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THE ROLE OF TEAMS IN IMPLEMENTING CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

Bachelor's Programme in Supply Chain Management

Bachelor's thesis

2024

Maria Kallio

Examiner: Junior researcher Axel Zehendner

ABSTRACT

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The implementation of a corporate sustainability strategy requires engagement from both team leaders and employees. Companies are increasingly responsible for sustainable actions, shown as by pressure from stakeholders. Therefore, most companies are increasingly interested in how the sustainability strategy can be implemented successfully. The sustainability actions benefit companies also from an economic perspective which motivates companies towards sustainability.

This bachelor's thesis builds on theoretical background and interview research in a replenishment planning team. The study was conducted as a qualitative study and the interview data were analysed as content analysis. The study adds insights into the literature on sustainability strategy implementation. This thesis aims to find an answer to the question of the role of a team in implementing a company's sustainability strategy and how team members could best implement the strategy.

An effective team is built on trust, transparency of information, and good communication. These features are desired for each team member, in addition to matching the company's values. The results from the study indicate the importance of team leaders in implementing the company's sustainability strategy, as being a bridge for information and having the most effect on the level of communication in a team. The employees' role is a key factor in strategy execution, as their everyday work affects the success of strategy implementation. A corporate team should be more included in the strategy process, to improve the success of strategy implementation, as they have a lot of insight to improve the process possibly. These findings confirm previous studies, which underline the importance of middle-level managers and employees as they should not be forgotten in a successful strategy implementation.

Yrityksen vastuullisuusstrategian jalkauttaminen vaatii sitoutumista niin tiimien esihenkilöiltä kuin tiimityöntekijöiltä. Yritykset ovat yhä enemmän vastuussa vastuullisuudestaan, mikä näkyy paineena sidosryhmiltä. Sen vuoksi useat yritykset ovat yhä enemmän kiinnostuneita siitä, kuinka vastuullisuusstrategia voidaan jalkauttaa onnistuneesti. Vastuulliset teot hyödyttävät yrityksiä myös taloudelliselta kannalta, mikä motivoi yrityksiä kohti vastuullisuutta.

Tämä kandidaatintutkielma pohjautuu teoreettiseen taustaan ja haastattelututkimukseen täydennyssuunnittelutiimissä. Tutkielma on toteutettu laadullisena tutkimuksena ja haastatteluiden tulokset on analysoitu sisällönanalyysilla. Tämä tutkimus lisää näkemystä vastuullisuusstrategian jalkauttamisen kirjallisuuteen. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on löytää vastaus kysymykseen, millainen rooli tiimillä on yrityksen vastuullisuusstrategian jalkauttamisessa, sekä kuinka tiimin jäsenet voivat parhaiten jalkauttaa strategiaa.

Tehokas tiimi rakentuu luottamuksen, informaation läpinäkyvyyden, sekä hyvän kommunikaation pohjalle. Nämä ominaisuudet ovat toivottuja jokaiselle tiimin jäsenelle, sen lisäksi että arvot kohtaavat yrityksen kanssa. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että tiimien esihenkilöillä on tärkeä rooli vastuullisuusstrategian jalkauttamisessa, sillä esihenkilöt toimivat ikään kuin siltana tiedolle ja heillä on eniten vaikutusta tiimin kommunikaation tasoon. Tiimityöntekijöiden rooli on avaintekijä strategian toteutumisessa, sillä heidän jokapäiväinen työnsä vaikuttaa strategian jalkautumisen onnistumiseen. Yrityksen tiimiä pitäisi enemmän osallistaa strategiaprosessiin, jotta strategian jalkauttamisen onnistumista voitaisiin parantaa, sillä heillä on paljon tietoa mahdollisesti prosessin parantamiseksi. Nämä

tulokset vahvistavat aikaisempia tutkimuksia, jotka alleviivaavat sitä, ettei keskitason johtajien sekä työntekijöiden tärkeyttä strategian onnistumisessa tule unohtaa.

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1 Introduction

In today's world sustainability can be seen as one of the most important standards in a company's strategy. That is because sustainability, when done right, will not only enhance the reputation of a company but can have a positive financial impact on the company. For instance, it has been researched that lower pollution levels in a company are associated with higher financial performance. (Eweje 2011) The lack of environmental sustainability is not only threatening the nature of our world, but climate change is also incredibly costly for the world's economy. Therefore, the importance of corporate sustainability strategies increases, and the success of the implementation of a sustainability strategy is more meaningful. (Faraz, Ahmed & Xiong 2023) In this thesis, the concept of sustainability covers mostly environmental sustainability and slightly social responsibility but excludes for instance financial sustainability. It has been studied that the implementation of a corporate sustainability strategy includes the six most important variables. Those are organizational structure, organizational culture, leadership, management control, employee motivation and qualifications, and communication. (Engert & Baumgartner 2016) Similar findings were made in Lai & Gelb's (2015) study of key success factors in implementing corporate strategy, and they stress the importance of good communication, good organizational climate, and reward systems.

A team's role in implementing corporate strategy is crucial. In this context, a team consists of a team leader and their employees. Team leaders, which in a company are usually considered middle-level leaders, are one key factor in implementing a corporate strategy. There are a few key success factors when implementing the company strategy through middle-level leaders. The top key success factors are the overall corporate culture, clear strategy, and communication (Lai & Gelb 2015). Middle-level leading cannot be ignored when wanting to influence to best resulting strategy implementation. This leads to thinking about the ways the implementation of a strategy in a company could be enhanced. How can be made sure that team leaders in a company are aware of the strategy and are driven to implement it into action. Employees are seen as the key executors of strategy, but their role is still a very understudied aspect of strategy implementation (Kang & Sung 2017).

As proven by multiple studies, when an efficient strategy has been created, the next step, as valuable as the first, is bringing the strategy into action. (Engert & Baumgartner 2016; Burgelman, Floyd, Laamanen, Mantere, Vaara, & Whittington 2018) Many studies notice the importance of leaders and communication, as well as to an increasing extent, the importance of employees, in the process of implementing a corporate sustainability strategy. Most of these studies focus on the overall picture of strategy implementation but lack the ground-level inspection of how the implementation itself shows in the leaders' and employees' everyday work. This thesis will present, on a more concrete level, the communication and implementation of the strategy in a team. Moreover, the ways a sustainability strategy and its implementation appear on a purchasing team and how they contribute to the strategy. This subject will be particularly important to study, as it is, to this day, quite understudied.

To address this gap among studies of strategy formulation and implementation, a study of a more practical level of implementation is needed. Some studies address the importance of leadership and employee engagement, among communication and overall organizational culture, in strategy implementation. A lot of studies have been made to address the importance of the key success factors in executing a strategy. Those studies also describe the ways, for instance, in which a company could take into consideration these factors. Still, a more ground-level study is missing, despite how important the implementation is for the whole strategy process to be successful.

1.1 Research questions and objectives

This thesis seeks to find how a corporate team, including the team leader and employees, can implement the company's sustainability strategy. Another objective is exploring how the sustainability strategy is reflected in the work of the team leaders, and the work of employees. In addition to those, this study also explores the interaction and communication between team leader and their team members, and how they can best implement the company's sustainability strategy and goals. Based on these reflections, the final research question is:

> ➢ *How do purchasing teams contribute to the implementation of the corporate sustainability strategy?*

More study on the effects of leaders' and employees' actions in their work is needed for companies to become more successful. The primary objective for any company is achieving its goals, whether those are strategic or not. Studying ways of leaders and employees' possibilities in implementing a strategy, the study will gain benefits for any company. This thesis will add insight into the ground-level research about corporate teams' contribution to strategy implementation. The ground-level aspect is created by interviewing a company team and collecting data from the team members' viewpoints and experiences. This kind of study can add a deeper level of knowledge to previous literature about the key concepts of strategy implementation, where middle-level leaders and employees are noted as important factors. This study reveals that team members' significance is not noticed enough in companies, as they can affect the success of strategy implementation in many ways. For instance, the way a team leader communicates the strategy to team employees can make a difference. Thus, the interaction of the corporate team and the whole organization does impact the success of the strategy process becoming a reality. In addition, to support the studies that address the relevance of cooperation, this thesis brings insight into team-level cooperation and communication. When the effects of employee satisfaction and work motivation increase, the findings of this study can benefit companies in the future.

