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The role of LMX and followership in strategy implementation

A case study from IT project teams

School of management
Master's Thesis in International Business

Vaasa 2026

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA
School of Management
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Title of the Thesis: The role of LMX and followership in strategy implementation: A case study from IT project teams
Degree: Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration
Programme: Master's Degree Programme in International Business
Supervisor: William Degbey
Year: 2026 **Pages:** 68

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this master's thesis is to examine the relationship between leader-member exchange (LMX), followership, and strategy implementation in IT project teams of an international organization. The organization has gone through significant changes in recent years, especially in terms of the digital service development. As part of these changes, IT projects have become more important for operational activities and the implementation of strategic goals.

The aim of this research is to explore how the relationship between a leader and an employee is related to active followership behaviour, and how these factors support the transition of strategic goals into daily project work.

The theoretical framework of the study is built around LMX, followership, and strategy implementation literature. Previous studies and literature help to understand that the relationship between a leader and an employee is an interactive process, and that employees' own, active behaviour can support the implementation of strategic goals in IT project teams.

The research was conducted as a quantitative case study in an international logistics, e-commerce, and service organization. The data was collected from the organization's IT project teams using an online questionnaire, which resulted in 52 responses. The questionnaire included statements measuring LMX, followership, and the implementation of strategy in daily work. The data was analysed using statistical methods including descriptive statistical analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

The results showed that both high-quality leader-member relationships and proactive followership behaviours were positively related to strategy implementation. However, followership and follower behaviour had a stronger connection to strategy implementation than leader-member relationships. The results suggest that strategy implementation is not only based on leadership, but that employee activity, actions, and commitment play a key role in implementing strategic goals into daily work.

This research complements previous studies by emphasizing the importance of followership in strategy implementation in projects and by highlighting the connection between interactive leadership processes and the practical implementation of strategic goals. The findings also provide practical insights for organizations that seek to strengthen the strategy implementation in project teams.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, LMX, Followership, Strategy implementation, Project teams

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää leader-member exchange (LMX) -suhteiden, seuraajuuden (followership) sekä strategian implementoinnin välistä yhteyttä kansainvälisen organisaation IT-projektitiimeissä. Organisaatio on viime vuosien aikana kokenut merkittäviä muutoksia erityisesti digitalisten palveluiden kehittämisen osalta. Osana tätä muutosta, IT-projekteista on tullut yhä tärkeämpiä operatiivisen toiminnan sekä strategisten tavoitteiden toteutumisen kannalta.

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tarkastella miten johtajan ja työntekijän välinen suhde liittyy aktiiviseen seuraajien käyttäytymiseen, sekä miten nämä tekijät tukevat strategisten tavoitteiden siirtymistä osaksi päivittäistä IT projektityötä.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu LMX- teorian, seuraajuuden sekä strategian implementointia käsittelevän kirjallisuuden ympärille. Aikaisemmat tutkimukset ja kirjallisuus auttavat ymmärtämään, että johtajan ja työntekijän välinen suhde on vuorovaikutteinen prosessi, ja työntekijöiden oma, aktiivinen toiminta voi tukea strategisten tavoitteiden toteutumista työtehtävissä.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kvantitatiivisena tapaustutkimuksena kansainvälisesti toimivassa logistiikka-, verkkokauppa- ja palveluorganisaatiossa. Aineisto kerättiin sähköisellä kyselylomakkeella organisaation IT-projektitiimeiltä (N=52). Kysely sisälsi LMX-suhteita, seuraajuutta sekä strategisten tavoitteiden toteutumista päivittäisessä työssä mittaavia väittämiä. Aineisto analysoitiin tilastollisin menetelmin hyödyntäen kuvailevaa tilastoanalyysia, reliabiliteettianalyysiä, korrelaatioanalyysia sekä regressioanalyysia.

Tulokset osoittivat, että sekä laadukkaammat LMX-suhteet että seuraajien käyttäytyminen olivat positiivisesti yhteydessä strategian implementointiin. Huomattavaa on kuitenkin, että seuraajuudella ja seuraajien käyttäytymisellä oli vahvempi yhteys strategian implementointiin kuin LMX-suhteilla. Tulokset viittaavat siihen, että strategian toteutuminen ei perustu pelkästään johtamiseen, vaan työntekijöiden aktiivisuudella, aloitteellisuudella ja sitoutumisella on keskeinen rooli strategisten tavoitteiden sisällyttämisessä osaksi päivittäistä työtä.

Tämä tutkimus täydentää aiempia tutkimuksia korostamalla seuraajuuden merkitystä strategian implementoinnissa projekteissa, sekä tuomalla esiin vuorovaikutteisten johtamisprosessien yhteyden strategisten tavoitteiden käytännön toteutumiseen. Tulokset tarjoavat myös käytännön näkökulmia organisaatiolle, jotka pyrkivät vahvistamaan strategian implementointia projektitiimeissä.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, LMX, Followership, Strategy implementation, Project teams

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1 Introduction

Leadership has long been viewed as a top-down process in which designated leaders provide direction and followers execute tasks. This perspective has been widely studied in organizational and project management literature, focusing on leadership styles, traits, and decision-making processes. However, this kind of leader-centered approaches provide only a partial understanding of how leadership functions in modern organizations and tend to overlook the role of followers and the relational side of leadership processes.

Technological organizations that operate in project-based environments have become more complex, as the work requires a lot of continuous interaction between people for the teams to smoothly cooperate and share expertise (Turner & Müller, 2005; Müller et al., 2018). This development calls for leadership that is based more on communication and mutual influence, rather than formal authority. It emphasizes broader understanding of leadership where the employees are active participants in the leadership process and not only passive recipients of directions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Carsten et al., 2010).

Followership is an important perspective that addresses the difference between traditional leadership processes and active participation of followers. According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), leadership cannot exist without followership because followers play a key role in shaping leadership outcomes. Followers contribute to the creation of leadership through their active participation and engagement instead of only passively receiving instructions (Uhl-Bien at al., 2014). This is how followership theory shifts the focus from only leaders executing leadership to followers and leaders co-creating leadership.

The importance of followership is emphasized in IT project environments. IT projects are the place where organization's technological development and strategic goals are put into practice through collaboration between different functions. (Aga et al., 2016;

Gemünden et al., 2018). Project teams often consist of individuals with specialized expertise, which increases the importance of communication, coordination, and shared understanding. Effective project leadership requires more than task coordination as it involves building trust, fostering good and timely communication, and enabling shared understanding among team members. As a result, leadership effectiveness in IT projects increasingly depends on how team members engage with their roles and mutual influence between leaders and followers (Müller et al., 2018).

One theoretical approach that captures the relational dynamics between leaders and followers is the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. LMX explains leadership as a series of two-way relationships between leaders and followers, where the quality of exchange determines levels of trust, commitment, and performance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Despite extensive research has demonstrated the positive effects of high-quality LMX relationships, less attention has been given to how these relationships shape followership behaviors, and how such behaviors influence more broader organizational processes. In particular, there is limited research examining how LMX and followership together contribute to strategy implementation, especially in project-based environments.

Strategy implementation refers to the process where an organization's strategic objectives and goals are translated into actions and behaviors that can be executed in everyday work (de Oliveira et al., 2019). Implementing a strategy is not just setting goals, as the process requires creating a clear roadmap to explain how strategic objectives can be achieved. De Oliveira et al. (2019) have identified five dimensions that are part of the strategy execution process: unfolding, communication, coordination, development of human resources policies and employee competences, and control and feedback. While strategy formulation defines the direction, successful implementation requires that employees understand, internalize, and act upon strategic priorities in their everyday work (Ahearne et al., 2014). The gap between organization's strategic goals and the daily work of employees is one of the biggest challenges in strategy implementation

(Hrebiniak, 2006). Effective and interactive leader-follower relationships help employees to understand the organization's goals and apply them in their own work (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). For that reason, examining both leader-follower relationships and follower behaviors is important when gaining understanding on how strategy is implemented in practice.

1.1 The research purpose and objectives

Leader-member exchange, followership, and strategy implementation have been widely studied as separate concepts, but there is little research on how the leader-follower relationships and follower behaviors are associated with strategy implementation in project work. Existing LMX research has mainly focused on outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Dulebohn et al. 2012), while followership research has primarily examined follower role orientations and proactive behaviors (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). At the same time, strategy implementation literature has emphasized communication, alignment, and organizational processes (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; de Oliveira et al., 2019), but has paid less attention especially to the relational and behavioral processes through which strategy is translated into everyday project work.

In particular, limited research has examined how leader-member relationships shape proactive followership behaviors and how these behaviors support strategy implementation within IT project environments. Therefore, this thesis focuses on integrating LMX theory, followership research, and strategy implementation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how strategy is translated into practice in IT project environments.

The aim of this master's thesis is to investigate how leader-member relationships shape followership behaviors in IT project teams within an international logistics and e-commerce organization, and how these relationships support the implementation of organizational strategy in through everyday work. The research is situated in

international business environment, where IT projects support digital services, logistics operations, and strategic coordination across multiple countries. In addition, some project teams operate in multinational environments involving collaboration between employees located in different countries, while certain projects directly support cross-border operations.

By focusing on the relational and behavioral link between LMX, followership, and strategy implementation, the research contributes to both the theoretical understanding of leadership-followership co-production and the practical management of IT projects in strategic contexts. Therefore, the objectives of the thesis are:

- To analyze the leader-member exchange and followership in the context of the IT project environment to gain understanding of the relational dynamics between leaders and followers in international project work.
- To explore how leader-member relationship quality is linked to followership behaviors, such as proactivity, responsibility-taking, and communication in IT project teams within an international organization.
- To examine how leader-member relationships and followership behaviors support the implementation of strategic goals in project work.

1.2 Research questions and delimitations

The objectives of this thesis guide the examination of how leadership relationships and followership behaviors support strategy implementation in international IT project work. In particular, the research focuses on the relational processes linking leader-member exchange and proactive followership with the translation of strategic priorities into everyday work within an international organization. Based on these objectives, the two research questions this thesis aims to answer are:

1. How do leader-member relationships shape followership behaviors in IT project teams operating in an international organization?

