min
26	Informant Z6	Lower echelon	12.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 40min
27	Informant Z7	Lower echelon	12.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 40min
28	Informant Z8	Lower echelon	11.02.2013 / Germany	Face-to-face interview	German/ 40min

29	Informant Z9	Lower echelon	16.04.2013 / Switzerland/ China	Telephone interview	English/ 30min
30	Informant Z10	Lower echelon	26.04.2013 / Switzerland/ India	Telephone interview	English/ 30min
Total: 30 interviews					

11.1.2 Appendix A.2 Interview transcripts

For confidentiality reasons the interview transcripts are supplemented on a compact disc.

11.2 Appendix B. Interview guide

11.2.1 Appendix B.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interview guide
1. semi-structured & 2. quantitative*

Version: Employees

Fabian Heuschele
Center for Customer Insight
Bahnhofstrasse 8
CH-9000 St. Gallen
University of St.Gallen
fabian.heuschele@unisg.ch

** This interview guideline
applies an outline that was
adopted from Marin &
Eisenhardt (2010).*

Date:

Respondent:

Function:

Company:

Introduction

- Explanation of the project
- Background of the researchers.
- Purpose of the project is to explore many-to-one communication.

All information is confidential. Results are only shared with firm respondents. Findings will be reported in a way that masks the identity of specific individuals and firms that participate in the study.

You may refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may stop the interview at any time.

Note: Ask permission at this point to begin recording the interview. Remind informants about confidentiality as stated above.

Disclaimer:

All information is confidential. Results are only shared with firm respondents. Findings will be reported in a way that masks the identity of specific individuals and firms that participate in the study.

Warm-up

The interview consists of two different parts: first there will be narrative questions (open-ended questions), followed by narrow questions in form of ratings (quantitative).

1. The semi-structured part of the interview has 4 sections:

1.1 General information: personal background, function, involvement in company, strategic context.

1.2 Organizational insights: implementation, process, usage, issues and impact of many-to-one communication on the company.

1.3 Individual experience: personal usage experience, special/critical situations, outcomes.

1.4 Narrative assessment: personal satisfaction, further potentials, limitations of the medium.

2. Quantitative ratings:

In order to get an accurate understanding of many-to-one communication in your company, we ask all informants to give numerical ratings for various items. E.g., we ask you to make an implicit rating for certain items on a scale of 1 – 5 (1=lowest rating; 5=highest rating). Please respond in a spontaneous manner and stick to your first impressions.

1.1 General information

Note: In order to get a broad understanding of the many-to-one platform in your company, the interview starts with some background information, before it asks questions regarding the strategic context of your company.

General background

- Please describe your background at your firm.
- How long have you been working for your company and what is your current job?

Strategic context

Note: This section should be addressed rather briefly.

- How would you describe your company's competitive strategy?
- How did the company's business environment develop over the last years?
- What are the key challenges for your company these days? Who informed you about these challenges?

1.2 Organizational insights

Note: This section addresses the implementation, adoption, and communication process of the many-to-one platform at the company. Moreover, it focuses on its organizational impact.

1.2.1 Organizational adoption and impact

Please take the position of an observer and describe the observations you made with the many-to-one platform. Please try to think back to the time when you first heard about the many-to-one platform. Try to give concrete examples if possible.

- How was the platform introduced? Who introduced the platform?
- How did a.) you, b.) your colleagues feel/talk about this initiative? Please give concrete examples.
- Please proceed chronologically: Could you illustrate development (traffic, topics...) of the “straight-to-platform” at your company?

Note (here details): What were critical events that you observed: a.) at the beginning, b.) after 3-6 months, c.) recently/at the end?

- What were the most interesting conversations/situations (pos./neg.) that you followed?

Note (here details): Who were the involved persons? What was the context of this situation? What was the content? What made these situations remarkable? What were the outcomes?