1.2 Conceptualization

This study includes only a corporate sustainability strategy, excluding any other corporate strategies. Strategies for corporate sustainability strive to gain a balance between the social, environmental, and economic needs of the organization and society (Engert & Baumgartner 2016). In other words, corporate sustainability can be defined as a matter that includes social, environmental, economic, and cultural problems in corporate strategy (Eweje 2011). Sustainability is an important part of the business and an important part of a company's strategy. Stakeholders are more and more interested in the companies' sustainability and what they do to promote sustainable values. For better financial performance and a good reputation, sustainability should be a part of an organization's strategy. (Kanashiro & Rivera 2019)

Figure 1 presents the conceptualization of a strategy implementation process through a company team. A strategy can be implemented in multiple ways, but this study focuses on the team leader and employee perspective. Although a team leader and employees are not the only key success factors in implementing corporate sustainability strategy, they have a great role in executing the company strategies. This thesis will concentrate on the perspective of how the strategy appears in their everyday work, and how their work could affect even better strategy implementation and execution. Not to forget that cooperation and good communication is a major part of the success.
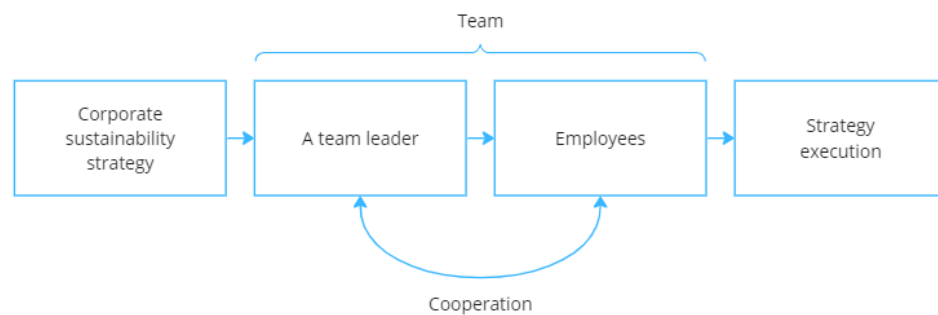

Figure 1. Conceptualization

The connection between every affecting part in strategy formulation and implementation is important to notice in the process of strategy formulation and execution. Kamensky (2015, 14) describes four main key success factors in how a company can be successful. These four categories are strategy, management, expertise, and interaction. All these categories apply to strategy formulation, which is the base of success in every company. A successful company strategy will demand straightforward cooperation and communication, for the employees to be able to work for a common goal and know what is expected of them (Shah, Jain & Jain 2023). An important point to remember is that without every part of the strategy process, it will not be a successful outcome.

1.3 Key concepts in strategy implementation

Corporate strategy: Corporate strategy is a continuous process that is tailored to follow a company's goals. Developing a strategy is crucial for companies, as it guides the decisions in the company and leads companies to their goals. One part of strategy creation is noticing the desired goals. Corporate strategy, at its core, strives to value creation and developing

advantage in markets. (Ottawa University 2020) Strategy is usually defined as a plan for a company's purpose, direction, and goals (Liff & Andersson 2021).

Corporate sustainability: There is not only one definition for corporate sustainability but it can be defined as meeting a company's indirect and direct stakeholders' needs, as well as meeting the needs of future stakeholders (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse & Preuss 2010). In other words, corporate sustainability can be seen as the factor taking care that the long-term goals will be possible to achieve.

Strategy implementation: A crucial part of a company's successful strategy management. Implementing a strategy means the realization of strategy when the strategy is not only a concept but also a part of a company worker's job. There is research that indicates that middle managers are in a key position in implementing corporate strategies. The implementation process is still dynamic between top and middle managers but also includes all the company's employees. (Schuler, Orr & Hughes 2023)

1.4 Structure of the study

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The introduction covers a part of the background of the study, the goals, the framework, and the research question. The second chapter presents the theoretical background, covering previous studies on strategy formulation and implementation. The team dynamics including team leaders' and employees' importance in strategy implementation are explained in this chapter. The third chapter describes the methodology, which includes the case company description, research method, data collection, and data analysis. The fourth chapter describes the findings and analysis of the study results. The fifth and final chapter is for conclusions and discussion. The conclusions summarise the theoretical background and findings and the discussion summarises the study findings. Then there is study reliability and validity included with limitations and future directions.

2 Theoretical background

Theoretical background is presented in this chapter, which presents research and previous studies regarding the development of corporate strategy framing and implementation. The chapter focuses especially on the importance of middle-level leaders' and employees' contributions in executing strategy. First is presented how the corporate sustainability strategy can be implemented. Second, moving on to the role of teams in strategy implementation and then describing separately the roles of team leader and employee in executing strategy. Finally, the communication and dynamics of the team are discussed.

2.1 Implementing corporate sustainability strategy

Strategy can be and is defined in many ways. On the whole, it is "the long-term direction of an organization" (Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Angwin & Regnér 2015, 2-3). Identified success factors for corporate sustainability strategy implementation are, among other factors, the overall organizational culture and structure, and employee engagement, not forgetting leadership and communication. (Engert & Baumgartner 2016) Implementing sustainability strategy practices for suppliers and sub-suppliers is a challenge. The further level supplier in the supply chain is, the more difficult it is to implement strategy efficiently and keep track of sustainability. (Wilhelm et al. 2016) Most of the time even a well-designed and defined strategy will not become reality in its entirety, which results from failing implementation (Gębczyńska 2016). A surprisingly common problem that has occurred in the studies of Engert & Baumgartner (2016) is that all high-level leaders do not have proper knowledge when asked about the company's sustainability or sustainable strategy. For the strategy implementation, it would be very important for the top leaders to understand the strategy, as they should be able to communicate it to all employees. That will be an issue for the company's internal communication and further the strategy implementation. Poor communication forms an atmosphere where good results in strategy execution are almost impossible to achieve. The most important first step is to completely understand the subject, and then be able to implement the strategy so employees have the complete understanding.

Corporate sustainability strategy is usually a part of a company's strategy, and in today's world, almost every company does address sustainability in its strategy. Especially in polluting industries, but also in any industry nowadays, sustainability is addressed to be an important part of a company's strategy. Also, to the stage where companies feel pressure from stakeholders to be more sustainable. (Kanashiro & Rivera 2019) Legitimacy, stakeholders' expectations, and improving competitiveness are the greatest motives that push companies toward environmental activities (Abdalla & Siti-Nabiha 2015). Legitimacy is associated with strategic advantages such as enhancing organizational credibility and drawing active support among stakeholders (Kanashiro & Rivera 2019).