2. How do these leader-member relationships support the implementation of strategic goals in daily IT project work within an international organization?

This thesis is conducted as a quantitative case study focusing on IT project teams within a single, international organization. The organizational environment includes collaboration between teams located in different countries, and projects that support cross-border operational processes. However, the research focuses on one organizational context only, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other internationally operating organizations or industries. In addition, although the organizational environment includes multinational collaboration, the research does not specifically compare cultural differences or national contexts.

1.3 Use of Artificial Intelligence

In this thesis, artificial intelligence (AI) was used only to support the writing process. AI-based tools were used to check the grammar and improve sentence structures so that the text stays clear and academic. All of the suggestions were critically evaluated before their possible use. The author remains responsible for the final form of the text throughout the thesis.

The AI tools used include Grammarly for grammar checking and Claude by Anthropic for text clarity. The tools were used only to support the writing process.
AI tools were not used to independently generate content and all research activities, analytical work, findings, and conclusions presented in this thesis are the original work of the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of this thesis.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Following the introduction, chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of the research by reviewing previous literature on followership, leader-member exchange (LMX), and strategy implementation. The chapter also discusses the relationships between these concepts in the context of IT

project work and develops the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis and hypotheses of the study.

Chapter 3 explains the research methodology, including the research design, case organization, data collection process, and methods used for statistical analysis. In addition, the chapter evaluates the reliability and validity of the research and outlines the ethical considerations related to the research process.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of the research. The chapter includes descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis examining the relationships between LMX, followership behaviors, and strategy implementation.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to previous literature and the theoretical framework of the thesis. The chapter examines the results from both theoretical and practical perspectives and examines the role of followership as a relational mechanism connecting leadership relationships and strategy implementation in IT project teams in international organization.

Finally, chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings and contributions of the study. The chapter also discusses the limitations of the research and provides suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical framework

Leadership in project environments has been identified as a critical factor for project success, influencing both the team's performance and strategic outcomes (Turner & Müller, 2005; Müller et al., 2017). Projects differ from permanent organizational structures as they are temporary, goal-oriented, and have time restrictions (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). This makes leadership in projects particularly complex, as project leaders need to balance task coordination, collaboration, communication and adapting to changing conditions (Clarke, 2012). Ismael (2022) is presenting that the demanding role of the head of the project involves creating clear objectives, making informed decisions when to adjust plans, keeping the team engades and enthusiastic under the pressure and making sure that the project is completed in the planned time frame and cost-efficiently**.**

Literature on project leadership underlines balanced or shared leadership as a concept. According to Müller et al. (2017), shared leadership happens when the leadership responsibilities are spread through the project group instead of the group having one formal leader. Shared leadership theory is well aligned with the followership theory. Followership is also viewing leadership more from a collaborative perspective and emphasizes the importance of communication and interactive behavior between the team members and the leader (Uhl-Bien, 2006). It also highlights that leadership should be seen as something that is created by the actions and interactions in the workplace (Crevani et al., 2010). Using the shared leadership processes and having team members who participate actively can help the team to focus more to the outcomes of the project (Söderlund, 2004). This strengthens the idea of understanding leadership through relationships and interactions within teams and not only through leaders.

2.1 Followership

Although leadership has long been an important topic in organizational research, the study of followership has received limited attention. In traditional leadership theories,

followers are often described as passive recipients of influence who are simply executing the directions of those in leader positions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Historically, leadership research has focused on identifying the traits, styles, and competencies of the leaders. This focus is valuable but tends to miss the relational nature of leadership and underestimates the role of followers (Shamir, 2007). In response, followership theory emerged to emphasize that leadership cannot exist without followers and that followers contribute actively to leadership outcomes (Kelley, 1992; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Early followership theories emerged in the late 20th century as researchers questioned the imbalance of leadership studies and started to address the limitation by emphasizing that leadership is essentially a relational process in which followers are active contributors not just passive actors (Kelley, 1992; Uhl-Bien et al.,2014). Kelley (1992) was among the first to conceptualize followership as an active and valuable role, categorizing followers based on their independent critical thinking and active engagement. He argues that effective followers demonstrate critical thinking, responsibility, and active engagement rather than just blindly following orders. In addition, Chaleff (2009) observes that active followers support their leaders, but they also have the courage to question and challenge the leaders if needed. The role of active followers is recognized as an important and essential part in helping to achieve organizational goals (Schindler & Schindler, 2014, chapter 2).

Followership research highlights the relational and interactive view of leadership. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) identify two primary perspectives for studying followership: the role-based and the constructionist approach. The focus of the role-based approach is on what followers do and what tasks and responsibilities their roles include (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followership depends on the way the employee perceives his/her role in the organization, and this view impacts how the employee behaves towards leaders (Carsten et al., 2010). The employee's role perception is impacted by his/her attitude and the surrounding conditions, such as leader's leadership style and the organizational setting. Employees can either act passively, actively, or proactively and this affects how

well employees share their thoughts and participate in decision-making (Carsten et al. 2010; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). Recent studies (eg. Yu & Feng, 2024), indicate that role perception influences employee's behavior, which then influences performance outcomes and this is why it is essential to understand the role perception of employees when studying leadership processes.

The focus of the constructionist approach is on the interactions between leaders and followers and on how leadership and followership develop from these interactions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The approach sees leadership as a dynamic process, not just as fixed and hierarchical roles that certain people hold (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Co-creating leadership and seeing leadership as relational challenges the traditional ideas of leadership hierarchy and authority. Instead of leaders simply providing vision and followers executing tasks, followers are co-creating leadership by gproviding feedback and sharing their perspectives (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers can influence decisions and even determine whether leadership efforts succeed or fail (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). In more recent research, Bastardoz and Adriaensen (2023, pp. 5-6) have built on this idea, suggesting that employees become followers when they are influenced to work towards shared goals. This supports the idea that followership is developed through interaction. From this point of view followership is not fixed, and employees can change between leading and following depending on the situation and their perception of expertise in that situation (Bastardoz & Adriaensen, 2023, pp. 5-6). The focus changes from static organizational roles to dynamic interactions between team members, where leadership and followership are co-created. Approaching a project in this way is important because teamwork and shared understanding matter more and personal responsibilities can change during the project.

The concept of co-created leadership suggests that leadership is happening when leaders and followers are working together and having active interaction (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Shamir, 2007). Derue and Ashford (2010) say that leadership and followership are continuously being shaped through interactions. People claim and

give roles to each other. Leadership is not only something a leader does, but it is created together with the followers through conversations and shared understanding (Baker, 2007). Blom and Alvesson (2015) continue that leadership and followership are connected and always changing through interaction.

Followership is also about how people act on their role. Active followers show that they can think independently, take part actively, are responsible, and are ready to give feedback when necessary (Schindler & Schindler, 2014, chapter 2). When followers are proactive, it can lead to a higher level of trust and better relationships. Followers who take initiative and are active are more likely to build strong relationships with their leaders (Shahzadi et al., 2022).

Although followership has received more and more attention in research, recent reviews show that the field is still fragmented especially in terms of how followership behaviors develop in different organizational settings (Ribba et al., 2024). At the same time, studies point out that factors like leadership style and the work environment are important in shaping follower behavior (Velez & Neves, 2022). Because of this, it is important to study followership as something that changes depending on the situation and environment. Followership is not only a role, but a dynamic process that is socially shaped and expressed through behavior and it plays a central role in how organizational goals are understood and put into practice, which reinforces its relevance in project-based environments.

2.2 Followership in project work

In projects, leadership relies less on formal authority and more on mutual trust, communication, and collaboration (Müller et al., 2018). Project team members contribute their skills, suggestions, and feedback, making followership an important part of shaping the project outcomes. Active followership in a project environment means that team members participate actively, are engaged, suggest improvements, and take responsibility for their work (Aga et al., 2016; Breevaart et al., 2015). To understand

followership in project work, it is important to look at the quality of relationships between leaders and followers.

Abson et al. (2024) show that shared leadership often develops in project-based organizations when trust exists between team members and between the team and the leaders. Their findings indicate that leadership in project settings is shaped by how the team members interact. This supports the idea that followership in project work requires active participation and engagement from all members of the project team.

The way IT projects are working can highlight the importance of active followership.
The project teams in IT need a from of leadership that supports collaboration and shared responsibility by using clear delegation between team members (Ismael, 2022). Members of the project team usually have different individual skills that are essential for finishing different tasks, so it is important for them to take initiative and go beyond their assigned roles (Ismael, 2022). This is connected to the findings about shared leadership in projects by Abson et al. (2024), who say that followers are participating in decision making and problem solving instead of just doing their tasks.

Latest research on followership theory focuses on relationships and behavior. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) suggest that followership is created through a process where followers and the leaders are interacting and that creates and later shapes the leadership. So, the followers are seen as active contributors with real possibility to influence the leadership with their own actions. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) also support this, noting that leadership is often created by interactions like listening, having informal conversations, showing interest, and being present. Their research highlights that followers often see these acts as meaningful leadership with value. Followers are co-creating the leadership daily when they participate actively.

Proactive follower behavior is seen as a key part of effective followership in recent studies. Proactive followers shape how the organization works by sharing their ideas and

speaking up about problems early (Shahzadi et al., 2022). In IT project teams need to adapt and coordinate clearly, so proactive followership behaviors matter. Proactive behaviors help teams handle challenges and stay aligned with goals.

2.3 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

According to Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995), leader-member exchange (LMX) theory explains leadership as a process that develops through individual relationships between a leader and each of their team members, challenging the traditional leadership models that assume leaders to interact the same way with and toward all employees. Unlike traditional leadership theories that assume leaders to treat everyone the same way, LMX theory proposes that each leader-member relationship is unique and varies in how much trust and respect there is, as well as in the level of support exchanged between the employees and the leaders (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Bauer & Erdogan, 2015).

