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"INTERNAL BURN TO MOVE ON" MILLENNIAL LEADERS' CHALLENGES AND RESOURCES AT WORK

SALLA KARIMA, SATU UUSIAUTTI, KAARINA MÄÄTTÄ

Abstract:

The growing number of today's leaders represent millennial leaders who have their specific approach to leadership work. This was a qualitative study in which 28 Finnish leaders from Great Places to Work companies were interviewed. The study had two purposes: the first aim was to understand what kind of leadership-related challenges millennial leaders describe and the second focused on analyzing what kind of resources they identified when dealing with these challenges. The interview data was analyzed with the qualitative content analysis. Two types of challenges from the millennial leaders' perceptions could be distinguished. These were the challenges for the future and challenges related to human activity. When it came to resources, a passion for leadership and a positive and confident attitude toward challenges helped leaders. The findings were also discussed against the elements of Grit (interest, practice, purpose, and hope), which showed that leaders' perceptions when analyzed from this perspective contributed a new theoretical viewpoint to Grit and a practical model for analyzing today's leadership challenges and coping.

Keywords:

Work Engagement, Grit, Millennial Leader, Content Analysis, Challenges, Resources

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1. Introduction

Mental health and coping come to the fore in almost all occupations in the *Well-being from Work in the 2030s scenario report* by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Kokkinen et al., 2020). Occupational well-being affects an organization's competitiveness, financial performance, and reputation. Increased teleworking, for example during the covid-19 pandemic, has increased the debate about the importance of work-life balance and questions about how well-being at work and institutions can be maintained and developed (Uusiautti et al. 2021; Repo et al. 2020; Waters et al. 2021). On the other hand, with the movement of positive psychology, research on work should increasingly focus on positive issues such as well-being at work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2018, 187). Researching only the causes of work-related nausea easily leads to a one-sided understanding of work conditions and to merely remedial action, while more attention should also be paid to what is good and what could be strengthened (Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005; Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015). Therefore, positive research on work conditions and behaviors at workplaces is needed so that we can support well-being at work in versatile ways and have a broader understanding of the concepts involved.

Millennials play a central role in today's workplaces. They have different expectations and attitudes toward work than their predecessors (Anderson, Baur, Griffith, & Buckley, 2017). In Finland too, people in their 30–40s, named as millennials, are the growing majority. In 2020, those born in Finland in 1983 were the largest birth cohort in the population (Statistics Finland, 2021). In this article, we present the study in which leadership was studied through Finnish millennial leaders' perceptions. Our aim was to understand, what kind of challenges do millennial leaders face in their work and how do the elements of passion and perseverance appear in the millennial leaders' descriptions of their coping with challenges. This information will support leaders, organizations, and companies to gain new perspectives and develop effective processes and support models for today's leaders' well-being and leadership development.

2. Theoretical viewpoints

In this research, we are interested in finding how millennial leaders describe challenges and coping in their work. Coping traditionally refers to the various ways people adopt to stress and the level of various means to cope, and quite often it has also been connected with various personality types and illnesses (see e.g., Lazarus, 1985). In the field of positive psychology, especially the concept of resilience has been used for describing positive strategies and abilities to deal with challenging or difficult situations (Carver & Scheier, 2005) and even the ability to bounce back after adversities (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Coping and resilience describe the person's aptitude to select positive surviving methods, while there are also other approaches to view behaviors at work. For example, positive engagement to work can be seen a steady, fundamental resource that can determine how people face challenges (Stairs & Galpin, 2013). Instead of specific coping methods or resilient behaviors, our purpose in this research was to analyze what kinds of resources the leaders could identify in their work or as a part of their leadership style, and how these could

contribute deeper understanding about positive work engagement and passion in millennial leaders' work.

Work engagement related research started heavily in the early 2000s, which was actually at the same time when work was viewed from the perspective of positive opportunities alongside the rise of positive psychology. Until then, research had focused on burnout, its treatment, and prevention actions. Yet, it is worth noting that research on burnout has stimulated most contemporary research on work engagement resulting to a notion that engagement has positive consequences at the individual and organizational levels (Stairs & Galpin, 2013). Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) showed that levels of employee engagement were positively related to business-unit performance (i.e., customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, productivity, turnover, and safety). Schaufeli et. al (2001) study found that positively committed employees were not obsessed with work even though they were motivated to work long hours. Instead, positive engagement may lead to flourishing and success at work (e.g., Karima & Uusiautti, 2018; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2016).

Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Roma, and Bakker (2002, 74) defined work engagement as "*a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.*" Thus, it can be said that an employee who experiences work engagement likes to work and enjoys doing it. He is proud of his work and persevering even in times of adversity. Vigor is an experience of energy, a willingness to invest in work, and perseverance and a desire to struggle even when facing challenges. Dedication is an experience of relevance, enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride at work. The third dimension, absorption, is a deep state of concentration and dedication. In an immersed state, detachment from work can seem difficult. In all, engagement to work is defined as a fairly permanent state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior. Work engagement is reflected in a positive work-related state of mind (Schaufeli et al., 2002, 74-75).

Work engagement can also be viewed from the perspective of perseverance. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) use the term "grit", defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Gritty employees' strength is endurance, and they naturally cope with challenges and adversities. They are motivated to achieve goals with tenacious effort and are willing to tackle challenges rather than avoid them. Gritty individuals work harder than their colleagues and they remain most committed to the task at hand for longer (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009, 5). According to Duckworth (2016, 54), gritty people work on something they care about so much that they remain loyal to it. While genetic factors have an effect, grit it is not immutable. Like other traits, it is variable under the influence of environmental factors (Park, Tsukayama, Yu, & Duckworth, 2020). Thus, it can be said that grit is both, a character trait and a skill (Duckworth, 2016).

Duckworth's (2016, 91) research has identified four components of grit: interest, practice, purpose, and hope. The source of passion is enjoyable doing and an interest in something that cannot be compelled. One of the biggest features of developing perseverance is simply that persevering people spend more time practicing. Thus, a long-term dedication is required for development, but also, and above all, high-quality training and having a growth mindset (Duckworth, 2016, 117-118). Passion matures when work is perceived as meaningful (Duckworth 2016, 91). The relevance of self-fulfillment usually develops with passion and practice but can also develop earlier. In addition,

persevering people become motivated when they feel that their efforts also matter to other people (Duckworth 2016, 143-144). The perspective of hope is the last component of grit, but it is also a solid part of all the aforementioned components. Belief in achievement and the ability to overcome difficulties is essential to maintain perseverance (Duckworth 2016, 91-92).

The structure and prevalence of grit have been studied and found to be associated with certain demographic differences. Flaming and Granato (2017) suggested that grit correlates with gender; females scored higher on the grit than males (see also Jaeger et al., 2010; Christensen & Knezek, 2014). Previous research has also shown that grit positively predicts a wide range of key psychological outcomes, such as academic achievement (Duckworth et al. 2007, 2010). Kannangara et al. (2018), referring to previous studies, found that grit has a strong association with certain psychological outcomes, reinforcing the notion that grit is related to well-being (see also Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

The manifestation of grit and its relationship to performance has been studied widely in the school and academic world among students of various ages and in various education programs. Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014) found that grit has an association with academic motivation and academic conscientiousness, while Pate et al.'s (2017) study showed that grittiness may be associated with academic performance. In addition, a positive relationship between grit, engagement, and academic productivity has been found among Australian students (Hodge et al., 2017). There are contradictory findings as well: grit did not predict academic achievement and performance in Bazelais et al.'s (2016) study. Likewise, the ability to regulate emotions predicted better the results than grit (see also Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014). To conclude, as the study environments are so multidimensional, it is probably reasonable to say that grit alone does not predict academic achievement and performance (see also Muenks et al., 2016; Palisoc et al., 2017), which is probably the case in work environments as well.

However, grit provides an interesting and new perspective to the analysis of work-related challenges and resources. For example, Schimschal and Lomas (2018) researched relationship between a leader's level of grit and their capacity to implement positive leadership strategies and practices. The results showed that the perseverance of leaders showed a stronger relationship than passion and that grit correlated positively with positive leadership. In another research (Caza & Posner, 2018), the impact of grit on leaders' own behavior as role models and innovators, and in inspiring, empowering, and supporting followers was explored. Persistent leaders were more likely to report role models and innovative behaviors, but less frequently inspiring behavior that was found to be context-bound.

3. Method

The following question was set for this research:

(1) What kind of challenges do millennial leaders describe?
(2) What kind of resources do they identify when dealing with these challenges?

Content analysis was chosen to be methodology for this study. Content analysis is one of the classical procedures for analyzing textual material and goal is to reduce material (Flick, 2014, 429). Content analysis is often divided into "inductive category development" and "deductive category application" (Mayring, 2000). Hsieh and Shannon (2005, 1277-1278) define content analysis as a research method in which the selected text is subjectively interpreted using systematic coding and classification. They introduce three different content analysis as conventional, directed, or summative. These different content analysis methods differentiate between coding methods, code origins and threats to reliability (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1277).