A company should include sustainability not only in its internal strategy but in its external strategy as well. If a company claims to be sustainable, the sustainability claim should reach its suppliers. This can cause problems because, in large companies, it can be impossible to be aware of every supplier's action and whether their claims being sustainable are true or not. Stakeholders will not settle for only the buying company being sustainable. They will, with a high probability, make sure that suppliers that the buying company uses, are acting sustainably too. (Wilhelm, Blome, Wieck & Xiao 2016)

Because of stakeholders and competition, companies have more pressure to be sustainable. Sustainability is a great competitive advantage for companies but also companies are responsible for their own and their suppliers' sustainability, which leads to the "chain liability effect". This means that if even one supplier in the chain is acting unsustainably, the buying company will be held responsible for the unsustainability problems. On the other hand, if every part of the supply chain is considered sustainable, the company will hold the reputation of being sustainable. (Hartmann & Moeller 2014) As can be said in this context, a company is as strong as its weakest link.

Organizational structure and culture affect in implementation of sustainability strategy. The way the employees think in an organization is reflected in their work and either promotes or complicates the strategy implementation. Management control and especially leadership, have not received enough attention in this context. Still, the relevance can be seen, and leadership should be addressed, as Engert & Baumgartner (2016, 829) describes leadership as "being fundamental in the implementation of company strategy". Managers' values and attitudes towards the company's strategy are important in successful or unsuccessful

implementation. (Engert & Baumgartner 2016) Wilhelm et al. (2016) address the importance of investigating contingencies—that way managers can make important decisions about what strategies to use in which situations. For instance, contingencies for a buying company addressing sustainability in their sub-suppliers are supply chain transparency, relative buyer power, and stakeholder pressure.

Employees should be motivated towards strategy implementation, as they are the key to executing the strategy in their everyday work. Exactly like managers, also employees' attitudes and values affect the way they are motivated towards sustainability. It has been studied that qualifications and reward systems do motivate employees towards their set strategic goals. Strategy cannot be implemented without cooperation with employees, which speaks to the importance of employee engagement. Nothing happens without good communication, which makes internal communication important, but external communication should not be forgotten either. In communication, transparency becomes crucial. Companies' ways of communicating internally are limited and companies may want to focus on the channels in the future, for better communication and understanding of the sustainability strategy. (Engert & Baumgartner 2016)

2.2 The role of teams in strategic implementation

Team-based work is recognised as "a favourite formula" in organizations (Doorewaard, Van Hootegem & Huys 2002, 356). Organizations choose teams increasingly often over individual work. Teamwork is believed to enhance quality and productivity, in the team but also the organization. Not to forget it offers autonomy, responsibility, and job enrichment for the team members. (Doorewaard et al. 2002) Johnson et al. (2015) divide strategy into three levels: Corporate-, business-, and operational-level strategies. These three levels link to each other in a way that corporate-level strategy concerns the overall scope of the company, business-level strategy is about the individual business and how it competes in its markets, and operational-level strategy forms the basis for how a company's resources, processes and people deliver effectively for company's strategies. The matter linking these strategies is the integration, which is the way all these strategies are implemented and managed.

The use of teams in an organization synergies various type of expertise and knowledge of team members as the teams increase capability, responsiveness, and flexibility. Organizations use teamwork for the benefit of it. Unlike before, most organizations nowadays revolve around teams instead of individuals. Teams have multiple benefits for effective working, but teams are not automatically effective. Ineffective teams waste resources and may not promote the company's strategies, and for that matter, the concern for organizations is how to maintain effective teams. A solution for the concern is to keep organizational culture, team and individual performance, behaviour, and attitude functioning. Creating a strong team culture is critical and it is derived from pre-existing organizational culture, that has driven the company to success. (Shah et al. 2023)

Research has shown that teams are beneficial for decision-making, but to be able to achieve effective decisions, all team members should have the relevant knowledge and information. Individual expertise is usually not enough, teamwork competencies should be enhanced too for better performance. (Sibbald, Campbell, Flores-Sandoval & Speechley 2023) The difficulties teams face in teamwork are related to communication and disagreements for example on common goals. Team members could have inappropriate expectations and teamwork is all in all quite vulnerable to issues. (Brassler, Block, Leal Filho, Azeiteiro, Alves & Molthan-Hill 2017, 66) Team leaders have a great role to play in the coordination of cooperation between team members, for a successful strategy implementation and clarity of the goals (Shah et al. 2023).

As discussed in the previous chapters, the role of team leaders in strategy execution and implementation is very important. As important as team leaders, is the contribution of employees. Team leaders have a bigger role in implementing the strategy for their employees, but the employees have a greater role in executing the strategy in their everyday work (Burgelman et al. 2018). Regardless of company form, or any other factor affecting in strategy process, there will be a considerable difference in success depending on whether the company notes the importance of both middle-level manager and employee motivation in implementing strategy, and how they understand it (Gębczyńska 2016). Burgelman et al. (2018, 540) state that "Strategy's effectiveness is achieved through practitioners' internalization of strategic responsibilities and priorities." By this statement, the researchers claim that every employee in a company must know their responsibilities and their role in

implementing strategy, for effective results. Gębczyńska (2016) agrees with the claim that strategy implementation requires decentralization for lower-level managers.

2.2.1 Role of team leaders and employees

Burgelman et al. (2018) conducted research on the strategy process and its actors. They came up with findings that advocate for the importance of other employees in strategy implementation, than only top management. Their research shows that middle managers have a great role in the strategy process. Middle managers can affect the quality of a company's strategy and the strategy implementation. In recent years, discussions about involving other employees have risen, and the importance of their expertise has been noticed in the strategy process.

Middle-level managers are typically seen as the implementers of top management strategic plans (Johnson et al. 2015, 244). Strategy strongly integrates in the work of team leaders. Team leaders could be seen as a channel where the team leader implements top management strategies for their team employees, in a way that is manageable for the employees in their work. It is the managers' responsibility to demonstrate their commitment and motivation towards the company's strategy, to motivate their employees (Thanyawatpornkul, Siengthai & Johri 2016). The talk about team leaders motivating employees towards more sustainable behaviours goes hierarchically and also in the other direction. If a company's CEO has environmentally responsible values and the middle-level leaders feel strong identification towards the CEO, it will create a situation where the middle-level leaders internalize the CEO's values in their work (Faraz et al. 2023). Tawse, Atwater, Vera & Werner (2022) found the importance of coordination in the strategy implementation success. They noted that middle-level management has a relevant importance in the implementation process. A distinctive factor in achieving successful implementation was middle-level managers' communication on the strategic goals and deadlines, role clarification, and information on each employee's responsibilities. Moreover, their role includes developing effective performance measures, as well as holding themselves and their team employees accountable for effective and on-time task completion.

Team leaders can use a strategy map to help them understand the company strategy better, and to help them implement the strategy for their employees. For effective leadership, a clear understanding of the strategy is vital. In their work, they need to link the everyday work to strategy, in a way that the employees can understand how their work is related to executing the company strategy. A strategy map is a tool for companies to help all employees understand the strategy. To introduce the tool, "The map should be constructed in a manner that demonstrates how objectives will be achieved and why they are being undertaken." (Goldstein 2022, 5) Apart from the strategy map, a crucial tool for strategy implementation for team leaders is their leadership capabilities. Team leaders must be able to listen not only to their employees but also to the top management. Leadership capabilities include communication, and the ability to think creatively and provide energy to team members. Creative thinking could be, for instance, how the leader could implement a strategy at an individual level; does the employee need a more concrete approach to the strategy, or more formal. It has been studied that all these capabilities do improve strategy implementation. (Tawse et al. 2022)

Employees are very critical for organizations. They can be the strongest supporters or loudest critics in the organization. Therefore, also considered one of the most important stakeholders, and very critical for strategic implementation. Regardless of the importance for organizations, employee relations are relatively understudied. (Kang & Sung 2017) The strategy always relies on the company's values (Johnson 2015, 94). Therefore, when recruiting employees, most companies rely on similar values between the new employee and the company (Karimi, Teimouri, Shahin & Barzoki 2019). The basis for employees executing a strategy is their understanding of it, yet in research made in 2001 only 5 percent of the staff members understood their company's strategy. Companies need to rely on their employees in the strategy execution, which makes effective communication essential. (Thanyawatpornkul et al. 2016) A claim from Faraz et al. (2023, 3) study accompanies the claim of the importance of employees: "The successful realization of an organization's corporate environmental strategy is contingent on employees' identification and ownership of the strategy".