LMX theory originated from the vertical dyad linkage (VDL) model developed in the 1970s, which first recognized that leaders develop individualized relationships with subordinates rather than treating everyone in the team in a same, consistent way (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This dyadic perspective highlights that leadership occurs within individual leader-follower relationships rather than at group level, supporting the idea leadership processes are inherently relational and individual (Graen, 1978).
These relationships develop gradually, as the leaders and followers learn to define and adjust their roles based on shared expectations and trust. This highlights that LMX is based on mutual influence, where both the leader and follower shape the relationship rather than the leader alone (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

A key differentiation in LMX theory is between high-quality and low-quality relationships. As the exchange relationship develops, it can evolve into a high-quality LMX relationship which is defined by loyalty, support, and mutual trust, or remain low-quality, defined mainly by contractual exchanges and limited communication (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997; Dulebohn et al., 2012). According to Liden et al.

(1997), trusting and supporting leaders have more committed and better performing followers. This strengthens the relationship between leaders and followers. In contrast, leaders who show no trust or support have followers who are less engaged and have lower performance (Liden et al., 1997).

Studies show that high-quality leader-member relationships create benefits for organizations. The meta-analysis by Dulebohn et al. (2012) covered more than 250 independent samples, confirmed strong positive correlations between LMX and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and citizenship behavior. This is supported by Breevart et al. (2015), who state that high-quality LMX relationships have been linked to increased job performance, work engagement, organizational commitment, and behaviors that go beyond formal requirements such as helping and speaking up. Empirical research further shows that high-quality LMX relationships are associated with behaviors where employees go beyond formal job requirements to contribute to team and organizational effectiveness (Deluga, 1998). High-LMX employees receive more information, feedback, and autonomy, which enhances their motivation and capacity to perform effectively (Liden et al., 1997). High-quality exchanges help both leaders and organizations. When leaders build trusting and respectful relationships with their team members, they can help teams to work together more effectively (Uhl-Bien et al., 1995).

While most of the studies about LMX focus on the benefits of high-quality relationships, some research also explains what happens when the relationship quality is low. In low-quality relationships there is no trust and employee motivation is low (Furunes et al., 2015). Henderson et al. (2009) have studied how leaders can have different kinds of relationships with people on the same team. This is called LMX differentiation. High differentiation can affect how the team works together, how fair people feel the leader is and the team's overall performance. This highlights the importance LMX throughout the team, not just for individuals. In project environment where people need to actively coordinate, collaborate, and share responsibilities the LMX effects are even more important (Liden et al., 2006).

LMX theory sees leadership shaping follower behaviors, but recent research shows that relationships can go both ways. The development and quality of LMX relationships can be influenced by proactive followers (Shih & Nguyen, 2025). This underlines that the relationships between leader and follower are dynamic and can change.

Also, different factors in the work environment can affect the growth of these relationships. For example, perceived organizational support (POS) can change how LMX relates to work outcomes (Erdogan and Enders, 2007). When supervisors feel supported by the organization, they are more likely to invest in developing supportive and resourceful relationships with their subordinates, so they are more likely to invest in high quality relationships with their followers.

2.4 Relationship between LMX, followership and project work

High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual trust and respect, whereas low-quality relationships remain mostly contractual and role specific (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997). While extensive research has demonstrated positive associations between LMX quality and outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, and performance (e.g. Dulebohn et al., 2012), less attention has been directed towards how LMX shapes followership behaviors within project context.

Recent research about followership suggests that the behaviors of the follower are not just outcomes of leadership but are also necessary to the leadership process. Velez and Neves (2022) argue that proactive behaviour and constructive engagement of the follower is directly influencing the quality of the leader-member relationship. This indicates that LMX not only influences how followers behave, but followers also have an impact on the quality of LMX. Followership behaviors like speaking up and taking initiative are now seen as key characteristics of effective followers (Yalçınyiğit & Karaçay, 2025). Shahzadi et al. (2022) highlight that proactive followers get involved for example by identifying problems and suggesting improvements. It is also identified that the followers need to feel safe and supported for these behaviors to happen.

LMX theory can help in understanding the conditions for developing proactive followership. When the LMX relationships are high-quality they include trust, open communication, and support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997). Supported and trusted employees do more than their assigned work. In contrast, low-quality relationships do not include trust and support, so followers might only do what is formally required (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997). The followership literature supports this view and emphasizes that followers' idea of their role shapes how they do their work (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Shahzadi et al., 2022). Understanding how these relationships work is important for explaining how leader-member interactions influence followership behaviors in project teams. In IT project teams, the quality of the relationship between leaders and members can influence how team members understand their roles and how much they participate in project tasks. Based on this idea, the first hypothesis H1 is:

H1: Leader-member exchange (LMX) is positively related to followership behaviors in IT project teams.

2.5 Strategy implementation in project teams

Strategy implementation is the process where organization's strategic plans are turned into actions so that they can lead to concrete results (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; de Oliveira et al., 2019). While strategy formulation sets the direction for an organization, implementation ensures that the strategic objectives are integrated into daily work. Even though strategy implementation is important, many organizations still have challenges to execute the implementation process. Studies have shown that there is often a difference between what organizations plan to do and what actually is done (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Hrebiniak, 2006). It highlights that it is not easy to turn strategic plans into concrete actions.

Previous studies have shown that strategy implementation involves more than simply following a plan. It is a complex process that includes multiple steps and activities. Noble (1999) writes that implementation has been viewed different ways in prior research, including control, execution, operational planning, and organizational action. Based on this view, he defines strategy implementation as the communication, explanation, adaptation, and execution of strategic plans. Furthermore, effective strategy implementation requires sensemaking and shared understanding in the organization. Individual employees need to understand what strategy means for their own roles and tasks, which further emphasizes how important communication and interactions are in the implementation process (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Kaplan & Norton, 2008). This broader understanding is also supported by de Oliveira et al. (2019), who argue that strategy execution involves multiple combinations of actions. Their model identifies five key dimensions on which strategy implementation depends on: shaping the strategy into actions, coordination, communication, control and feedback, and the development of resources.

Research also emphasizes that strategy implementation is not purely structural or top-down process, but rather a multi-level phenomenon shaped by interactions between organizational systems, leadership processes, and employee behavior (Engberg et al., 2015; Weiser et al., 2020). From this perspective, strategy is partly planned and partly developed over time, and successful implementation depends on employees understanding of strategic priorities and incorporating those priorities into their everyday work (Christie & Tippmann, 2023; Weiser et., 2020). This shifts the focus from formal plans to how strategy is understood and executed in practice. Therefore, strategy execution becomes dependent on people's actions and requires active engagement. Furthermore, Engberg et al. (2015) emphasize that resources for innovation and strategy execution are distributed across organizational levels. Therefore, effective strategy implementation depends on how these levels interact and support each other. This supports the idea that strategy implementation should be clearly executed throughout the whole organization.

According to Hyväri (2016), project management plays a central role in strategy implementation. Projects and portfolios act as key mechanisms through which strategic objectives are implemented and delivered in organizations. According to Hyväri (2016), organizational project management functions as a framework for strategy implementation, as it allows to translate strategic goals into concrete outcomes through organized and controlled processes. The author continues to emphasize that continuous dialogue across organizational levels allows faster response to changes and ensures that work is aligned with strategic priorities, supporting the statement that clear communication is key factor when implementing strategies.

At the same time, implementation does not happen equally across all parts of the organization. Engberg et al. (2015) show that strategy implementation can weaken as it moves down the organizational levels. In their study, the strategic change was more visible at upper levels, while lower levels were less aligned with new objectives. These findings suggest that while strategy may be clear to top management, it does not guarantee that it is clearly understood in all organizational levels.

This issue becomes more significant in IT and digital project environments, where strategy execution often depends on alignment between business priorities and IT-related decisions. Luftman (2000) defines business-IT alignment as the co-development of IT and business strategies, highlighting that the alignment is a dynamic process that depends on management support, strong relationships, leadership, clear priorities, trust, communication, and shared understanding. In IT project teams it is important to understand that only formal alignment between business and IT decisions is not enough. The quality of communication, trust, management and shared priorities shape the strategy implementation process in projects (Luftman, 2000).

Tallon & Pinsonneault's (2011) research on strategic IT alignment shows that organization's results can improve when business strategy and IT work are aligned but

it is not the only affecting part. The outcomes depend on how flexible the organization is and how well teams can adjust to changes, which means that only having alignment is not enough. Teams also need to be able to adapt, coordinate, and respond to new demands to reach strategic goals. Additionally, Aaltonen and Ikävalko (2002) point out that strategic plans often fail to succeed because employees do not have clear communication, involvement, or a shared understanding of strategic goals. These findings suggest that implementing a strategy is about how people interact with the strategy in their daily work and how teams build a shared understanding of what is important. This is particularly important in project-based environments, where teamwork and constant adjustments to the work are needed.

Leadership research also highlights the importance of relationships in implementation. Boal and Hooijberg (2001) point out that strategic leadership matters most in uncertain and complex situations. They suggest that effective strategic leadership is based on three main capacities that help leaders guide the organizational change during strategy implementation. Absorptive capacity is the the ability to recognize and use knowledge, adaptive capacity is the ability to respond and adjust to change, and managerial wisdom is the ability to judge situations and act at the right time (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Kangas et al. (2019) have a similar view. According to them, change processes today are more complicated, systematic, and uncertain, so leadership in these situations cannot depend only on top-down control. Leading change needs co-operation between different levels of the organization, the ability to handle uncertainty, and a stronger focus on relationships in leadership (Kangas et al., 2019).

Implementing strategy in IT project teams is shaped by relationships and behaviors. Aligning IT and business strategy creates a formal structure, but success of the implementation relies on how leaders and project team members encourage proactive involvement and shared responsibility (Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011). Looking at these relationships helps to explain how leaders and team members work together to achieve strategic goals. Hyväri (2016) notes that project teams are important when turning

strategy into action. In project-based environments, strategy is carried out in temporary and task-oriented teams where good connection and coordination matter. Additionally, Abson et al. (2024) point out that trust within and between teams supports shared leadership and collaboration. Trust helps team members to take responsibility and align their work with the organization's goals.