Conventional content analysis is typically used in studies where no existing theory is directly found or the literature on it is limited. In directed approach, idea is on relying on the help brought by theory and the purpose is to test the theory or extend it conceptually. The analysis is strongly guided by pre-built, ready-made categories. In the third method of analysis, Hsieh and Shannon open up content analysis as a summative, content-based approach in which words and their frequencies are calculated and compared. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1277-1285).

For the purposes of this research, it was decided to concentrate on the companies who succeeded on Great Place to Work (GPTW) scheme during 2020. With this selection, our aim was to reach extensively millennial leaders from different areas. GPTW is a private global consultation company who offers global measurement tools through their Trust Index survey and in addition evaluates organization's culture through Culture Audit-program. Company does research in 60 countries and all together these companies have over 10 million employees (Great Place to Work, 2020a). The diversity of sectors being part of GPTW scheme, e.g. accounting firms, agricultural machinery import and sale company, staffing and recruitment company and digital service providers, confirmed the choice to select GPTW as a focus group for this study.

GPTW started the research in Finland on 2002 and until now has listed 18 times best workplaces in Finland. During 2020, all together 150 companies were researched covering 30,000 employees. GPTW 2020 listing was published on February 14, 2020. Companies were divided into three categories based on the number of their employees; small (20-49 employees), middle-sized (50-488 employees), and large companies (over 500 employees). GPTW released 50 best performing companies in their home pages. During February-March 2020, all together 47 (7 small, 30 middle-sized and 13 small companies) companies' Head of Human Resources (HR) or equivalent person were contacted via e-mail and their interest to participate to this study was asked. For the three remaining companies, necessary contact information was not found and hence they were left out from this study (Great Place to Work, 2020b).

As a result, 11 companies were willing to join to this study and their HR department supported to provide the detailed contact information of their millennial leaders. We did not receive a response from all the companies contacted. However, a few companies reported that they have a policy of not participating in PhD research while some companies rejected the invitation referring to workload and hurry. Some of the companies did not respond at all. HR department was instructed to delimit individuals having a leadership or supervisor position and representing millennials as born between the years of 1978-1995. HR departments were given the full freedom to select the leaders and provide the contact information to the researcher. Followed by this, all together 40 millennial leaders were contacted via e-mail from which 28 shared their willingness to join to a casual interview. Some

of the leaders rejected due to challenging schedules or high workload. Eventually, 15 men and 13 women were interviewed. Of them, 19 were born between the years 1978-1985 and remaining nine between 1986-1991. Most study participants were from the beginning of the millennial generation, a few born in the late 70s. Millennial leaders educational background distributed as follows: three hold doctoral degrees, 15 master's degrees (from universities or universities of applied sciences), one candidate degree, three polytechnic degrees, and six vocational degrees (of which two were double degrees). The more specific position of leaders in the organization has not been opened as the leaders interviewed worked in different fields and organizational structures in different companies. Therefore, a more detailed examination of leadership hierarchies has been deliberately omitted from the study. The number of subordinates of leaders varied. For example, one leader had only two subordinates, while the other was the CEO of a small company and thus his leadership covered the entire staff of the company even though there were only a few direct subordinates. Some of the leaders had a team of about ten people to lead.

The interviews were conducted between March–August 2020. The first interview was done face-to-face, but all the rest were done remotely with the Microsoft Teams due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were recorded with the acceptance of interviewee. Interviews followed the semi-structured interview guide. Interviews started with the introduction of the study, followed up with warming-up questions related to the interviewee's background (gender, age, education, years of employment in total and a description of the current position) followed by discussion about the characteristics of leadership and leadership experiences. The average time for one interview was one hour, which was a suitable time to discuss the interview themes and, when necessary, we could also discuss those issues the interviewee brought up. Leaders were asked to freely tell what kind of thoughts about, and values related to leadership they have in general, what kind of challenges they have faced, and how they have tackled them. In this study, a conventional approach, also called as a data-driven content analysis was used. The results are presented as categories that are supported by material examples as descriptive evidence.

4. Results

Two types of challenges from the millennial leaders' perceptions could be distinguished as the main perspectives to view leadership challenges. These were the challenges for the future and challenges related to human activity. The description of challenges is followed by findings about resources the millennial leaders identified.

4.1 Leadership challenges

4.1.1 Challenges related to the future and changes in the operating environment

The category of challenges for the future and the diversity of the operating environment comprised elements that were related to issues that were not in the leaders' own hands. When describing the challenges, the leaders highlighted how they reflected the future changes in the operating environment which caused concerns about the uncertain future. For example, concerns about the continuity of work, the development of the industry and the resilience of employees during change

were evident in the leaders' narration. Uncertainty about the future, such as future job prospects and economic development, were perceived as challenging.