A fact speaking in favour of including employees in the strategy process is that it increases employee motivation and satisfaction (Nwachukwu, Chladkova & Olatunji 2018; Thanyawatpornkul et al. 2016). It has been researched that when employees get engaged in

committing to the corporate strategy, their satisfaction with the company rises (Nwachukwu et al. 2018). Employees need to understand the company's strategy and what they can do to help execute it. A strategy map is proven to be an effective tool for employee inclusion. Benefits from successful employee involvement by strategy maps are that employees show greater commitment to the strategy, they can make better decisions in their work, and the tool can lower resistance to organizational strategy. (Goldstein 2022)

Team leaders' sustainability actions and values drive employees towards more sustainable working. It plays an influential role in implementing sustainability for a team. It has been studied that leaders do influence engaging employees in sustainability. However, companies should train and coach leaders towards more sustainable employment so that leaders can improve their abilities to employ sustainability in their everyday work. The practice which will guide team members towards sustainable actions is the team leader's exemplary behaviour and creating a "green environment". (Cai, Yang, Bossink & Fu 2020) A responsible leader has qualifications for considering more or less everyone's interests and they can handle information from different directions. Also, a needed ability is, as Faraz et al. (2023) present, to be able to share their opinion with employees. Open conversation and transparency in information will help the employees internalize the team leader's values and support the strategy. (Faraz et al. 2023) Employees' sustainability actions in their work are based on the company's set sustainability targets. The company should still give a free hand to their employees to implement the sustainability targets in their way. If a company wants to activate their employees towards sustainability, they should educate and bring up the topic in ways of dashboards and sustainability ambassadors. All employee's values and interests do affect the level of sustainability actions an individual takes in their work, excluding the sustainability tasks related to their everyday work. (Bhattacharya, Sen, Edinger-Schons, & Neureiter 2023)

2.2.2 Team collaborations and dynamics

Interaction is one of the four dimensions of "the diamond of success" by Kamensky (2015, 14). Interaction and cooperation are strongly integrated into effective strategy implementation. Kamensky (2015, 26-27) elevates the interaction-based approach in strategy formulation and implementation. In an organization, the need for multidimensional

interactions between individuals, teams, departments, and functions is increasingly important. Relevant to this study is the collaboration and dynamics between the team and its individuals.

Executing a strategy in a company acquires trust between staff members. When employees are a key part of executing strategy, an effective reward system, as well as communication and development, play a key role in efficiency in strategy execution. (Thanyawatpornkul et al. 2016) Trust is key in team relationships. The research presents that trust will promote a positive attitude toward the organization, promote performance, and increase organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Well-working cooperation will contribute to team cohesion and better performance. Cohesion describes the commitment to the team and company, and team members' desire to remain in the company. (Salas, Rico & Passmore 2017, 18) Working toward a common goal demands communication. Communication is key for avoiding errors and keeping a good atmosphere in the team. Face-to-face interaction should promote communication where information is shared from an individual's sight of view. In practice, the information shared by a team member is typically commonly held opinions, which does not promote good communication. For better communication skills in a team, it is critical to encourage expressing of unique information, and everyone's thoughts. In a virtual environment, the information should be openly available for best working communication. (Salas et al. 2017, 21-22)

Teams' dynamics are affected by the internal dynamics of the whole company. To say that a company has good dynamics, it needs to have good internal information flow, motivation, knowledge, culture, leadership, technology, and competencies. (Kolpinski, Yazan & Fraccascia 2023) Differentiation along a socially desirable dimension is called hierarchy. Hierarchy is present in any organization, but the levels of hierarchy differ. For team efficiency, it is essential to study how hierarchy affects a team because it can promote or be a barrier to seamless strategy implementation. Studies show that status differentiation promotes a competitive team climate, which decreases team cooperation. Team members are then more likely to withhold important information and resources. High hierarchical differences are associated negatively with team performance. (Hays, Li, Yang, Oh, Yu, Chen, Hollenbeck & Jamieson 2022) For a well-cooperating and functioning team, could

say that low hierarchical differences are important, between the team leader and employees, but also between each team member.

An effective, two-way communication is critical in a team. It is not only the key to successful strategy execution but also the factor that creates a healthy environment. (Thanyawatpornkul et al. 2016) Communication is more than verbal, it requires gestures in addition to spoken communication, which is crucial for conveying the messages (Burgelman et al. 2018). Open communication should be the basis for a team, but easier said than done. A team's success is practically dependent on effective communication, in addition to coordination and team decision-making. (Hays et al. 2022)

Employee engagement from the employee perspective, is at its best when an employee feels engaged in the role as an employee and feels included in the team. To acquire a state where employees feel included and engaged, organizations need good internal communication. The importance of engaged employees has recently been recognized. A two-way relationship between employee and employer will be beneficial for both and increase satisfaction in the workplace. For smooth functionality and innovation, organizations should focus on engaging employees. (Kang & Sung 2017) When an employee feels satisfied with their work, they are more productive and perform better in companies. Employees can be engaged, for instance, by recognition for their work, reward systems, co-workers, and the nature of their work or organization itself. (Nwachukwu et al. 2018)

3 Methodology

This research was executed as a qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews in a large size Finnish trading sector company. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research among other things in a way that qualitative research involves the data collection, analysis, and interpretation at the same time. (Saunders et al. 2023, 652) Qualitative data will likely be rich in contextual detail, and the analysis process will follow during and after data collection. (Saunders et al. 2023, 653-654)

Qualitative study, collected by semi-structured interviews, can best serve the needs of this research, as the extensive data will provide important details for the study and enable precise data analysis. Qualitative methodology has its benefits for this research, as this study concentrates on the means an individual can affect the implementation of a company strategy. The interviews were held in the company's replenishment planning team, in which the team leader and three team members were interviewed. This chapter discusses the methodology of the study, including the data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Description of the case company

The case company is a large size Finnish company operating in the trading and retail industry. The company will remain anonymous and is referred to as "the company" in the text. The company picked for this study is known for promoting sustainability in its strategy and marketing. That is one major reason for picking this company, to find out the methodologies in strategy execution, in a company that strongly addresses sustainability. The company has a wide range of suppliers in many different ranges of industries. The replenishment planning team, that was interviewed for this study, focuses on material-providing suppliers.

The study focuses on the replenishment planning team, which implements operational procurement. The team consists of several team employees and a team leader. Three of the team employees and the team leader were interviewed for the study. These people were

interviewed as it is interesting to find out how the company's sustainability strategy is reflected in their everyday work and how they cooperate and communicate for the best resulting strategy implementation. The interviewees will stay anonymous and will be referred to as "interviewee A", and so on, in the text.

The case company's strategic goals evolve around sustainability, customer experiences, and digital services, and the strategies aim towards viable growth and more sustainably developed tomorrow. The strategies are developed for each department individually. This way they can react individually to the industry-related changes. A connecting factor is that all strategies include sustainability, which in the supply chain management department covers daily activities. There are multiple ground-level measures, for instance, transportation and packaging instructions for suppliers guide to the use of recyclable packaging materials, and use of reusable pallets instead of single-use pallets. The company's strategies aim for growth and a part of the strategic success is recognising the sustainability risks and developing policies to address those.