Linking this to the LMX theory, the quality of leader-member relationships may influence how strategic objectives are understood and executed within project teams. High-quality relational exchanges can foster trust as well as open communication and mutual understanding, which all are critical for clarifying how strategic goals relate to project tasks. When followers feel supported and respected, they may be more likely to engage proactively in aligning their work with strategic priorities. In contrast, weaker relational exchanges may limit engagement to task completion without a deeper strategic connection. Based on this, higher-quality leader-member relationships may support strategy implementation by strengthening communication, clarity, and alignment between strategic objectives and everyday project work. Therefore, the second hypothesis H2 is proposed as follows:

H2: There is a positive relationship between Leader-member exchange (LMX) in strategy implementation in IT project work.

In addition, proactive followership behaviors may support strategy implementation because employees who actively participate, communicate, and take responsibility may be more active in translating strategic priorities into concrete daily actions within project work. Through this active engagement and independent contribution, followers may strengthen the enactment of strategy in everyday work. From this, the third and final hypothesis H3 is proposed:

H3: Followership behaviors are positively related to strategy implementation in IT project work.

Although this research does not statistically test a formal mediation model, the theoretical framework proposes that followership may function as an important behavioral mechanism through which leader-member relationships support strategy implementation. In this sense, high-quality leader-member relationships may encourage proactive followership behaviors, which in turn may strengthen the implementation of strategic objectives into daily project work. Therefore, the study approaches followership as a relational process link connecting leadership relationships with strategy implementation in IT projects.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach used in this thesis and its purpose is to explain how the study was designed and how the data was collected and analyzed.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how leader-member exchange (LMX) is associated with followership behaviors and how these behaviors support the implementation of strategic goals in IT project teams. To investigate these relationships, a quantitative research approach was chosen. The study is designed as a mono-method quantitative case study, meaning that only one type of data collection method is used to gather data from the participants (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 184).

The study is conducted as a case study, focusing on a real-life organization and its IT project teams. A case study strategy allows in-depth understanding of how leader-member exchange is associated with followership in the project teams and the implementation of strategic goals in a specific context (Saunders et al, 2023, p. 206). Focusing on one organization allows the study to provide detailed information on the dynamics of leadership and followership that might be missed in studies that compare multiple organizations.

This thesis uses a deductive research approach. In this approach, existing theories from the literature are used to guide the empirical study (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 52). Deductive research starts with theory and then tests relationships between variables using data (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 52). The theoretical framework builds on LMX theory, followership research, and strategy implementation literature. Understanding the theories help to study how LMX and followership behavior are related in IT projects and how they may affect the strategy implementation.

3.1 The case organization and focus group

The case company is international and operates in multiple countries offering services in logistics, digital solutions, and cross-border trade. The organization has transformed a lot in recent years because of rapid digitalization. IT projects are an important part of the organization because they are developing all the technical solutions to improve operations and create new digital services. IT project teams are helping the organization reach its strategic goals.

This thesis is focused on the IT-project teams in the case organization. These teams develop and implement the softwares and digital platforms that help the organization to provide its services and execute internal processes. Project work in the case organization often requires employees from different departments, and sometimes different countries, to collaborate. These teams usually include software developers, project coordinators, product owners, architects, and other experts who work together to design, build and launch digital solutions that meet the organization's goals.

The organizational setting is important for this study topic. In IT projects, teams often need to work together closely and share knowledge between leaders and team members (Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011). Since IT project work requires both technical skills and good teamwork, the actions of employees and leaders are important for putting strategic goals into practice.
This study examines project teams in an international organization to show how leader-member relationships relate to followership behaviors. It also explores how these behaviors help turn strategic goals into daily IT project work.

3.2 Data collection

A structured online questionnaire was used to collect data. Surveys are common in organizational and management studies because they help researchers gather information from large groups of people in a systematic and efficient way (Bryman &

Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2023). The questionnaire was sent to 200 employees, and response time was set to three weeks.

The study uses non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling is often used when only a specific group, like a part of organization, can be reached (Saunders et al., 2023, p.313). The survey was shared to employees who work in IT projects in internal channels. Participation was voluntary and responses were collected anonymously.

The study focuses on employees who work in different kinds of IT projects. The employees have all kinds of roles in project teams, for example, developers, analysts, project coordinators, product owners, and designers. These employees work closely and daily with project leaders and their own supervisors, so they can offer useful insights to leader-member relationships and followership behaviors in project environments. A total of 52 valid responses were received and included in the final analysis, leaving the response rate at 26%.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections measuring the key constructs of the thesis. In the first section, LMX was measured using the validated scale of LMX-7 (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) which measures the respondents´ idea of the quality of their working relationships with their immediate supervisor. The questions cover areas of trust, communication, mutual support, and respect.

Questions in the second section measured the followership behaviors. The followership items were developed based on prior followership literature, particularly Kelley's (1992) dimensions of independent critical thinking and active engagement. The questions on the survey focused on employee's' proactive engagement, responsibility taking, and participation in team activities and conversations.

The third section focused on strategy implementation in project work. Strategy implementation was measured using a set of items developed for this study, drawing on

prior literature on strategy implementation, strategic alignment, and leadership in project-based work. The questions capture how well strategic goals are understood, communicated, implemented, and reflected in daily project work as well as how well project tasks align with broader organizational objectives. The questions for all the sections can be found in Appendix 1.

All survey items were measured using a Likert scale with a range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Likert scales are often used because they allow respondents to express their attitudes and views in a structured format (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 529).

In addition to the main survey items a limited number of background questions were included regarding the respondents' time in the company and the length of time working with their current leader. These variables were considered relevant for understanding leader-member relationships within project work. Other demographic variables were not collected to keep the questionnaire concise and to support the respondent's anonymity within an organizational context. Furthermore, it was not seen relevant regarding the study to ask about age, gender, or ethnical background.

3.3 Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using quantitative statistical analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to examine the relationships and predictive associations between LMX, followership behaviors, and strategy implementation.

Before conducting the analysis, the data was reviewed and prepared. The data was checked for incomplete responses invalid entries, and if those were present, they would be removed. Additionally, the dataset was closely checked to ensure the consistency of the data. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of the sample. Composite variables were formed by calculating mean scores of the LMX, followership, and strategy implementation survey items (Saunders et al., 2023, p.534).

To examine the relationships between variables, Pearsons's correlation analysis was conducted. Correlation analysis allows for the assessment of the strength and direction of relationships between variables (Myers et al., 2010, p. 474-475). In this thesis, correlation analysis was used to explore whether higher levels of LMX are associated with stronger followership behaviors and improved strategy implementation, as well as to examine the relationships between followership and strategy implementation.

In addition, regression analysis was conducted to examine the statistical predictive relationships between the variables. Regression analysis allows the assessment of how well one or more independent variables explain variation in a dependent variable (Myers et al., 2010, pp. 63-65). In this thesis, regression analysis was used to assess the extent to which LMX and followership behaviors predict strategy implementation, as well as to examine the relationship between LMX and followership.

All the statistical analyses were conducted using the Jamovi software, and the results of the analysis are presented in chapter 4.

3.4 Reliability and validity

Ensuring reliability and validity is an essential part of quantitative research. Reliability is when measurements are consistent. Validity is when research tools are measuring what they are supposed to measure (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 522).

The questions in the survey are based on the academic literature of leader-member exchange and followership. The LMX-7 scale by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) is often used in research, and it has shown to be reliable. The followership questions are based on previously recognized followership behaviors for example by Kelley (1992). The strategy implementation questions are also based on known literature on the topic. Each question in the survey is based on the concepts of the theoretical framework, so the data that was collected is consistent with the main theories of the thesis.

Cronbach's alpha was used to test how reliable the measurement scales in the questionnaire are. Field (2018, pp. 869-870) explains that Cronbach's alpha is often used to test if the survey items that measure the same thing give consistent results. A value above 0.7 is usually a sign of good internal consistency (Field, 2018, p. 876).

4 Results

This chapter presents the results of the analysis and examines the relationships between leader-member exchange (LMX) and followership behaviors. It also shows how LMX and followership relate to the strategy implementation in IT project teams.

The data was collected through a structured survey using Likert-scale items measuring LMX quality, proactive followership behaviors, and the extent to which strategic goals are reflected in daily project work. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns, relationships and tendencies within the data using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

The results are presented in three parts. First, descriptive statistics are introduced to provide and overview of the data. Second, the relationships between followership behaviors and strategy implementation are analyzed. Third, the relationships between LMX and both followership behaviors and strategy implementation are examined. The detailed format of the questions can be found in Appendix 1.

4.1 Sample characteristics

The sample consisted of 52 respondents. In terms of organizational tenure, 9,6% of respondents have worked at the company for less than one year, 25% for 1-3 years, 19,2% for 3-5 years, and 46,2% for over five years. A large proportion of respondents have relatively long experience within the organization.

The duration of the time that the respondents have spent with their current leader varies from one year to over five years. 26,9% of respondents have worked with their current leader for less than one year, 40,4% for 1-3 years, 26,9% for 3-5 years, and only 5,8% for over five years. These results suggest that most respondents have a long career, but not necessarily long-term relationship with their current leader.