Leaders also mentioned how the surprising and rapid situations and changes in their work environment were challenging. Leaders' workdays typically included a wide variety of tasks and meetings, and they needed to be able to react quickly to changes around them. During the working days leaders had to move from one meeting to another, deal with a number of different topics. The first meeting of the day could address the personal challenges of the subordinate, after which the leader moved on to a meeting on the annual earnings outlook and then to a meeting on change management. The readiness and ability to be present at the meetings was therefore considered challenging.

You should be on the map; where we are now, what changes are happening in the world and how they affect us etc. Do you make the right choices in prioritizing your own time as no one looks after you, you have all the responsibility in a certain way for yourself. (Leader 1)

When you jump from one thing to another all the time you are not burdensome. That may be the challenge for many superiors here… (Leader 2)

So last year was that challenging. I had, at the same time, I should have done change management and pulled big projects as well as be supportive of new supervisors. Also, I had to form a clear direction in terms of responsibilities for where we were going and there was terrible pressure to get it moving fast. It was a challenging year and hard mentally. (Leader 3)

Furthermore, the constant intensification of competition was perceived as challenging, which was reflected in economic pressures and increased workload. Under financial pressures, leaders had been forced or knew in the future to lay off people. This was perceived as very challenging, also in an emotional level.

Then, of course, there are financial discipline, as is currently the case… (Leader 14)

Yes, we now have a very difficult situation because this big project will end at the turn of the year and 15 people will be left unemployed. (Leader 20)

4.1.2 Challenges related to daily work and decision-making

The constant changes in the operating environment were reflected in the activities of the leaders, which required them to perform new activities and renew themselves. Leaders found it very natural for the fact that there are all sorts of situations involved in leading people. Discussing the challenges, one of the leaders said aptly that working with people is humane and basically involves making mistakes. These kinds situations are managed by getting to know people, learning from mistakes, and working together.

 Very much it is a matter of working with people so somehow it is inevitable that there will be small or bigger failures. (Leader 22)

Leaders described performance discussions or dismissal situations as particularly challenging situations. Leaders also found it challenging when they had to give feedback to an employee about poor performance. Similarly, in redundancy situations leaders experienced responsibility and compassion for the employee. In these situations, leaders were required to have the courage to make hard decisions and deal with the fact that also difficult situations are part of a leader's work.

Certain situations, even where the employee's behavior needs to be addressed and measures taken… (Leader 6)

The most difficult situations are situations where you must do certain things due to the law or rules, to act in a robotic way in a situation where there are people or big emotions. (Leader 7)

The diversification of work and population challenged the practices and daily activities of leaders. The content of people-related matters was varied and practically could appear as numerous meetings during a day accompanied by sudden interrupts and emergency situations.

For example, today the roof of my calendar, 1,2,3,5,6,7 (counting), seven meetings on completely different things. In other words, we go from extreme to extreme. And then, in addition to this, I have handled quite a few calls this morning, which means things are coming up a lot all the time and they are completely different. I have, for example, today I have talked about the salary of one of my employees, we have talked about her cold sores etc. Then one job seeker has called, then a hundred emails have been processed, then someone's vacation money has been exchanged for money, there has been talk of preparing for the coronavirus etc. (Leader 2)

Leaders also pointed out that when working with people, a wide variety of emotions and situations may be present. Leaders understood this but at the same time saw it as one of the challenges of a leader's job. For example, an employee may have personal concerns that affect his or her ability to be fully present in the workplace. On the other hand, an employee may be so excited about something that a leader must limit his or her work so that the employee does not become exhausted. The leader's own emotional states, handling and tolerating them also required leaders to be aware of and have the ability to deal with them.

People are hard (laughing)… as so logically these things are easy but then in practice people have feelings, dreams, and desires. In a pulse like this or any pulse so you can't answer all of them or not all of them at the same time. And that makes it difficult. (Leader 21)

The limitations of time were repeatedly raised in the speeches of the leaders. Typically, their work days were full and there was not enough time for everything. Leaders felt particularly bad when they could not spend as much time with their employees as they would have liked. The pressure from time use was felt to be great.

It is said that what I might have paid attention to myself soon is that those subordinates do not receive, so to speak, enough attention and would be able to be sufficiently present in their daily lives… (Leader 27)

4.2 Resources at work

4.2.1   Genuine interest and belief in learning and coping

Millennial leaders seemed excited and interested in leadership. The willingness to reform and the challenges inspired the leaders. Challenges were perceived to be part of leadership and when difficult situations arose, leaders did not give up but found ways to tackle them.