3.2 Data collection

Data collection was executed as semi-structured interviews. By this method, the interviewer will prepare interview questions and the interviewee will answer the questions in their own words. The semi-structured interview allows changes in the question order and gives more options for the interviewee. The interviewee can for instance suggest their questions and they can answer questions without restrictions. This is the most used method, and if successful, the results can be very effective. (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen 2005, 104-105; Bryman & Bell 2015, 13) The qualitative study will best suit a situation, where the study concentrates on details and certain events, rather than general information (Metsämuuronen 2008, 14). The semi-structured interviews gather data, which is typically analysed qualitatively, as the questions include in-depth questions and answers. (Sauders et al. 2023, 447)

This method was chosen for this study since semi-structured interviews enable precise responses and thoughts from interviewees, and the analysis can be conducted qualitatively.

In addition, by this method, it was possible to ask further questions if needed, during interviews. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. Interviewees were chosen randomly from the case company's replenishment planning team, by asking who would like to participate in the interview. The team leader was asked first, to ensure that they would participate, as the team leader's responses were needed to receive a full picture of the whole team. The team leader and three employees participated in the interviews. The team leader will be presented as interviewee A, and the team members will be presented as interviewee B, C, and D.

Interviewee A is the team's replenishment manager, and the team leader, and describes their job in a way that approximately 50 percent of the working time is spent on team leader tasks, and the other 50 percent is spent on development work. The interviewees' B, C, and D job descriptions as replenishment planners were similar to each other: they work in the replenishment planning team and their main responsibilities are product replenishment planning and placing of orders, optimisation of inventory values, delivery tracking, communication with suppliers and responsibility for monitoring the supply chain in these responsibility areas.

All interviews were conducted during October 2023, and the interview meetings were held in Teams application, separately for each interviewee—this way the automatic transcript could be used for collecting the discussion, for easier data handling later. The interviews lasted around 25 to 50 minutes and were spoken in Finnish. All employees were asked the same questions, but during interviews, the interviewer could add sub-questions, and every interviewee answered in their own words. For the team leader, the interview questions were similar to employees' questions but differed a bit. For instance, the team leader was asked how they act to keep their team up to date with the strategy and objectives, which was directed at the team leader only. The employees were asked more about the dynamics and cooperation in the team and with their team leader. For the findings, the data will be translated from Finnish to English and presented as quotes and interpretations. All interviewees received the interview questions a few days beforehand, to prepare for the interview.

3.3 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed, which enables the data analysed from a point of 'how' the interviewee answered, not only what they answered. In other words, this method enables a more detailed analysis of the findings (Saunders et al. 2023, 658). This study will not focus mainly on the tone in answers, but it is good to remember that the tone can influence the data analysis. As there is a lot of data, the analysis will be time-consuming, and it is important to be able to take the key points from the data. Therefore, content analysis will be the method for analysing the data.

A content analysis is a technique that describes the content in an objective, systematic, and quantitative way and helps identify specific characteristics of a message in a text. This method enables the text to be analysed systematically and objectively (Bryman & Bell 2015, 298-299). To make the analysis more effective, content analysis can be done with the help of a few steps. The first task is to gather all crucial information from the text, to make sure that the key information is clear. Second, the information should be coded. This means that all similar information is gathered in the same group, to help with categorising information. Third, focusing on sampling and not only on the interesting period or data sources. (Bryman & Bell 2015, 305) The content analysis emphasises that the study will be replicable by using explicit categories in coding the components and producing an identical outcome (Saunders et al. 2023, 584).
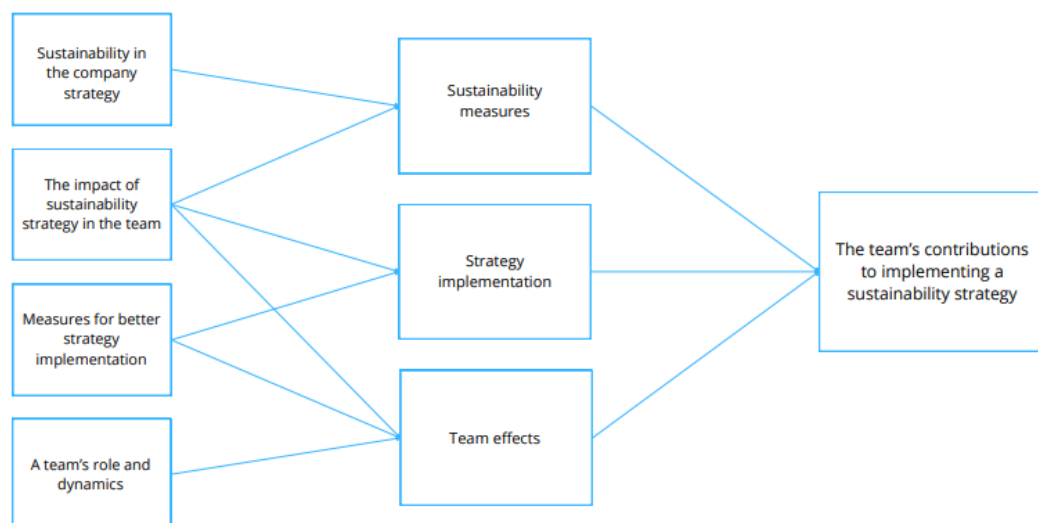

Figure 2. The process and final categories for coding findings

The analysis is done as an inductive analysis by developing categories based on the gathered data. The categories for content analysis and the process behind the final categories are presented in Figure 2. The process where final categories were elaborated started by finding the key information that needed to be addressed from the data. The categories were formed from the interview data after interviewing all interviewees. The interview questions were used as a guide to form the themes to help with the coding process, which eventually turned out to be the four final categories. The first-order categories fall under more than one second order, which can be seen in the coding tree. In this study, the findings are analysed by examining the relationships and similarities between each category of information.

4 Findings

The findings of the interview research will be presented in this chapter. The study is based on a team leader and three team members' interviews. The study results are analysed from the interviewees' answers to questions that can be found in Appendix 1. The collected data provided further insight into the team's effectiveness and impact on sustainability strategy implementation. In addition, the interviewees were asked to estimate their importance in the strategy implementation process and to evaluate their team dynamics.
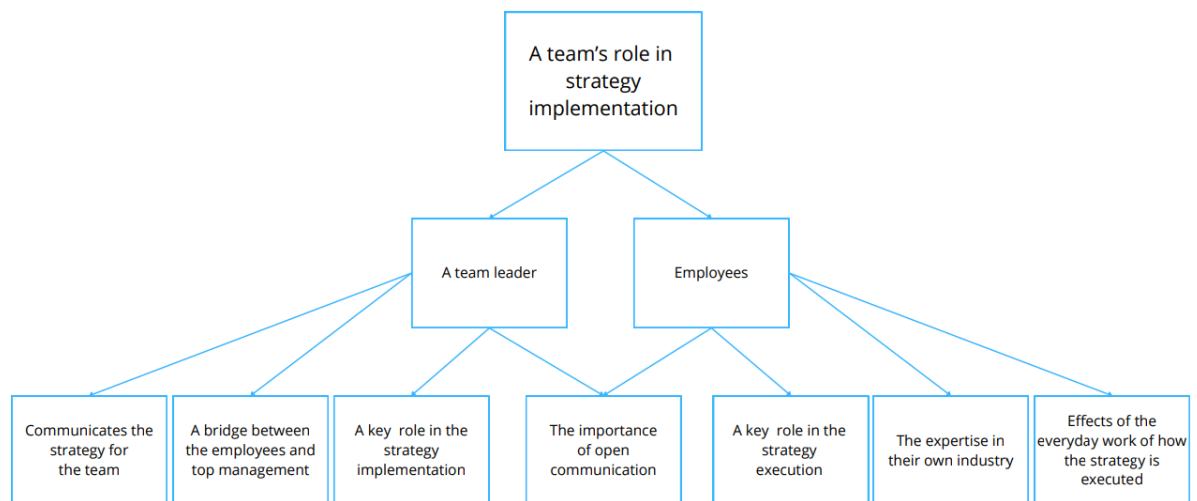