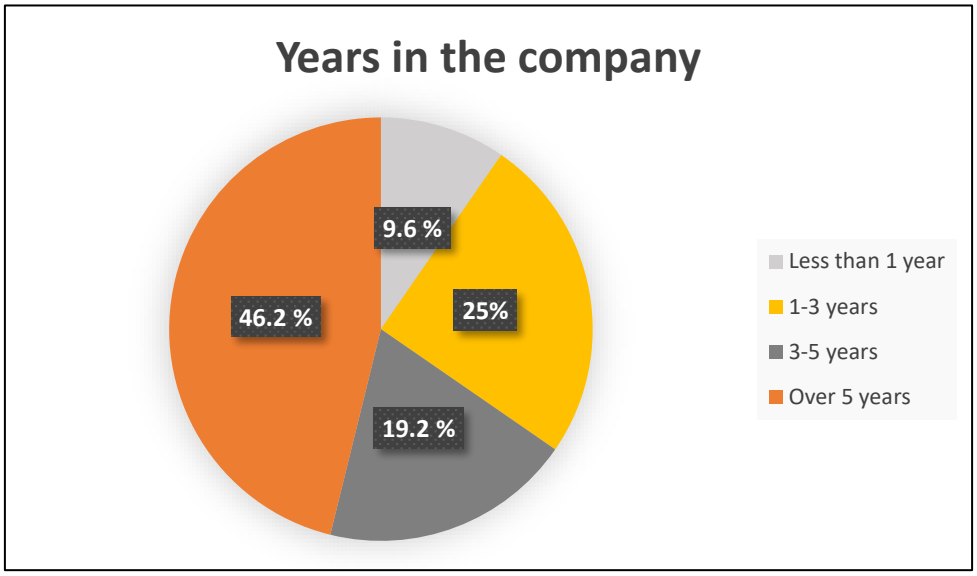

Figure 1. Respondents' length of career in case company.

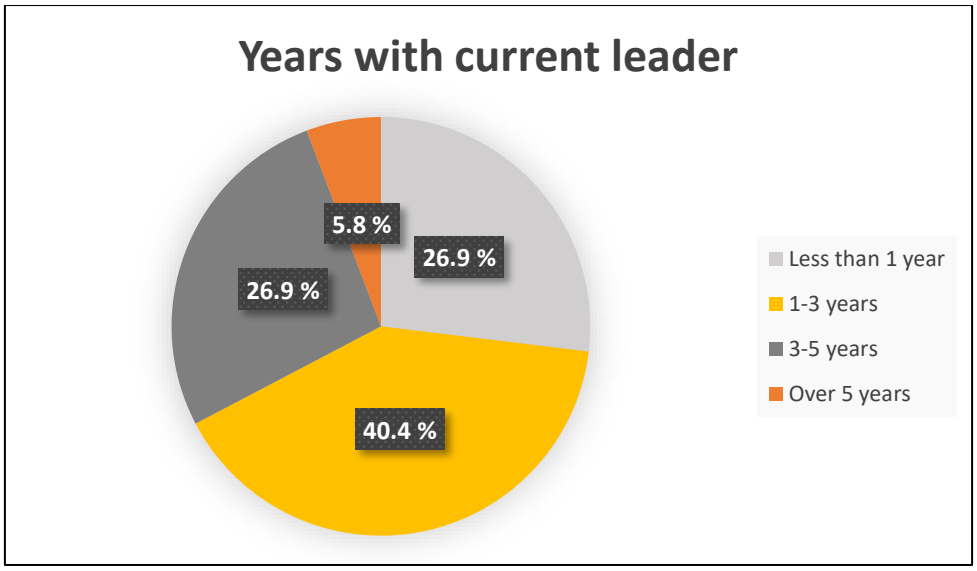

Figure 2. Respondents' time with their current leader.

4.2 Reliability analysis

The internal consistency of all the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The LMX scale demonstrates excellent reliability as shown in Table 1 (α= 0.928). Values over α= 0.9 are commonly considered to indicate excellent consistency (Field, 2018).

Table 1. Reliability statistics for LMX scale.

Scale Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's α
scale	0.928

To further examine the contribution of individual items to the scale, item-level reliability analysis was conducted. The results presented in Table 2 show that removing any individual item did not improve reliability, as Cronbach's alpha remains consistently high and therefore all items were retained for the analysis. Overall, the LMX scale can be considered reliable for further analysis. The item level wording can be found in Appendix 1.

Table 2. Item level reliability of LMX scale (if item dropped).

Item Reliability Statistics

	If item dropped
	Cronbach's α
LMX1	0.917
LMX2	0.913
LMX3	0.923
LMX4	0.918
LMX5	0.920
LMX6	0.913
LMX7	0.917

The followership scale, as presented in Table 3, indicates good reliability (α= 0.806), which exceeds the commonly accepted point of 0.7 for exploratory research (Field, 2018).

Table 3. Reliability statistics for followership scale.

Scale Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's α
scale	0.806

Item-level analysis (Table 4) shows that Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.756 to 0.809 if individual items are removed. The relatively stable alpha values indicate that removing any single item would not meaningfully improve reliability and therefore all items were retained for further analysis. The detailed wording for the items can be seen in Appendix 1.

Table 4. Item-level reliability of followership scale (if item dropped).

Item Reliability Statistics

	If item dropped
	Cronbach's α
ICT1	0.767
ICT2	0.782
ICT3	0.756
AE1	0.800
AE2	0.809
AE3	0.759
AE4	0.788

Lastly, the consistency of the strategy implementation scale was assessed. The results indicate excellent reliability (α= 0.924) as shown in Table 5. Item-level analysis shows

that Cronbach's alpha values range between 0.904 and 0.936 if individual items are removed. Examination of item-deleted statistics presented in Table 6 indicate that all items contribute consistently to the scale and removing any individual item did not improve reliability. Therefore, all items were retained for the analysis. The detailed item level wording can be seen in Appendix 1.

Table 5. Reliability statistics for strategy implementation scale.

Scale Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's α
scale	0.924

Table 6. Item-level reliability of strategy implementation scale (if item dropped).

Item Reliability Statistics

	If item dropped
	Cronbach's α
SDW1	0.904
SDW2	0.910
SDW3	0.907
SDW4	0.910
SDW5	0.910
SDW6	0.909
SDW7	0.936

4.3 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of respondents' impression of leader-member exchange, followership behaviors, and strategy implementation.

Overall, the results indicate relatively high-quality LMX within the sample group (Table 7). The mean value of LMX is 3.82 (SD= 0.85), which indicates that within the sample, leader-member relationships are generally perceived as positive. Given that the scale ranges from 1 to 5, the average score is clearly above the midpoint, suggesting relatively strong leader-member relationships within the sample.

At the same time, the standard deviation shows a moderate level of variation in responses. This indicates that while many respondents experience high-quality relationships, there are also respondents who perceive the relationship less positively. The minimum (1.86) and maximum (5.00) values further support this variation, suggesting that the quality of LMX differs across individuals and teams.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of LMX.

Descriptives

	LMX mean
N	52
Mean	3.82
Standard deviation	0.848
Minimum	1.86
Maximum	5.00

Table 8 gives a more detailed view of the LMX results. The highest mean values are seen for LMX1 (M= 4.15) and LMX7 (M= 4.06). This indicates that respondents see strong mutual understanding and good overall quality in their relationship with their leader. Most of the other items also have relatively high mean values, between 3.71 and 3.92. This suggests that different parts of the leader-member relationships are generally seen in a positive way. However, LMX5 shows clearly a lower mean value (M=3.35). This indicates that this part of the relationship is not seen as positively, and there may be some differences in how support or recognition is experienced.

Table 8. LMX: item-level descriptives.

Descriptives

	LMX1	LMX2	LMX3	LMX4	LMX5	LMX6	LMX7
Mean	4.15	3.71	3.79	3.92	3.35	3.79	4.06
Standard deviation	0.849	1.14	1.04	0.947	1.10	0.997	0.998
Minimum	2	1	2	2	1	1	2
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Similarly, descriptive statistics were calculated to assess how respondents evaluate their own followership behaviors. As can be seen in Table 9, the mean value (M= 4.14, SD = 0.59) indicates a relatively high level of proactive behavior among respondents. Given the scale range from 1 to 5, the average is clearly above the midpoint, suggesting that respondents generally recognize themselves as active, engaged, and willing to take initiative in their work.

Compared to LMX (M= 3.82), followership scores are higher and show less variation, as indicated by the lower standard deviation. These results imply that while leader-member relationships vary more across respondents, followership behaviors are more consistently high. There is still some variation although most respondents report strong followership behaviors. The minimum value was 2.86 and maximum 5.00.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics of followership.

Descriptives

	Followership mean
N	52
Mean	4.14
Standard deviation	0.590
Minimum	2.86
Maximum	5.00

A closer examination of followership items (Table 10) show that the highest mean values were observed for ICT2 (M= 4.37), AE3 (M= 4.33), and AE1 (M= 4.23), indicating that respondents demonstrate strong levels of independent critical thinking and active engagement. The results suggest that employees are generally willing to express their opinions, evaluate ideas critically, and actively participate in team processes. Most other items also received relatively high mean values, ranging between 4.02 and 4.19, supporting further the overall strong level of followership within the sample. However, AE2 shows a noticeably lower mean value (M= 3.71), indicating some variation in the consistency of active engagement behaviors across respondents.

Table 10. Followership: item-level descriptives.

Descriptives

	ICT1	ICT2	ICT3	AE1	AE2	AE3	AE4
Mean	4.19	4.37	4.02	4.23	3.71	4.33	4.13
Standard deviation	0.864	0.768	1.02	0.831	0.936	0.785	0.841
Minimum	2	2	2	2	1	2	2
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Finally, the descriptive statistics were used to see how respondents recognize the implementation of strategic goals in their daily work. As presented in Table 11, the mean value of 3.56 (SD= 0.90) indicates that strategy implementation is seen as moderately positive but not as strong as LMX or followership.

Compared to followership (M = 4.14) and LMX (M= 3.82), strategy implementation has the lowest mean and the highest variation. The findings point toward that while employees generally understand and engage with strategy, the level of alignment in daily work is less consistent across respondents. The relatively wide range of responses (1.71 – 5.00) further supports this observation, indicating that some respondents

experience strong alignment with strategy, while others see it less clearly as part of their daily work.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics of strategy implementation.