- How did the different stakeholders work together the platform? Please state remarkable events.
- How would you describe the impact of the many-to-one platform on your company? Could you explain the intension for/why most of your colleagues use the platform? *Buzzwords:* proactive / reactive; to rate / to write messages

1.3 Individual experience

This section focuses on your personal experiences with the many-to-one platform. Please give concrete examples if possible.

1.3.1 Individual usage

- What are your personal intentions/motivations by using the platform?
Buzzwords (after a while): getting informed/seek for transition; proactive/reactive; to rate/to write messages
- For what kind of topics do you use the platform? Please give concrete examples.
Note (if informant unclear): cultural, organizational, strategic, etc.
- How often do you use the many-to-one platform? What drives your usage (internal/external factors)? (0-10 scale: 0=never; 5=once a week; 10=several times per day)
- In which situations where you personally disappointed by the platform, and why? Please state concrete examples.
- Have there been any issues (people, technical etc.) that were hindering you in participating (more) at the platform? If yes, what issues?
- For what kind of situations/messages would you recommend the platform? Please state concrete examples.
- For what kind of situations/type of messages is the platform not suitable for at all, and why?
- Are there any other electronic platforms/communication tools in your company that you use? If yes, when?

1.4 Narrative assessment

Note: This section focuses on the personal satisfaction of the informants with virtual interacting with the CEO. It analyses, moreover, fields for improvement, the limitations of the medium, as well as its potential for leading organizations.

- How would you describe your CEO?
- How would you describe the role of your CEO in the platform? Are a.) you, b.) your colleagues satisfied with his appearance and commitment? Please state examples.
- How did the platform influence your opinion about the CEO (compared to the time before)?
- Do you have the feeling that a.) you can directly contact the CEO through the platform? b.) your colleagues can have a direct impact on top management decisions? *Note: Ask for comparison to the time before the platform.*
- If you were the leader (CEO) of the platform – what would you make different? Where do you see fields for improvement?

11.2.2 Appendix B.2 Questionnaire

2. Quantitative ratings:

Note: The quantitative rating includes several sections: It begins with measuring the employee's perceptions of many-to-one communication in their company. Then it proceeds with measuring the leadership style of the CEO by applying several leadership questionnaires, and lastly it analyzes the organizational climate.

Please state your opinion about the following statements / questions. Select for each statement (or question) a number on the scale. Mark the number that is best suited for each statement (or question) with a cross in the grey shaded area. Please notice that the value of the scale might differ between the statements (or questions). Generally, 1 represents the lowest rating and 5 the highest rating.

2.1 Perceptions of many-to-one communication

	Statements/Questions	Rating				
		highly negative		no impact		highly positive
1	The many-to-one platform changed the company-culture...	1	2	3	4	5
2	The many-to-one platform changed the transparency of the CEO...	1	2	3	4	5
3	With the many-to-one communication platform, I have the feeling that I can directly communicate with the CEO.	1	2	3	4	5
4	With the many-to-one platform, I am better informed about important organizational issues.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I have the feeling that I have an influence on important issues of the company.	1	2	3	4	5
6	With the many-to-one platform my influence on organizational issues changed ... compared to before.	1	2	3	4	5
7	All employees of our company know about the many-to-one platform.	1	2	3	4	5
8	My colleagues use the many-to-one platform frequently.	1	2	3	4	5
9	In my opinion, the platform is <u>not</u> useful.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I know about the development of the company in the next years.	1	2	3	4	5
11	Because of the many-to-one platform, my perception of the CEO is ... than before.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I know about the issues the CEO works on these days.	1	2	3	4	5
13	How satisfied are you overall with your CEO?	1	2	3	4	5
14	In my opinion the appearance of the CEO in the many-to-one platform is not authentic.	1	2	3	4	5
15	How satisfied are you overall with the performance of the platform?	1	2	3	4	5