Figure 3. Illustration of a team's role in strategy implementation

Figure 3 illustrates the main findings and key aspects of a team's role in strategy implementation, based on these study findings in this chapter. The figure summarizes the key activities of a team leader and employees contributing to the implementation of a corporate sustainability strategy. The individual aspects of the key findings are elaborated in the sub-sections. The key findings regarding the team leader and employees are presented and highlighted in sub-section 4.2, and the finding considering both, the importance of open communication, is presented in sub-section 4.4. All in all, the Figure 3 presents the final key findings of a team leader and how they contribute to the strategy implementation, and the employees' contributions to the implementation process, and what is the common finding between the two.

4.1 Impact of sustainability strategy on a replenishment planning team

"When the aim is to get suppliers to act for the environment, you have to think about what packaging materials are used, that those are as recyclable and reusable as possible."

- Interviewee A

All interviewees agree that sustainability is a very important part of the company's strategy, and it can be seen in many activities of the company. Interviewee A has the most knowledge and perception of the company's sustainability strategy, as can be assumed from a team leader. The sustainability strategy is contained in the company's industry-level strategy, as well as in the procurement strategy. It includes goals such as being carbon neutral in a few years, emission-free transport in all their activities, demanding sustainability actions based on science for the majority of their suppliers, and reducing emissions from their product processes. To summarise answers from almost all interviewees, transparency, open information, and precise criteria for suppliers are the core factors of sustainability activities.

"It is good too that the goals can be changed. Not because they cannot be reached, but because the world changes and one must be realistic."

- Interviewee D

The level of knowledge in sustainability strategy of interviewees B, C, and D differed as some of them had a better understanding of the company's sustainability strategy than others. For instance, interviewee B noted that the company does take sustainability seriously; they do what is needed and even more. Sustainable activities show even in the most basic forms, such as recycling in the workplace. Interviewees A, C, and D brought up that the company has great materials for sustainability in the intranet. Sustainability is continuously monitored and developed, centered on the customer-orientated view. However, the employees' roles in the implementation of the company's sustainability strategies were not as clear for them as they could be. For instance, interviewee B expressed that it could be clearer how their everyday work impacts the sustainability strategy execution.

"The company seeks to use a wide range of procurement channels -- to achieve results in efficient, sustainable, and customer-oriented purchasing."

- Interviewee D

The sustainability strategy seems to impact the replenishment planning team in various ways. Interviewee B stated that sustainability appears most visibly in the ordering process. One clear aspect of sustainability in the everyday work, which was presented by all employees, is that they must order full containers. Interviewees C and D also added that sustainability shows in the logistic expenses, in addition to the fact that orders should be carefully considered, as there should not be vain purchases. The importance of efficiency in the purchasing process is stressed in the team members' answers.

"Transparency is demanded from suppliers and the factories are audited -- the criteria are specific as to which factories can be ordered from."

- Interviewee C

It was found that the focus is on sustainable and responsible cooperation and supply relations. Green values are the drivers in the sustainable value chain, as interviewees D and C both address. Long-term relationships with suppliers are a goal that aims for good and trusted cooperation. Interviewee C draws a point that sustainability does not only include green values and environmental sustainability. It also includes social responsibility, which shows in the company's work community. All begins with everyone's well-being at work. The company has zero tolerance for workplace bullying and these cases will be taken seriously. The social responsibility and value choices show already in the recruitment process, as the new employees are chosen with similar values to the company. Interviewee C states that when employees' values match, everyone can have the best effects on the company's overall culture, and they will best work together for a common goal.

4.2 Team's role in implementing a company sustainability strategy

The interviews revealed that a team is important in implementing corporate sustainability strategy as they are the final step in the implementation process. The team leader and employees create a cooperative unit in which everyone has their important roles and responsibilities. Interviewees agree that every one of them has a significant impact on how the strategy will be executed. Their values meet the company values with a motivated attitude, and the company's transparency with the strategy creates the most effective strategy implementation.

"The team leader is responsible for the whole team, so their role is greater in the implementation of the strategy."

"They [the team leader] need to, of course, follow the company's strategy, policy approaches and values in general --."

- Interviewee D

Every interviewee agreed that the team leader's role in implementing a company sustainability strategy is significant. The team leader has *a key role in the strategy implementation*, and is seen, by all interviewees, as *a bridge between the employees and top management*. Interviewee A states that their role in implementing the strategy is crucial, as it is the team leader who *communicates the strategy for the team*, in a way that the employees can best understand it and its effects on their everyday work. Interviewee D notes that the team leader has the greatest responsibility for complying with the company's strategy and values, and the strategy implementation for their team is one of the most important aspects of leading the team. Interviewee B states that the team leader's role is to lead the activities in a team and bring information to team employees' attention. Interviewee C agrees that communication is the main responsibility of a team leader, to also set goals individually.

"Even though it feels in the team leader role that I am repeating myself three times and saying the same things, I know that it is not so for the replenishment planners --"

- Interviewee A

The team leader's responsibilities include developing processes, which in this case considers, for instance, updating the transportation and packaging instructions and taking sustainability into account increasingly more. The company has set a certain strategy for sustainability which a team leader will implement in almost every aspect of their work. The best measures for implementing a strategy, from the team leader's point of view, are the following. Clear communication, clear instructions, and materials for what the strategic measures mean for the team and their everyday work. Interviewee A also notes that repetitions are a key, as the important information can easily be forgotten, if not reminded regularly. One vital matter for interviewee A is that the employees can discuss any topic with them and bring up matters if there are any problems or worries. The job includes redirecting the matters from the employees to the top managers. The most important factor is team members feeling heard.

"We order only full containers as effectively as possible -- that there will be as low emissions as possible."

- Interviewee B

The employee's role in implementing the company sustainability strategy shows best in everyday work. The strategy is contained in the set goals and as interviewee D presents it, their role is the 'final step' in executing the strategy. Their actions as employees will be the last bridge between the strategy plan and strategy execution. Interviewee C notes that their everyday operative work is very important in the strategy implementation process and its realisation. The strategy implementation is all about the *effects of the everyday work of how the strategy is executed*. Interviewee B agrees with interviewees C and D, that employees play *a key role in the strategy execution*. The reason employees are so important in implementing company strategy is that the strategy plan integrates their work most concretely. They have *the expertise in their own industry*, for instance, they must calculate efficient order baches, make sure that containers are ordered full, and figure out how the supply chain could be as effective as possible. In operative procurement, sustainable activities are shown in each measure of work tasks. Interviewee C states that it does matter how well one reaches the goals set for each individual. Interviewee D backs up the statement, as they think that one cannot depart from the set goals as it would affect negatively the otherwise successful strategy implementation.

"When implementing a corporate strategy for employees, the concept should be presented in a way that will best serve everyone's individual needs and how they can best understand it."