Descriptives

	Strategy mean
N	52
Mean	3.56
Median	3.71
Standard deviation	0.901
Minimum	1.71
Maximum	5.00

The item-level examination of strategy implementation items in Table 12 shows greater variation compared to LMX and followership. The highest mean value was SDW6 (M= 3.81) followed by SDW1 (M= 3.75) and SDW3 and SDW5 (M= 3.71), indicating that some aspects of strategy are relatively well reflected in daily work. However, several items have lower mean values, especially SDW7 (M=3.15) and SDW4 (M= 3.33). This suggests that the connection between strategy and everyday work is not always clear. The variation indicates that some respondents can recognize how their work relates to strategic goals, but others do not see the connection.

Table 12. Strategy implementation: item-level descriptives.

Descriptives

	SDW1	SDW2	SDW3	SDW4	SDW5	SDW6	SDW7
Mean	3.75	3.48	3.71	3.33	3.71	3.81	3.15
Standard deviation	1.03	1.08	1.05	1.18	0.997	1.12	1.14
Minimum	2	2	2	1	2	1	1

Descriptives

	SDW1	SDW2	SDW3	SDW4	SDW5	SDW6	SDW7
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

The strategy implementation shows greater variation in responses. This difference is important as while both LMX and followership are rated relatively high, strategy implementation appears more uneven across respondents. This may reflect that translating strategic goals into daily work may be more challenging and dependent on multiple factors. This finding sets the foundation for the next part of the analysis, where the relationships between LMX, followership, and strategy implementation are examined.

4.4 Correlation analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was used to see if LMX, followership, and strategy implementation are connected The analysis provides an overview of the relationships between the main variables.

The results presented in Table 13 show that there is statistically significant positive relationships between all variables.

Table 13. Correlation matrix.

Correlation Matrix

		LMX mean	Followership mean	Strategy mean
LMX mean	Pearson's r	—		
	df	—		
	p-value	—		
Followership mean	Pearson's r	0.566	—	
	df	50	—	
	p-value	<.001	—	

	Pearson's r	0.528	0.604	—
Strategy mean	df	50	50	—
	p-value	<.001	<.001	—

The results show that LMX is positively correlated with followership (r= 0.566, p<.001). This indicates that higher-quality leader-member relationships are linked to more proactive followership behaviors. LMX is also positively correlated with strategy implementation (r= 0.528, p<.001). This suggests that employees who have better relationships with their leaders are more likely to see how their daily work aligns with strategic goals.

The strongest correlation can be observed between followership and strategy implementation (r= 0.604, p<.001). This indicates that proactive followership behaviors are strongly associated with how effectively strategy is reflected in the daily work of IT project team members. While LMX is important, followership clearly shows the strongest direct relationship with strategy implementation. The results also suggest a chain-like relationship, where LMX is associated with followership, and followership is strongly associated with strategy implementation.

Additional item-level analysis provided further insights into the relationships between the individual variables. The full item-level correlation analysis is presented in Appendix 2 (Figure 3). The results indicate that specific aspects of leader-member relationships, such as mutual understanding, recognized support, and effective working relationships were positively associated with proactive followership behaviors. In addition, the analysis shows that followership behaviors related to critical thinking and active engagement are strongly associated with strategy implementation. For example, employees who reported higher levels of confidence in questioning ideas also reported stronger agreement with statements related to understanding how their work creates value for the organization. Additionally, people who were more active and engaged

were more likely to understand how their daily work relates to the organization's strategic goals.

The results show that implementing strategy into daily work depends on behaviors such as active participation, critical evaluation, and ongoing commitment. This supports the broader pattern that is observed in the analysis, where leader-member relationships are associated with followership behaviors which in turn are strongly linked to the implementation of strategy in daily work within IT project teams.

4.5 Relationship between variables

To further examine the relationships between the variables, linear regression analyses were conducted. Separate regression models were estimated to examine the effects of LMX on followership, LMX on strategy implementation, and followership on strategy implementation.

4.5.1 Effect of LMX on followership

A linear regression analysis was conducted to understand how the leader-member relationships are associated with followership behaviors. The purpose of this analysis was to see if LMX explained variation in followership within IT project teams.

The results presented in Table 14 indicate that LMX was significantly associated with followership ($R = 0.566$, $p < .001$), explaining 32,1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.321$). The adjusted R^2 value (0.307) suggests that the model remains relatively stable when accounting for sample size (N=52). This suggests that leader-member relationships play an important role in supporting proactive followership behaviors, although a substantial proportion of followership behavior may also be associated with individual, organizational, and project-related factors beyond leadership relationships alone.

Table 14. Model fit measures (LMX-followership).

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
1	0.566	0.321	0.307

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=52

The regression results presented in Table 15 show that LMX was positively associated with followership behaviors (0.394, p <. 001). This means that for each one-unit increase in LMX, followership increases by approximately 0.394 units. Employees who had higher-quality relationships with their leaders were also more likely to show proactive followership behaviors such as sharing ideas and helping the team reach its goals. The standardized coefficient (0.566) shows a moderate to strong effect size.

Table 15. Regression results (LMX-followership).

Model Coefficients - Followership mean

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Std. Estimate
Intercept	2.634	0.3173	8.30	<.001	
LMX mean	0.394	0.0810	4.86	<.001	0.566

4.5.2 Effect of LMX on strategy implementation

A linear regression analysis was used to see how LMX is connected to the implementation of strategic goals. The purpose was to find out if LMX can predict how much strategy is shown in the daily work of IT project teams.

The results in Table 16 show that LMX was positively related to strategy implementation (R= 0.528, p <.001). LMX explained 27.9% of the variance in strategy implementation (R^2= 0.279). The adjusted R^2 was 0.264, which means the model stayed relatively stable when considering the sample size (N = 52). When compared with the regression model with followership and strategy implementation, this model explains less. This suggests

that leader-member relationships are important for strategy implementation, but they do not fully explain how strategic goals are shown in daily IT project work. At the same time, a large proportion of variance is not explained, so other factors in the organization, context, or project may also play a role in strategy implementation.

Table 16. Model fit measures (LMX-Strategy implementation).

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
1	0.528	0.279	0.264

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=52

Table 17 shows that higher-quality LMX is linked to stronger perceptions of strategy implementation (0.561, p <.001). Employees with better relationships with their leaders also showed that strategic goals were more present in their daily work. The standardized coefficient (0.528) points to a moderate effect size.

Table 17. Regression results (LMX-Strategy implementation).

Model Coefficients - Strategy mean

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Std. Estimate
Intercept	1.418	0.500	2.84	.007	
LMX mean	0.561	0.128	4.39	<.001	0.528

4.5.3 Followership on strategy implementation

Finally, a linear regression analysis was used to study how followership behaviors are associated with strategy implementation. The goal was to see if proactive followership behaviors are linked to how strategic goals are shown in daily work.

The results in Table 18 show that followership explains 36.4% of the variance in strategy implementation (R^2= 0.364). Compared with the regression model examining LMX and strategy implementation (R^2= 0.279), followership demonstrated greater explanatory power. This suggests that proactive employee behaviors may represent a more immediate behavioral link to how strategy becomes implemented in daily work practices than leader-member relationships alone.

Table 18. Model fit measures (Followership-Strategy implementation).

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
1	0.604	0.364	0.352

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=52

The regression analysis results in Tabel 19 show that followership was significantly and positively associated with strategy implementation (0.923, p <.001). The regression coefficient indicates that higher followership scores were associated with higher perceived levels of strategy implementation. The standardized coefficient (0.604) suggests a strong statistical relationship between the variables.

Table 19. Regression results (Followership-Strategy implementation).

Model Coefficients - Strategy mean

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Std. Estimate
Intercept	-0.258	0.721	-0.357	.722	
Followership mean	0.923	0.172	5.354	<.001	0.604

The findings suggest that proactive followership behaviors are strongly associated with how strategy is reflected in daily work. Employees reporting stronger proactive followership behaviors also reported stronger perceptions of strategic goals being reflected in their everyday work tasks. Compared to earlier results, followership explained a larger part of variance in strategy implementation (36.4%) than LMX (27.9%). This suggests that while leader-member relationships matter, proactive employee behaviors may be especially important for turning strategic goals into daily project work. However, a significant amount of variance still remained unexplained, which suggests that other organizational, contextual, and project factors could also influence strategy implementation

4.6 Summary of key findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how leader-member exchange (LMX) relates to followership behaviors and how these factors together are related to the strategy implementation in IT project teams.

The results suggest that there is a connection between LMX and followership behaviors. Employees who have high-quality relationship with their leader show more proactive followership behavior. Employees who trust their leader and feel like they have mutual understanding with the leader tend to speak up, question ideas, work independently without waiting for directions, and do more than just their assigned responsibilities. These results indicate that high-quality leader-member relationships can help to create an environment where followership behavior is more proactive. These findings support H1, as LMX is positively related to followership behaviors in IT project teams.

LMX has a positive connection to strategy implementation, but followership behaviors affect strategy implementation more. These findings support both H2 and H3 as both LMX and followership have a positive relationship in strategy implementation. The stronger connection between followership and strategy implementation highlights that employee behavior is important when executing strategy in daily work. Employees who understand how strategic goals are part of their daily work, are the ones who demonstrate proactive followership behaviors. Passively behaving employees might not realize the connection to organization's strategy as well. These findings suggest that implementing strategy in IT project teams is more related to employees' behaviors and how they act in their roles than leadership relationships. However, as LMX shows a strong connection to followership behaviors, it can effect strategy implementation indirectly.

The results suggest that there is a linear connection between LMX, followership, and strategy implementation. LMX is connected to followership behaviors, and followership behaviors have a strong connection to the strategy implementation. In more detail, the results indicate that high-quality leader-member relationships are linked to proactive followership behaviors, which are then linked to better strategy implementation in everyday work. Strategy implementation in IT project teams seems to be related to the interactions of leaders and followers and it is not a clear top-down process.