A genuine interest in leadership and the challenges it entails inspires some leaders to enthusiastically take on and evolve from challenges. On the other hand, they realized that too much enthusiasm could strain them if they could not manage their duties carefully. For this reason, the awareness of one's own boundaries was perceived as important, although the innate fire and interest in all aspects of a leader's work was perceived as the foundation for successful leadership and the challenges ahead.

I get excited, it's a good thing, but it's also a burden in between. I get excited about new things and then things sometimes get lost. (Leader 3)

But I guess it motivates you in a certain way, it's a certain kind of internal burn to move forward that this is part of this journey. (Leader 2)

There must be a certain passion for that job, that there is a passion for doing that job… I don't know, having a passion for leading it, there must be a passion for that managerial job. (Leader 6)

Some leaders revealed that they have learned through experience to live with challenges and have found ways to regulate the emotional states brought on by challenges and found ways to deal with them. Very often, giving time to both yourself and the challenging thing helped you deal with challenging situations and issues.

I get excited about challenges, many times I may be that I am first and foremost no no, I can't stand it is not hopeless, but I sleep for a night or two and then I come up with an angle… (Leader 25)

The attitude of the leaders towards the challenges was generally positive. It was clear from the speech of some of the leaders that they were aware of the impact of their own attitudes on, for example, their behavior and the way they act. Thus, they also realized that they were acting as role models in challenging situations for other individuals.

Leadership is also much dependent on attitude. Does a person want to be caricatured just to complain and point out problems, or to solve them? There is a big difference in the attitude that is often also reflected in doing, being active, taking responsibility and even the energy that is conveyed around you. (Leader 26)

4.2.2 Optimism and the sense of meaning

The leader's attitude toward learning was positive. Instead of focusing on negatives, or stressing the challenges ahead and faced, the leaders persevered with a confident attitude to the future. Optimism appeared a clear resource to them.

Somehow, I am extremely optimistic, and, in a way, I do not see an opportunity you will not survive… (Leader 9)

It doesn't help like (laughs) a bit like suck it up and try to heal. (Leader 26)

Challenges were an important part of development. The belief that difficult situations are actually opportunities seem to carry these millennial leaders. On the other hand, they also seemed to have strongly embraced the need for continuous improvement.

That's why I said that this crisis (Covid-19) is good for this place as you can't get lazy yourself. It is good that you must develop yourself with a frenzy. (Leader 28)

Difficult situations were perceived as a normal part of leadership. Leaders believed challenges were part of the leadership workplace and through challenging situations they had learned that challenges cannot be avoided but must be addressed immediately. This reflects the tenacious attitude of leaders towards the challenges of leadership. It was clear that leaders' mental toughness had helped them endure even in the face of obstacles.

Of course, it is heavy, but I feel they (challenges) are not part of this this job. They are quite essential (challenges) to this work. And you can't avoid them. (Leader 7)

Maybe a sense of relativity. You don't, yeah, they're nasty stuff but it's also part of doing business and part of leadership. It wasn't the end of the world for the company, and it wasn't the end of the world for me, and it wasn't the end of the world for him either. (coping with dismissal) (Leader18)

4.2.3 The experience of purpose and affiliation made leaders feel good

Leaders felt the responsibility given to them was meaningful. A sense of purpose motivated them to lead toward a common goal and handle obstacles.

It's an honor, yes, I feel I'm proud to have been given the responsibility to take the bigger picture in some direction. I find it terribly meaningful. (Leader 18)

Leaders felt that doing what they did produced meaning also for other people. This shows the purpose that leaders experience from their own work. The committed staff and the feeling of working together were perceived meaningful, which further strengthened the relevance of leaders' own work.

And the purpose of being a leader is further emphasized by the fact that you are proud of what that company does, then I am proud to be able to choose the people who do the job and direct and sort of steer to the big picture… if I succeed in it then it is true a big impact on one person's life and significance comes through it more. (Leader 18)

We have a good organization where people are committed and enthusiastic as well as blowing one coal across departmental boundaries and let's say though that negatives in relation to positives (things) so would go even at 95 and 5. (Leader 22)

Leaders felt that well-being at work was important and saw their own opportunities to influence the well-being of others. Helping and supporting the subordinate was perceived as meaningful, which certainly strengthened the mental perseverance of the leaders in coping with very different levels of challenges.