- Interviewee A

Because strategy as a concept can be difficult for employees to understand, interviewee A points out that the solution could be a practical talk on the subject, and that the strategy is taken to a more concrete level. Also, make clear that strategy is something that applies to everyone, not only top management. The strategy as a concept can be difficult to understand as an employee, which appeared in the interviews. Interviewees B and C experienced the interview questions as partly difficult to answer, because as interviewee B said, "the strategy actions in the everyday work are obscure". All interviewees agree with the fact that the strategy should be implemented in a way that becomes understandable for everyone.

Interviewee A notes that the implementation should be done in a way that considers every individual's needs, as some need a more practical point of view and some more statistical point of view. The key is repetition, as interviewees A and B point out. Interviewee D thought it would be great if the strategies were checked individually, in a way that the strategies are explained in how they affect everyone's work. Employees' answers give an interpretation that the better employees understand the means of their work, the better they can work towards an efficient strategy execution.

4.3 Measures for better sustainability strategy implementation in the future

"It is not enough that the goals are gone through once a year, because people do not remember, as those should be brought up often enough and implemented more concretely."

- Interviewee B

The company's sustainable strategic goals should be brought up in meetings and those should be brought up often enough as the interviewees address. For the sustainability strategy to sink in, it needs to be repeated frequently enough and discussed by the team leader and each employee individually. The important matters for better sustainability strategy implementation, that stand out from the data, are the actions towards sustainability and ways everyone can affect those in their everyday work. Moreover, the effects of everyone's actions on the strategy's implementation and success, and determining goals and expectations for team leaders and employees. To improve the sustainability strategy implementation, these topics were brought up in the interviews, for what might help succeed in strategy implementation better in the future.

"-- When people hear the word strategy, they can feel like it goes beyond their understanding and knowledge, but it should be brought to them as it is the most basic daily action."

- Interviewee A

"The company's sustainability goals feel sometimes too much of a top-level issue, which is difficult to sort of bring to my work, of how I can make a difference with my work."

Interviewees noted that an understanding of the reasoning behind certain activities is crucial, for being able to work effectively. However, the findings show that most employees only know how things are done but are missing the important question of why. As interviewee D presents the matter, everyone should be able to justify their actions and understand them. All interviewers think the strategy should be implemented in a ground-level way, the way things are done, rather than through figures that are difficult to understand. All employees noted that sometimes the strategies are presented in a way that feels like it does not consider them, rather only the top management. Therefore, the effects of a new strategy should be presented in the most concrete way possible. One thought was that the figures of each one's performance and how their work promotes the company's goals could be interesting to go through in a development discussion individually. The objective of this measure would be to promote the understanding of the company's strategy.

4.4 Team dynamics and effects on practice

"I believe it is very important that I can rely on the team leader and these things can be discussed with them, and that I can be up to date for what is going on, leading to transparency to the other direction as well --"

"We have an easily approachable team leader who can be trusted and it is clear that they want to promote these things which, in that sense, makes it easy to have open discussions."

- Interviewee C

"Most importantly I listen to the employee and what is the obscurity and give them space to ask questions or present their opinion on how things could be done better --."

- Interviewee A

The level of communication in a team turned out to be crucial for team dynamics and efficiency. *The importance of open communication*, for both the team leader and employees was highlighted. All interviewees agreed with the fact that their communication, especially with the team leader, is at a good level. Interviewee A highlighted that the team leader role benefits from great listening and communication skills. The employees should feel heard

and respected for who they are and what they achieve. A team leader was stated to have a responsibility to motivate their employees and make sure the strategies that are implemented, will be heard and understood. The employees were found to have a responsibility to communicate their opinions and information and justify if they disagree with something. The interviewees noted that those actions will promote well-working cooperation and that good communication creates a trusting space where information can be passed effectively.

"We set each team member individual goals at the beginning of the year, which mirror directly from our company's strategy."

- Interviewee A

"Objectives are set for everyone which are based on the company's strategy and the strategic goals are realized for everyone to do."

- Interviewee B

The cooperation between an employee and the team leader considers development discussions, problem-solving, and meetings, for instance. Individual goals are set at the beginning of each year, with an employee and a team leader. The set goals mirror the company's strategy. After half a year the goals are re-evaluated and checked if some changes are needed. And finally, at the end of every year, the goals are gone through with the team leader, and each employee, of how the goals are completed. The team leader's role in these cooperations is highlighted as they can affect how employees understand and internalise the goals. According to interviewee A, in addition to these functions, there are different pieces of training and tasks arranged to internalise the new information.

"If there are any unclarities, I will contact the person concerned and our team leader does have a receptive approach, so we can discuss the matter --"

- Interviewee B

"It is not enough to just say that I disagree or that cannot be done. At least you should bring something concrete to the argument"

- Interviewee D

The interviewees were asked, how they would handle a situation where there are some unclarities with the team leader or an employee. The results were similar as communication was the best solution for everyone and how they would handle the situation. Interviewee A, as a team leader, pointed out the importance of listening and communication. Interviewee D would handle the situation by justifying their point of view and communicating with the team leader. The style for handling the situation would be justifying their opinion and discussing the matter.

Interviewee D noted that if companies went through each individual's possibilities and ways of implementing a strategy, and what it means in their work, the results in strategy execution could be better. Interviewee C considers it important that the company communicates all changes and information up to date, for all teams, as the new information is important for all employees' work. The important factor is understanding the importance of each action and work. The results from interviews speak in favour of employees needing more understanding of the importance and effects of their work, as they would gain motivation and possibly even feel more fulfilled in their work.

5   Conclusions and discussion

This chapter presents the conclusions and discussion of the study findings and theoretical background. This chapter discusses the key findings, compared to previous studies. Finally, the reflection on the reliability and validity of the study, research limitations, and future research directions are presented.

5.1   Discussion of research results

This thesis aimed to bring more knowledge about the effects and contributions of a team in a company when implementing a corporate sustainability strategy. The goal of the study was to gather information on the importance of teams in implementing a corporate sustainability strategy, and how they can best implement it. This thesis also includes research on team dynamics and cooperation, which were found to have an impact on the results of a successful strategy implementation. This thesis is an attempt to change the direction of having more research in the field of strategy implementation, as the topic needs more attention.

The research question for the study was *"How do purchasing teams contribute to the implementation of the corporate sustainability strategy?"* which was based on a theoretical background, followed by data analysis. The summarised results of the study, based on interviews, are presented below. The answers are built on previous research and together with interview answers, present the conclusions.

This thesis focused on the company's sustainability strategy. Sustainability as a topic causes a lot of discussion and especially environmental sustainability creates a problem that most companies try to solve with their actions. Companies can feel pressure towards sustainability and in this study findings, it became clear that employees are aware of the importance of sustainability in the competitive markets. Transparency was addressed both in the previous studies and in the interview findings when talking about corporate sustainability.

The team interviewed were aware of their importance for the company's functions. The strategy implementation is dependent on many aspects, including leadership, corporate culture, cooperation, employee engagement, and strategy planning. Thus, it cannot be argued

that team leaders or employees are the only factors needed to implement a strategy. However, it can be argued that middle managers and employees are key factors in the whole process. Responses from interviewees highlighted the fact that the knowledge and even participation in the strategy process by employees is still relatively low. As the previous studies have addressed, the importance of including employees and their understanding of the strategy is increasingly proven to be an effective method for strategy implementation.

Team leaders should be aware of how a strategy can be implemented for each team member individually. This one important aspect of team leadership emerged in the interview answers as well as in the theoretical background. An important feature for a team leader is being able to listen and communicate clearly. The team dynamics seem to be much dependent on the team leader's communication and cooperation skills. However, the other team members have an important role in the team dynamics too. As previous studies revealed, a problem with team dynamics forms in a situation where an employee in a team does not share all important information and opinions but adapts to the general opinion of the team. This might form a situation where the needed information will not be shared, and the efficiency of the implementation suffers. Similar notes can be observed from the interview responses, where according to interviewees, the most important way to improve team dynamics and make progress is to express one's opinions openly. If an employee does not feel able to express their knowledge and opinions, it will affect the effectiveness of the whole team and can undermine the strategy implementation.