In conclusion, the results suggest that high-quality leader-member relationships create more proactive followership behaviors. When followers are more proactive, they recognize better how their daily work relates to organization's strategy. Successful strategy implementation in international IT projects seems to depend on the employee behaviors.

5 Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how leader-member exchange (LMX) and followership behaviors are linked to implementing strategic goals into daily work in IT project teams. The thesis looks closer at how leader-member relationships are associated with followership behaviors and how both of these are connected to the strategy implementation process.

The findings are supporting earlier research and show clearly that LMX is positively related to followership, and both LMX and followership are positively related to strategy implementation. However, followership seems to have a stronger relationship with strategy implementation than LMX. This finding highlights the importance of proactive followership behaviors in strategy implementation. In other words, while leader-member relationships are important, the implementation of strategy in IT project teams appears to be linked to how employees engage with their work, take initiative, think critically, and participate in team processes.

Overall, the findings support a relational and behavioral understanding of strategy implementation. Strategy is not only implemented through formal plans and leadership, but through how individuals understand and act on strategic goals in their daily work. At the same time, the results should be interpreted with caution. The statistical analyses show significant relationships between the variables, but they do not provide causality. Therefore, the findings are best understood as evidence of strong associations between LMX, followership, and strategy implementation in project environments.

5.1 LMX as a driver of followership

The relationship between LMX and followership supports the central idea of LMX theory, which argues that leadership develops through individual relationships between leaders and followers, and that these relationships have different levels of quality (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships are built on trust, support, mutual respect,

and open communication. In contrast, while low-quality relationships tend to be more formal and limited to specific roles.

In this context, employees who had higher-quality relationships with their leaders also showed more active followership behaviors. The employees stepped up, joined in on discussions, and kept the project moving forward. This supports the previous research that links high-quality LMX with commitment and going beyond the assigned role in work (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Breevaart et al., 2015). These behaviors are highly valuable in project environments where employees are expected to participate actively in shaping the work. Analysis showed that when employees felt understood, supported during difficult moments, and closely connected to their leader, they had better relationships and showed higher engagement. This is in line with previous LMX research and also highlights that relational leadership might be the key in encouraging proactive followership behaviour in IT projects.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) state that followers are not passive recipients of leadership influence. The findings in this thesis support that idea, as leader-member relationships explain only a part of the followership behavior and a larger part remains influenced by other factors. Followership is strongly shaped by the leadership relationship and the project environment, but it is also shaped by the employee's personal motivation, identity, expertise, and role orientation. Even though leadership relationships can encourage followers to be proactive, it does not fully explain proactive followership. This comes to show that followership is a reflection of active employee behavior in project environment. It is also related to the relational view of leadership as discussed in chapter two.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), DeRue and Ashford (2010), and Bastardoz and Adriaensen (2023) all underline that leadership and followership are dynamic and formed in social interactions. In project work, followership can be even more important because expertise and responsibilities are changing depending on the situation. The results are

supporting this idea by showing that leader-member relationships are important, but employee behavior plays a significant role too.

5.2 The role of followership in strategy implementation

The strongest connection in this thesis was found between followership and strategy implementation. More proactive employees were also more likely to understand and see strategic goals in their daily work. This is a good reminder on the importance of employee engagement when implementing strategy in project environments.

Previous studies show that strategy implementation is turning strategic goals to specific actions at the operational level (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002). So successful strategy implementation depends on employee understanding and how they work towards the goals in their work (de Oliveira et al., 2019). This thesis is building on that idea by suggesting that the way employees act in their roles is the key to the implementation process. Taking initiative in the work, critical thinking, and being involved helps connecting the strategy to everyday actions. It is important to notice that followership has a stronger relationship to strategy implementation than leader-member exchange. These results suggest that while leadership relationships are important, proactive employee behaviors can be even more effective for implementing strategy to daily project work.

Research by Balogun and Johnson (2004), Kaplan and Norton (2008), and Weiser et al. (2020) is highlighting that employees need to have understanding on the organization's strategy in the context of their own work and roles. In this thesis, employees that were ready to question ideas, take initiative, and be active in team discussion were also more likely to understand how strategy is connected to their daily work.

The data suggests that some behaviors can matter more than others. Critical thinking and active engagement were shown as especially important behaviors when implementing strategy. Employees who were comfortable with questioning ideas were also more confident with how their work adds value to the organization. Both of these

findings suggest that strategy implementation is strongly connected with the understanding of how daily work tasks connect to organizational goals, which is supporting the proactive followership description by Carsten et al. (2019). Employees and their behavior play an important role in shaping how strategy is translated into daily actions.

Although there is a strong connection between followership and strategy implementation, this does not mean one causes the other. Employees who understand strategy may be more likely to act proactively, and both followership and strategy implementation can be influenced by factors like team culture or communication. Still, the results clearly show that followership is an important part of implementing strategy into everyday work.

5.3 The role of LMX in strategy implementation

Research done on strategic leadership shows that leaders are most valuable for communicating the vision, aligning goals within the employees, and supporting employees in strategy implementation (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Engberg et al. (2015) and Weiser et al. (2020) also underline that strategy implementation is highly dependent on how leaders and employees interact with each other. The findings of this thesis are in line with these views. Employees who had stronger relationships with leaders were more committed to strategic goals and understood them better. This suggests that good relationships with leaders can help employees understand and apply strategic priorities in their daily work more effectively. Still, the results show that leadership relationships alone cannot explain how strategy is executed in daily work, since followership had an even stronger statistical link to strategy implementation that LMX.

The results are also in relation to previous research on strategy implementation. Aaltonen and Ikävalko (2002) say that communication, shared understanding, and involvement are key challenges when implementing strategy. LMX has a possibility to help in addressing these challenges since strong leader-member relationships build trust

and encourage communication. When employees feel trusted and supported, they are more likely to ask questions and link their work to strategic goals.

As previously stated, the connection between LMX and strategy implementation was not as strong as the connection between followership and strategy implementation. The results state that even leadership is important, it is not enough on its own to implement strategy effectively. Leadership seems to help by creating conditions for employees to act proactively, which helps in the strategy implementation process.
LMX builds a strong foundation of relationships, but strategy implementation depends on how employees use that foundation in their daily work. This gives a strong suggestion that followership may be the way leadership relationships are put into practice during strategy implementation.

5.4 The gap between strategy and daily work

A significant finding from the results is that strategy implementation scored lower than LMX and followership. LMX and followership were rated relatively high, while strategy implementation was rated at a lower level and contained more variation. This result, like previous research, underlines that even if management relationships are relatively strong and employees are involved, strategy implementation in daily work is not always successful. This comes to show that strategy implementation is often the most difficult part. Aaltonen & Ikävalko (2002) and Hrebiniak (2006) underline that organizations frequently struggle to convert strategic goals into operational actions. The findings in this thesis suggest that the organization has relatively strong relational and behavioral conditions to support the implementation of the strategy, but the connection between strategy and daily work is not consistently visible.

This gap may reflect the complexity of IT project environments, especially in internationally operating organization with multinational project teams and cross-border operations. As discussed in the literature review, strategy implementation in IT and digital projects depends on the alignment between business priorities and IT-related

decisions. Luftman (2000) emphasizes that business-IT alignment requires management support, communication, trust, clear priorities, and shared understanding. The lower scores for strategy implementation may suggest that formal strategic priorities are not always translated clearly enough into project-level decisions and tasks. Furthermore, Engberg et al. (2015) found that strategy implementation can weaken as it moves down organizational levels. Strategy may be clear at higher levels, but this does not automatically mean that it is understood or executed in everyday work. In the case organization, the lower scores in strategy implementation are highlighting that the employees may not have a clear strategic meaning on their daily tasks while they may still have full understanding of the tasks and stay engaged in their work. In internationally operating and cross-functional IT project environments, this may be especially important since strategic goals must be well coordinated through multiple operational contexts.

The results are highlighting that employees can be active and motivated, but if strategic goals are not clearly connected to their daily decisions, the proactive behavior may not be completely directed toward strategic goals. Therefore, the challenge is not lack of leadership or motivation, but how the strategy is translated to daily tasks in the IT project environment.

5.5 Connecting LMX, followership, and strategy implementation

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) are debating that leadership is co-created through interaction between leaders and followers. In the same way, DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe that leadership and followership roles are constantly changing through social interactions. When considering all of the findings of this thesis, they support the relational and behavioral view of implementing strategy. The pattern of relationships indicates that LMX is positively associated with followership, while followership is strongly associated with strategy implementation. Although this does not prove a causal chain, the findings suggest that followership functions as an important behavioral part.

The followership functions are connecting leader-member relationships and strategy implementation in daily work.

The findings are also supporting the concept of shared or balanced leadership in these project environments. Müller et al. (2017) strongly highlight that in project work, leadership is not carried out by the formal leader only, but it is often shared inside the team. This happens to be especially relevant in IT project teams, because team members often have specialized expertise in different areas. In situations like this, the employee with the most relevant knowledge in the topic may temporarily take the lead. This is also supporting the idea that followership is not passive but can involve active influence and responsibility by team members.

Weiser et al. (2020) and Christie and Tippmann (2023) are highlighting that strategy is usually shaped by the understanding of the employees and their execution in practice, this means that strategy implementation is not only a process that is planned, but also something that changes and develops through ongoing interactions in daily work. In this thesis, followership behaviors appear to function as a big part of this process of execution and interaction. Employees are not just receiving the strategy passively. They need to understand it so they can connect it to their daily work proactively and then execute it through various project decisions. The results suggest that while leadership relationships are important, followership behaviors demonstrate a stronger statistical relationship with strategy implementation. Organizations should not only focus on how leaders communicate and execute strategy, but also how employees engage with strategy in their daily work.

Overall, the findings suggest that while leader-member relationships are associated with strategy implementation, the relationship may operate through proactive followership behaviors. In this sense, followership appears to function as a key behavioral mechanism linking leadership relationships with the implementation of strategy in daily project work. This may be particularly important in multinational and cross-functional IT project

environments where aligning strategic priorities with everyday operational activities is critical. The findings therefore suggest that strategy implementation is not only a top-down leadership process, but also a relational and behavioral process shaped through interactions between leaders and followers.