2.2 CEO Charisma

Statements/Questions	Rating				
	1	2	3	4	5
"Our CEO...	rarely or never	once in a while	sometimes	fairly often	very frequently, if not always
1 exudes competence in his words and actions."	1	2	3	4	5
2 exhibits extraordinary competence in his undertakings."	1	2	3	4	5
3 gives employees the feeling that management can overcome any obstacle."	1	2	3	4	5
4 projects a powerful, dynamic, and magnetic presence."	1	2	3	4	5
5 mobilizes a collective sense of mission."	1	2	3	4	5
6 Communicates a clear vision of the future	1	2	3	4	5
7 engenders complete confidence in management."	1	2	3	4	5
8 makes employees aware of important values, ideals, and aspirations that affect the organization and employees alike."	1	2	3	4	5
9 talks about the future with optimism."	1	2	3	4	5
10 demonstrates a strong conviction in their beliefs and values."	1	2	3	4	5

2.3 Organizational climate (OCM)

	Statements/Questions	Rating			
		1 definitely false	2 mostly false	3 mostly true	4 definitely true
<i>Involvement</i>					
1	Management involve people when decisions are made that affect them	1	2	3	4
2	Changes are made without talking to the people involved in them	1	2	3	4
3	People don't have any say in decisions which affect their work	1	2	3	4
4	People feel decisions are frequently made over their heads	1	2	3	4
5	Information is widely shared	1	2	3	4
6	There are often breakdowns in communication here	1	2	3	4
<i>Welfare</i>					
7	This company pays little attention to the interests of employees	1	2	3	4
8	This company tries to look after its employees	1	2	3	4
9	This company cares about its employees	1	2	3	4
10	This company tries to be fair in its actions towards employees	1	2	3	4
<i>Clarity of Organizational Goals</i>					
11	People have a good understanding of what the organization is trying to do	1	2	3	4
12	The future direction of the company is clearly communicated to everyone	1	2	3	4
13	People aren't clear about the aims of the company	1	2	3	4
14	Everyone who works here is well aware of the long-term plans and direction of this company	1	2	3	4
15	There is a strong sense of where the company is going	1	2	3	4
<i>Pressure to Produce</i>					
16	People are expected to do too much in a day	1	2	3	4
17	In general, peoples' workloads are not particularly demanding	1	2	3	4
18	Management require people to work extremely hard	1	2	3	4
19	People here are under pressure to meet targets	1	2	3	4
20	The pace of work here is pretty relaxed	1	2	3	4

11.3 Appendix C. Detailed coding information (Atlas.ti)

11.3.1 Appendix C.1 Code families, including high-order codes

The open- and selective-coding process at Company X, Y, and Z revealed 3 code families (first-order code). Each code family is based between 1-3 first order codes. The 6 first order codes (categories) contained between 11-382 lower-order codes, respectively.

11.3.2 Appendix C.2 Total list of codes (higher- and lower order)

The open- and selective coding process at Company X, Y, and Z revealed 972 codes in total. These were divided into 1. first order codes (_A.-_F.), and 2. low order codes. Note: The total code overview is excluded from the print version of the dissertation.

Curriculum Vitae

Name Fabian Heuschele

Date of Birth 15.04.1984 in Stuttgart, Germany

Education

2010-2014 University of St.Gallen, Switzerland (CH)
Doctoral Studies in Business Administration

University of Michigan, USA
Summer Program in Quantitative Methods of Social Research

2008-2009 London School of Economics and Political Science, UK
Master of Science in International Management

École des hautes études commerciales de Paris, France
CEMS Master's in International Management

2004-2007 University of St.Gallen, Switzerland
Bachelor Studies in Business Administration

Bond University, Australia
Exchange Studies

2001-2003 Goldberg-Gymnasium Sindelfingen, Germany (DE)
Abitur

Work Experience

2011-2014 Center for Customer Insight, University of St.Gallen, CH
Research Associate

2010-2011 RWTH International Academy, RWTH Aachen University, DE
Project Leader, Research Associate

2008 Audi AG, Audi Volkswagen Middle East, UAE
Internship in Dealer Development

2007 Oliver Wyman, Switzerland
Internship in Management Consulting

2006 HSBC Trinkaus & Burkhardt, Germany
Internship in Corporate Finance (M&A)

2003-2004 Civilian Service, Böblingen, Germany