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

4.2.4 Strong self-confidence and learning from mistakes

Unquestionably, the leaders believed that their own efforts would have an impact and that they were able to improve the future through their own actions. Leaders also had confidence in the ability of people to develop and learn, and they saw themselves as able to influence the development and possible transformation of subordinates. Perhaps their experience of overcoming past challenges had strengthened their credit for overcoming the challenges.

Because I believe in people, I believe that things can be affected, I believe that people can change… it is not so gloomy that there is no solution… (Leader 21)

Patience, humility, faith in one's own actions, that one has coped even in those difficult situations. (Leader 22)

5   Discussion

The actions and attitudes of the millennial leaders were positive about the work and the challenges ahead. The positive and continuous learning attitude reflected the way leaders work and cope with challenges. Leaders liked their work and enjoyed it, which is why they can be said to be committed to their work. The resources the leaders mentioned as crucial when tackling challenges are supported by Schaufeli et al. (2002). For example, the leaders' vigor of the leaders was especially evident in the challenging situations and when they talked about the challenging situations. In the interview situations, they enjoyed talking about the challenges and eagerly gave concrete examples. Leaders did not want to give up easily, reflecting their perseverance and willingness to

cope with the challenges. Leaders' strong experience of the importance of their work and their pride in leadership reflect their dedication to their work. However, Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) third dimension of absorption and the deep state of concentration did not directly emerge to such an extent in our interview data.

The growth attitude (see Dweck, 2007) reflects the way in which millennium leaders take a position on leadership work and the challenges that lie ahead. It can be said that millennial leaders saw leadership as a process in which adversities and learning from them was a natural part. Studies by Dweck (2007) have showed that people with a growth attitude recover better from adversity than people with an attitude of fixed mindset.

Millennial leaders emphasized an interest in leadership, a positive attitude, experiencing relevance at work, and a strong belief in what they are doing as their main resources. How millennial leaders' challenges and resources reflect grit can be seen in Figure 1 that presents a three-leveled disc called "Categorization of the millennial leaders' challenges and resources according to GRIT". Figure 1 shows how perseverance and passion supported leaders in a variety of challenges.
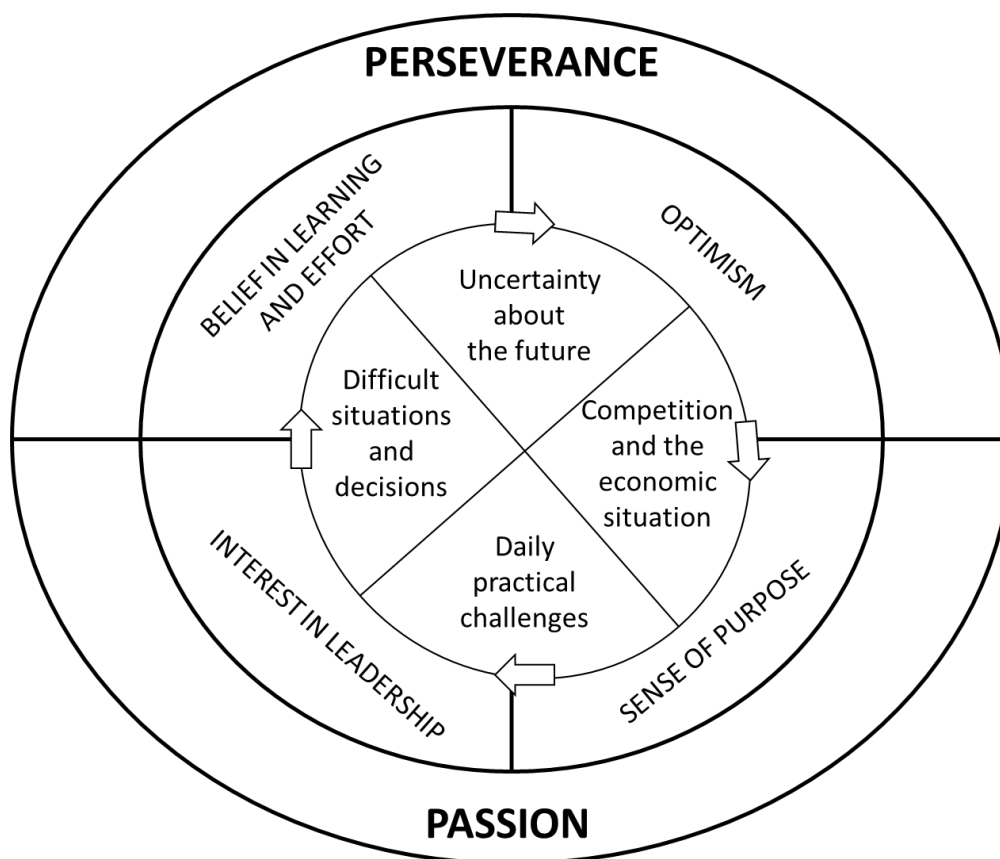