5.6 Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the existing literature by strengthening the understanding of how leader-member exchange relates to followership behaviors within IT project teams. Although previous research has examined the LMX in relation to different outcomes like performance, satisfaction, and commitment in your work (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Dulebohn et al., 2012), the connection with proactive followership in project setting has had less notice. The results of this thesis highlight that high-quality leader-member relations are also associated with followership behavior that is more active and engaged. That supports the idea that relational leadership processes shape how employees behave within teams.

The findings of this thesis strongly emphasize that followership is not and should not be understood as an outcome of leadership. Instead, followership appears as a separate and important construct that plays a central role in organizational processes. This is in alignment with previous followership research, that is emphasizing the active role of the follower in shaping organizational outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The results also give reinforcement to this perspective by highlighting that proactive behavior of the followers is strongly associated with the strategy implementation in daily work.

Conventional views of how strategy is implemented are often focused on formal structures and processes (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; de Oliveira et al., 2019). The findings made in this thesis are suggesting that employee behavior can represent an immediate behavioral link to the implementation of strategy than leadership relationships on their own. The strong connection between followership behaviors and strategy implementation highlights how important it is to see employees as active

participants in strategy implementation. This can be particularly important in multinational and cross-functional IT project teams, where aligning daily work with strategic goals is important but might be harder to see.

This thesis highlights that the quality of the relationship between leader and follower are important. When employees feel trusted, supported and that there is open communication, they are more active and engage more in their work. This indicates that the efforts in leadership development should focus on interpersonal skills that allow meaningful connections to happen with team members and not only on formal management skills. In practice, the findings suggest that implementing strategy into daily work requires leaders to support proactive employee behaviors.

Ultimately the results of this thesis underline the value of linking the organizations strategic goals to daily work routines. Despite the fact that leadership relationships are strong and employees are committed, strategy may not be completely visible in daily work. This means that organizations need to pay closer attention on how strategy is communicated through the organization and translated into actions inside project teams. Communication, visibility and relevance of the strategy in the operational level of the organization can support the alignment between organizational objectives and employee action. Employee understanding and how employees translate the strategy in their daily work should also be the focus, instead of only focusing on how managers are communicating the strategy through the organization. Proactive followership behavior is the most important part in translating strategy into daily work. This gives an extension to former leadership focused perspectives on strategy implementation by giving stronger emphasis to the active role of the employees in shaping how strategy implementation happens in everyday project work.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Summary of findings and contributions

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how leader-member exchange (LMX) and followership behaviors relate to the implementation of strategic goals in IT project teams in international organization. The focus was on understanding how leader-member relationships shape followership behaviors and how these factors support the translation of strategy into daily work.

The findings show that leader-member relationships are positively associated with followership behaviors, and that both are related to strategy implementation. However, followership demonstrates a stronger direct relationship with strategy implementation than LMX. This indicates that while leadership relationships play an important role, the implementation of strategy may depend more directly on how employees engage with their work.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that strategy implementation in IT project teams in international organization is not supported by leadership relationships alone. Instead, the findings suggest that proactive followership behaviors may function as a key behavioral mechanism linking leader-member relationships with strategy implementation in daily work. While it seems that leadership relationships create important interpersonal conditions, such as trust and respect, the statistically stronger relationship between followership and strategy implementation indicate that the active engagement of employees play an important role in translating the strategy into the everyday project tasks. The relevance of this is especially highlighted in multinational and cross-functional IT project environments, where the strategic alignment of the objectives with operational work is crucial.

The findings provide clear answers to the research questions of the thesis. The results are suggesting that the leader-member relationships are positively associated with

proactive follower behavior inside IT project teams. Employees reporting higher-quality relationships with their leaders also report stronger initiative-taking, active engagement, and team process participation.

Second, the findings suggest that leader-member relationships support strategy implementation especially through proactive followership behaviors. While leadership relationships appear to create important relational conditions such as trust, communication, and mutual understanding, proactive followership behaviors demonstrated the strongest statistical relationship with strategy implementation. This suggests that followership may function as an important behavioral mechanism linking leadership relationships with the translation of strategy into daily IT project work.

6.2 Limitations of the study

This thesis has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The study is based on a single organization, which may limit the ability to generalize the findings to other contexts. Furthermore, the data was collected using a cross-sectional survey, which does not allow conclusions about causal relationships between variables. The strength and stability of the statistical results may also be affected due to the relatively small sample size. In addition, the study relies on self-reported data, which may include response bias. Respondents may evaluate their own behavior and perceptions more positively, particularly in relation to followership and engagement.

6.3 Suggestions for future research

Future research could build on these findings by exploring the relationships between LMX, followership, and strategy implementation in different organizational contexts and industries. Future studies could examine how these relationships affect the strategy implementation in more detailed level, focusing on different types of IT and digital project teams such as software development teams, agile project settings, or larger scale system implementation projects. Comparative studies through various organizations

could provide better insights into how the relationships vary in different environments depending on project structure, complexity of technologies, and working methods. Also, future research could show whether other factors like cultural background or geographic location of team members influence leader-member relationships, behavior of the followers, and strategy implementation in project teams. These aspects were not specifically examined in this study. Examining LMX from both manager and follower view could provide additional understanding on how leadership relationships are experienced by different members of the organization.

Longitudinal study designs could also make it easier to understand causation and how leader-member relationships and behaviors of the followers evolve over time in IT project environments. Considering that IT projects include changing requirements, and cross-functional collaboration, examining how these relationships evolve during different phases of the project would be beneficial. Additionally, future research could inspect the role of different factors such as team culture, agile working methods, organizational structure, and different leadership styles in shaping followership and strategy implementation in digital project contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire items

Background	
How long have you worked at the organization?	
How long have you worked with your current leader? (immediate supervisor)	
LMX	
I have a good mutual understanding with my leader.	**LMX1**
My leader understands my work problems and needs.	**LMX2**
My leader recognizes my potential.	**LMX3**
I can count on my leader to help me when I face difficulties in my work.	**LMX4**
I can depend on my leader to "bail me out" at their expense.	**LMX5**
My leader would defend my decisions if I were not present.	**LMX6**
My leader and I have an effective working relationship.	**LMX7**
Independent thinking (followership)	
I speak up when I believe a project decision could be improved.	**ICT1**
I evaluate project instructions instead of following them blindly.	**ICT2**
I feel comfortable questioning ideas when needed.	**ICT3**
Active engagement (followership)	
I take initiative in my tasks without waiting for direction.	**AE1**
I look for ways to contribute beyond my assigned responsibilities.	**AE2**
I put effort into supporting project goals even during challenges.	**AE3**
I stay involved and engaged in team activities and discussions.	**AE4**

Strategy implementation	
I understand how my team's work connects to Posti's overall strategy.	**SDW1**
My leader clearly communicates how our tasks support strategic goals.	**SDW2**
I know how my own work contributes to the wider organizational objectives.	**SDW3**
Our project decisions usually reflect strategic priorities.	**SDW4**
The goals of my project are consistent with Posti's long-term direction.	**SDW5**
I feel confident explaining how my work creates value for the organization.	**SDW6**

Appendix 2. Item-level correlation matrix

Correlation Matrix

		LMX1	LMX2	LMX3	LMX4	LMX5	LMX6	LMX7	ICT1	ICT2	ICT3	AE1	AE2	AE3	AE4
LMX1	Pearson's r	—													
	df	—													
	p-value	—													
LMX2	Pearson's r	0.753	—												
	df	50	—												
	p-value	<.001	—												
LMX3	Pearson's r	0.707	0.709	—											
	df	50	50	—											
	p-value	<.001	<.001	—											
LMX4	Pearson's r	0.625	0.613	0.543	—										
	df	50	50	50	—										
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	—										
LMX5	Pearson's r	0.550	0.611	0.599	0.723	—									
	df	50	50	50	50	—									
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—									
LMX6	Pearson's r	0.595	0.668	0.583	0.731	0.801	—								
	df	50	50	50	50	50	—								
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—								
LMX7	Pearson's r	0.753	0.771	0.543	0.648	0.517	0.722	—							
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	—							
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—							
ICT1	Pearson's r	0.467	0.474	0.331	0.330	0.279	0.276	0.532	—						
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—						
	p-value	<.001	<.001	.016	.017	.045	.048	<.001	—						
ICT2	Pearson's r	0.333	0.234	0.198	0.255	0.219	0.231	0.202	0.276	—					
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—					
	p-value	.016	.095	.160	.068	.119	.099	.151	.047	—					
ICT3	Pearson's r	0.427	0.341	0.301	0.286	0.326	0.236	0.384	0.730	0.417	—				
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—				
	p-value	.002	.013	.030	.040	.018	.093	.005	<.001	.002	—				
AE1	Pearson's r	0.477	0.402	0.422	0.073	0.168	0.202	0.362	0.401	0.388	0.249	—			
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—			
	p-value	<.001	.003	.002	.608	.233	.151	.008	.003	.005	.075	—			
AE2	Pearson's r	0.230	0.086	0.300	0.218	0.213	0.186	0.060	0.240	0.395	0.417	0.138	—		
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—		
	p-value	.101	.546	.031	.121	.129	.188	.672	.087	.004	.002	.330	—		
AE3	Pearson's r	0.541	0.435	0.304	0.509	0.456	0.491	0.526	0.426	0.514	0.482	0.393	0.318	—	
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—	
	p-value	<.001	.001	.029	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	.002	<.001	<.001	.004	.022	—	
AE4	Pearson's r	0.410	0.388	0.236	0.432	0.394	0.386	0.551	0.395	0.256	0.386	0.291	0.175	0.615	—
	df	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	—
	p-value	.003	.004	.092	.001	.004	.005	<.001	.004	.066	.005	.036	.215	<.001	—

Figure 3. Item-level correlation matrix.