5.2 Discussion

To this day there is not as much research on strategy implementation as there is on strategy formulation, which results in a majority of strategic goals never being realized. Strategy implementation is described to be the most challenging task that managers face. The bridge between strategy formulation and implementation is middle managers, who can manage the effectiveness of strategy execution. (Tawse et al. 2022) This study attempted to fill this gap by researching ways of how a company's sustainability strategy is implemented in a replenishment planning team. The goal was to find the best ways of strategy implementation in a team, by a team leader and the employees.

A team's role in a company is significant, there is no denying that. Each team member has the power to influence the success of strategy implementation. At the same time, the team members should have more influence in planning the strategies (Engert & Baumgartner 2016). The same results were made in this thesis, as the employees hold important information, and the expertise of employees should not be underestimated. Employees hold valuable information that can affect positively the results of strategy implementation if given the information. Of course, the importance of top management's strategy planning should be noticed, but employees can have an important insight into the daily processes and therefore give good contributions to the strategy formulation. Team leaders could even be used as a bridge when transferring the employees' valuable experience and information to the top management to help the strategy formulation. At the same time team leaders hold valuable information themselves, which can be used in the strategy process.

Team leaders have been studied as being the bridge between the top management, the employees, and other stakeholders like suppliers (Tawse et al. 2022). The middle-level managers' attitude towards a strategy has been studied to have a great impact on the success of strategy implementation (Engert & Baumgartner 2016; Shah et al. 2023). The way a team leader presents the company's strategies does matter. The interviews revealed that in employees' opinion, the team leader's perception of the strategy and how they implement it is crucial for the success of the implementation. The level of engagement for the role and accomplishing tasks is significant when talking about middle-level managers. As well as the team leader, the employees' attitude towards sustainability, or strategic policies, will have an impact on the success of strategy implementation and execution. Therefore, when recruiting new employees, a company should pay attention to the potential new employee's values and if they align with the company's values. Studies show that when an employee is engaged in the company's strategy, it will increase their motivation towards the company. The motivation will keep the employees engaged and increase their satisfaction in everyday work.

A strategy is good when it adapts to the surroundings. This sets the employees in a position where they must adapt and be aware of how the changes are going to affect their work and how they can best execute the strategies. The understanding of the impact of the strategy is key for the employees to be able to effectively implement corporate strategies (Gębczyńska 2016). This thesis supports the claim, as it appeared that the key issue in implementing the

sustainability strategy was related to the issues with understanding. When all employees are aware of the reasons how their work impacts the company's strategy, the team leader's work could be considered particularly successful, and the strategy execution by employees will likely be more successful.

Previous studies have found that low hierarchical teams can improve the team's performance (Hays et al. 2022) The interviewed team dynamics seemed low hierarchical, as the employees feel like they can address any unclarities with the team leader and all employees consider each other as equal. This kind of atmosphere in a team seemed to encourage open discussion, as the team members feel trusted with each other. In summary, the previous studies and this thesis' findings are in line with the fact that a corporate team's contribution to a successful strategy implementation is significant. All team members are crucial as they have their own roles in the whole process. The main responsibility for implementing the company sustainability strategy for a team lies with the team leader. The employees' role and contribution to the strategy implementation process are undervalued, but their importance can be demonstrated. The team dynamics and the corporate culture affect the motivation of employees and in that way the effectiveness of the team.

5.3 Research reliability, limitations, and future directions

To assess the quality of the study, there are two things to consider: reliability and validity. A study is considered reliable when the data collection procedure produces consistent results. It means that the new study achieves the same results as previous studies have found when the research design has been replicated as in the previous study. Reliability measures whether the study can be replicated. (Saunders et al. 2023, 215) The findings of this study are corresponding to the previous studies. Therefore, this study can be defined as reliable. The study was conducted as a qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews in a large size Finnish company, in a replenishment planning team. This setup can be replicated and therefore supports reliability. However, the interviewee quantity is relatively small, which lowers the reliability. Moreover, the interviewees present only their perspectives on the topics, which should be taken into consideration when assessing the reliability. Also, the study includes only one Finnish trading company, and therefore the results cannot be

generalised to all big Finnish companies, although, the equivalence of the responses makes the study more reliable.

Validity is the most important criterion of research (Bryman & Bell 2015, 50). Validity measures the accuracy of the research methods and for instance, questions asked in an interview. It measures whether the measures being used, and the phenomenon being studied meet as they are intended to. (Saunders et al. 2023, 215-216) The interview questions were, to a large extent, essential to explore the topic. Some questions could have been more detailed to receive precise answers, but the research method was still most suitable for the study. In addition, the findings were valuable for the research and therefore promote the validity of this study.

There are a few limitations of this work which are related to the limited number of interviewees, and a tight framing. A strategy implementation as a topic is very broad, there are many affecting factors in implementing a strategy. Therefore, there could be more study on the implementation processes of strategy and of the key factors. For future directions, a study could include companies and teams from different industries, as well as different kinds of job descriptions, and how the sustainability strategy shows in their work. Moreover, given the results of the study, future research may explore the topic in different surroundings, to have a full picture of sustainability strategies in Finland, and what are the methods different companies use to implement their strategies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions.

Interview questions for a team leader

1. What are your position and main responsibilities in the company?
2. Could you describe your company's main purchasing goals and strategy? Could you describe your company's main sustainability goals and strategy?
   a. How do strategies and their goals relate?
3. How and in what areas does the sustainability strategy manifest in the company's operations?
   a. How does the strategy extend to your day-to-day work?
4. What methods/strategies do you use in your work to put the company's strategy into practice?
5. How important do you consider your role in influencing the implementation of the strategy?
6. What methods have you personally found most and least effective in implementing the strategy within your team?
   a. Do you personally discuss the goals with each team member and what do you feel you can do to ensure the best results?
7. How would you handle a situation where you and an employee may have a misunderstanding on the goals related to the company's strategy and its implementation?
   a. Do you have any strategies for finding common ground and a shared direction?
   b. If this situation did happen, how do you think you could best handle the situation?
8. How do you believe you can motivate your team members to achieve the goals? How do you emphasize the importance of implementing the strategy?
9. Sustainability is an evolving topic. How do you act to keep your team up to date with the strategy and objectives?
10. Do you have any other topics, that were not covered in this interview, that might be worth discussing?

Interview questions for an employee

1. What are your position and main responsibilities in the company?
2. Could you describe your company's main purchasing goals and strategy? Could you describe your company's main sustainability goals and strategy?
3. How and in what areas does the sustainability strategy manifest in the company's operations?
4. What role should a team leader play in advancing the company's strategy into day-to-day work?
5. How does the sustainability strategy manifest in your day-to-day work?
6. How important do you consider your role in influencing the implementation of the strategy?
   a. And how important do you consider the impact of a team leader on the implementation of the strategy?
7. Do you and your team leader go over goals related to the company's strategy as well?
8. At what level do you perceive the implementation of strategies at the moment and how are they implemented?
   a. In what ways could you and your team leader promote the achievement of these goals?
9. Have you encountered situations of misunderstanding where your actions and the goals/expectations of your team leader did not align? How did you handle such a situation?
   a. Do you think you could have handled the situation better and how?
10. Do you have any other topics, that were not covered in this interview, that might be worth discussing?