Figure 1. Categorization of the millennial leaders' challenges and resources according to GRIT

At the heart of the three-leveled disc is a description of the four types of challenges described by the leaders. The first challenge is described as the uncertain future experienced by leaders and

related issues, such as those related to the continuity of work and the development of the industry. The second challenge was the intensifying competition and the economic situation in the industry, which were closely linked to the former, causing pressure and uncertainty. The latter two challenges are more closely related to the day-to-day work of leaders, including coping with practical challenges such as conducting performance discussions or handling redundancies. Difficult situations and decisions caused a wide range of emotional states and this was also perceived as challenging.

The core of the three-leveled disc, in which the challenges are described, is rolling while the other levels are stable. This is to illustrate the fact that regardless of a challenge, the resources placed in the second level of disc support the handling and coping with the challenge. For example, an interest in leadership strengthened leaders' motivation and willingness to develop in their work, giving strength to challenging situations. The experience and relevance of the purpose gave leaders the faith and strength to go through even the most challenging situations. The positive attitude of leaders toward work and leadership supported their attitude to the diversity of work and the credit for their own learning and effort created faith in coping with even difficult situations.

The survival of the challenges is reflected in the perseverance and passion depicted on the outer perimeter of the two-level disc. Next, we go through the elements of the two-level disc one by one to get an idea of how the grit's perseverance and passion manifested.

The elements of grit—interest, practice, purpose, and hope—were clearly visible in leaders' speeches. Genuine interest and passionate action in challenging situations manifest passion for leadership. The interest in and development of one's own leadership was repeatedly reflected in the speeches of leaders, which can be seen to reflect a strong passion for leadership. Duckworth (2016, 97) concludes that those who work on their own personal interests are more satisfied with their work and do better. Interest is expected to grow gradually and feedback and the people around are important (Duckworth 2016, 105), which may also be one important factor in the strong interest of leaders in leadership and related challenges.

Optimistic attitude and practice helped to cope with the challenges and showed the perseverance of the leaders. Seeing and experiencing the challenges as a natural part of leadership helped to take a realistic approach to the problems, which certainly supported the perseverance of the leaders to overcome them as well. Perhaps seeing the challenges as a place of growth and an opportunity to practice and develop as a leader supported the perseverance of leaders. Ericsson et al. (1993) used the concept of deliberate practise, which is needed to achieve expert-level ability. Deliberate practice refers to conscious activities that are well-planned, structured, and have long-term consequences and goals as a key idea (Ericsson et al. 1993, 368). Approaching and coping with challenges can be thought of as a type of deliberate practice.

Leaders perceived leadership as their own, which in turn could reinforce experience of the relevance of leaders in their work. For example, the importance of caring for well-being was emphasized in leaders' speeches, which certainly reinforced the leaders' experience of the importance of their work. In caring for the well-being of their subordinates, leaders felt their work was important, which could also strengthen their own well-being. Experiencing the significance and importance of the work could thus have had a self-reinforcing effect. Duckworth (2016) defines relevance as part of a passion, an intention to contribute to the well-being of others through one's

own actions, which was evident in the actions of the leaders of this study to promote the well-being of others through their own actions.

The discussion of the challenging situations was a good indication of the leaders' strong belief in their own learning and effort. Leaders were united by a growth mindset that supported them in dealing with difficult situations. People with a growth mindset explain adversity in a positive way, leading to new challenges and sustaining action (Duckworth 2016, 192; Dweck 2006).

Finally, the interest and perseverance shown in the leaders supported them in the face of various challenges. For example, a belief in one's own learning and effort, as well as an optimistic attitude toward an uncertain future, demonstrated the tenacious actions of leaders. Similarly, an interest in leadership and experiences of relevance supported in challenging situations and at the same time expressed a passion for the work of a leader.

Reliability

The reliability of a study is examined in terms of its credibility, transferability, reliability, and validation. Descriptions of the selection of research participants, as well as descriptions of the structure and data analysis of the semi-structured interview, have been used to highlight issues that affect credibility. When considering the transferability of a study, it is possible to assess how the results of the study can be applied in other contexts and it should be noted that the participants in the study were unique and the content of the study may change based on the participants' experience, hence, this study has sought to provide sufficiently detailed information on the stages of fieldwork as suggested by Shenton (2004, 63 & see also Ranta 2017, 51). For example, it can be assumed that companies participating in a GPTW project value personnel development and well-being, which is why they are willing to develop it together with an external actor. All leaders had experienced GPTW as a useful and motivating method to support leadership, which could be argued that a positive attitude towards self-development at different levels (individual, team, organization, and company) unites leaders. It should also be noted that most of the GPTW companies in this study were growth companies whose sales and staff have grown significantly in recent years. The interest in growth companies, their culture and will united leaders, which may be related to their positive attitude towards work and development in general.

Reliability refers to the reproducibility of the study, i.e., whether the study results would be similar if the study were repeated under conditions like this study. Therefore, the different stages of the study are described in detail. Elo et al. (2014) use the concept of trustworthiness in content analysis to refer to the reliability of each step of the analysis process, including preparation, organization, and reporting of results. The aim of this study was to understand what kind of challenges millennial leaders face in their work. The selection process of the research participants, as well as the steps of data collection, have been described above, which, are important parts in assessing reliability. In assessing the validation of a study, Shenton (2004, 72-73) uses the concept of confirmability which notes that attention is paid to the researcher him or herself as well. As researchers, we cannot claim that our own perceptions, prejudices and attitudes would not have influenced the

research at all, but therefore all stages of the research and especially the method of data analysis have been accurately described to confirm the effectiveness of the research.

We evaluate the ethical issues of research with the *seven-phase themes* of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, 63), the first of which is *thematization*. The purpose of the research is to produce scientifically valuable information that can be utilized, for example, in the development of leadership training. By *design*, Kvale and Brinkmann suggest that subjects have been asked to consent to participate in the study and confidentiality has been ensured. Participation in the study was voluntary. As a third step, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) encourage reflection on the *interview situation* itself, considering individuals 'feelings, such as stress and changes in self-understanding. For example, one of the interviewees had to interrupt the interview due to a work situation and asked to be allowed to continue another day. This request was granted.

The fourth step is to review the *transcribed* material, and in this study the researcher himself transcribed the material so that he could also make use of the interview diary he kept with it with additional comments. Additional comments included the general mood of the interview or possible interruptions. The names of the interviewees were not recorded in the spelling material, but the interviewees were coded with numbers. The fifth step concerns the ethics of the *analysis* and means how deeply the researcher interprets the material and whether the subjects can take a stand on the interpretation. In this study, subjects were anonymous and thus could not comment directly on personal interpretations (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

The sixth step is related to *verification* which means that the researcher is responsible for ensuring that results are reported safely and securely. The final step is *reporting*, where the goal is confidentiality of reporting. For example, the names and other identifying information of the interviewees' employers have been eliminated from the report (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

6. Conclusion

The optimal attitude and practice of leaders supported leaders in challenging situations. From this it can be said that positive leadership is the result of learning. By treating leadership positively and as an opportunity to develop, the ability to see the challenges and successes of the job in an encouraging and encouraging tone is formed. Having overcome various challenges, leaders had learned to trust that they had the resources to cope (see also Hyvärinen, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2015; Hyvärinen, Äärelä, & Uusiautti, 2022). The ability to experience positive emotions can be a fundamental human strength (Fredrickson, 2001; 2009). This also reinforces the idea that the ability to see one's own work and its achievements in a positive way is also a consequence of the learning process. Only those negative and difficult alerts that are responded to are easily noticed and, at the same time, positive experiences can be ignored for granted.

This study supports the notion that gritty leaders' strength is endurance, and they are capable to cope with challenges and remain most committed to the task at hand for longer (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009, 5). Grit can be seen as a resource of leaders, and this research also revealed the changing nature of grit (see also Park, Tsukayama, Yu, & Duckworth, 2020).

As a topic for further research, the methodological approach to the topic could be expanded. For example, leaders could write a diary of positive experiences and overcoming challenges (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Ethnographic research (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) could also highlight what issues are being addressed in leadership in the work community. Leaders may not recognize or know everything about their own behavior and the way they lead. In addition, it could be important to hear the voice of the employee ladder in GPTW companies. What do they expect from millennial leaders, how satisfied are they, and what do they value in leadership in the context of today's challenges? Action research (see e.g., Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; McNiff, 2013) could also bring a new addition to support the work of millennium leaders and the well-being of them and the work community. In this case, the three-leveled disc provided by this study could be implemented in the work community and tested, evaluated, and developed together with the leaders and employees.

This study brings a new perspective to take advantage of GRIT while expanding the field of leadership research. The research provides a new kind of tool to look at the challenges of prowess leadership and the conditions of coping with them.

7. References

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