



**UNIVERSITY *of*
WORCESTER**

The role and meaning of inspirational
motivation in leadership practice
to shape an effective digital transformation
in municipal services organisations in
Germany

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of the University's requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

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DECLARATION

I, Lars-O. Böckmann, declare that this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Worcester.

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own and that it has not been submitted for any other academic degree or professional qualification at this or any other institution.

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I confirm that all ethical approvals required for this research were obtained in accordance with the University of Worcester's Research Ethics Policy, and that all data have been collected, stored and used in compliance with the University's regulations on research integrity and data protection. Parts of this thesis have been presented at the PGR Conference in 2025 but have not otherwise been published.

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Pulheim, 23 December 2025

Lars-O. Böckmann

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Abstract

This research examines the role and meaning of inspirational motivation (IM) in the context of municipal services organisations (MSOs) in the age of digital transformation (DT). MSOs operate in a sector that is crucial to the public good but largely underrepresented in leadership research. While DT is widely discussed across industries, its impact on leadership in public organisations in Germany in general and on leadership in MSOs has received little scholarly attention. The research fills this gap by examining how top managers perceive and implement leadership practices that enable effective DT through IM. Four research objectives guided the study: (a) to understand DT from the perspective of top managers in MSOs; (b) to examine the role and meaning of IM in this context; (c) to identify development paths for managers to demonstrate IM in the digital age; and (d) to design a practical model for implementation that has been validated through reflection with practising managers. Using an interpretivist, qualitative research design, the study focuses on IM as one of four core components of transformational leadership to understand how it can shape DT. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with top managers of German MSOs and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). In addition, three reflective discussions were held with three top managers to explore how the interim findings from the interviews could be translated into practical application. Five key themes highlight the tensions between the promise of modernisation and the uncertainty of transformation and reveal the coping strategies used by leaders. Based on these findings, the concept of Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) was developed. RIM reconceptualises the traditional concept of IM beyond individual managers into a context-sensitive organisational capability: the ability to formulate a purpose-driven vision, institutionalise it structurally and procedurally, and legitimise it iteratively through participatory communication. The study proposes a three-level (strategic, operational and public) and three-phase (analysis, implementation and reflection) RIM framework that links vision, strategy, structures, processes and interaction to strengthen the legitimacy of DT. Theoretically, the study contributes to the context-sensitive further development of transformational leadership by integrating business, psychological and organisational-sociological perspectives and interpreting DT as a socio-symbolic rather than a purely technical phenomenon. In practice, it provides a roadmap for leadership development and change management within MSOs. Limitations arise from the qualitative design, limited sample size and contextual constraints. Future research should validate and expand the RIM model through quantitative and cross-sector studies. Overall, the dissertation positions RIM as a context-sensitive institutional leadership competency that enables sustainable DT by aligning a future-oriented vision with the public mission of MSOs.

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#TogetherIsBetter

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BA	Business Administration
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DBA	Doctor of Business Administration
DT	Digital Transformation
EU	European Union
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GT	Grounded Theory
GTM	Grounded Theory Methodology
IM	Inspirational Motivation
IP	Interview Partner
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IT	Information Technology
MLQ	Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire
MSO	Municipal Services Organisation(s)
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
RIM	Reflected Inspirational Motivation
RO	Research Objective
RP	Reflection Partner
RQ	Research Question
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SOC	Sense of Coherence
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
VUCA	Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the research background and motivation of the study and outlines the relevance of digital transformation (DT) in the context of municipal services organisations (MSOs). It establishes the problem context by discussing the increasing complexity, ambiguity and institutional constraints under which these organisations operate, and positions leadership as a central factor in addressing these challenges.

The chapter then provides an overview of the MSO context in Germany, examines leadership in public sector organisations, and introduces digital transformation as a multi-dimensional and non-linear phenomenon. Building on this, it identifies the existing research gaps and derives the research aims, questions and objectives guiding this study. Finally, it outlines the author's background and motivation and provides an overview of the structure of the thesis.

The term 'digital transformation' has become an integral part of the media and management literature, as well as the service portfolios of leading consulting firms. The majority of publications argue that digital transformation will lead to profound changes, particularly in the world of work (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016a; Precht, 2022a), with significant implications for leadership within organisations (Malik, 2015a; Wieland, 2019).

However, arriving at a shared understanding or definition of digital transformation is challenging, given the large number of definitions offered, which considerably vary regarding the adoption and use of new technologies, the improvement of processes, operations, customer relations, performance, and the creation of new business models (Kraus et al., 2021). For example, while Matt et al. (2016) do not explicitly distinguish between digitalisation and digital transformation, Liu et al. (2011) define digital transformation as an organisational transformation that integrates digital technologies and business processes into a digital economy. Warner and Wäger (2019) understand digital transformation as an ongoing process of strategic renewal that uses advances in digital technologies to build capabilities that refresh or replace an organisation's business model, and that also considers the impact of digital transformation on a new collaborative approach and culture. While the background and development of the terms are discussed in more detail in Sub-Chapter 2.2, the understanding of digital transformation by Lankshear and Knobel (2008) should be used here, which extends beyond individuals, companies and organisations to society as a whole and understands digital transformation as the use of information and communication technology not for simple

automation, but for the creation of fundamentally new skills in companies, public authorities and society.

This attempt at a definition already makes it clear that this change brought about by new technologies will pose challenges not only for companies in the private sector, but also for the state, governments and society. For example, in the public sector, this concerns the design of digital change through laws and guidelines, as well as the reorganisation of official processes, such as digital, data-driven administration as a task for the state administration. Depending on the perspective from which this topic is viewed, the meaning and role of digital transformation will appear in a different light, with different facets illuminated depending on the perspective (Precht, 2022).

Numerous disciplines have also focused on this topic for many years. For example, it can be considered from a more psychological perspective in relation to the individual (Wieland, 2019). In turn, organisational sociologists focus on conditions in companies, as, from this perspective, change is primarily made possible through changes at the formal level, particularly in structures (Kühl, 2015; Matthiesen et al., 2022). Overall, different perspectives from academia lead to different conclusions regarding certain research topics, including digital transformation and leadership – and these perspectives are always mutually influenced by the respective ‘zeitgeist’ and changes in science and culture (Bryman, 2011).

This research does not focus on exploring digital transformation from a theoretical outside perspective, but rather on using a qualitative perspective to show how the realities of organisational members – more specifically, top managers in the context of municipal services – are constructed by these very members themselves. The aim is to contribute, relevant to both theory and practice, to answering the central research question to be presented later through co-construction between participants and the researcher. By deliberately narrowing the perspective to focus on the individual views of top managers in the selected context on the phenomenon of digital transformation, it was possible to gain in-depth and new insights into the subject of this research.

The choice of municipal services of general interest as part of the public sector that provide services of general interest in Germany within the framework of local self-government as the context for this thesis and top managers as the focus persons is because the phenomenon of digital transformation has primarily been researched in the private sector, despite the fact that current developments in relation to digital

transformation are taking place in both the private and public sector (Rottmann et al., 2019). From the researcher's perspective, public organisations in general, as well as the so-called "Kommunale Daseinsvorsorge" (municipal services organisations; MSOs) in Germany, are crucial for securing the livelihoods of citizens (Meier, 2024), which is why it seemed worthwhile to focus this thesis on this context.

Before the following chapters take a differentiated look at the research context, the methodological orientation, and the results of this research, the aim of this introduction is to provide a basic understanding of what is meant by the chosen context of municipal services organisations in Germany, as well as an initial theoretical approach to the concept of digital transformation and the topic of leadership.

With this overview and basic orientation, the selection of the aim, objectives, and research question of this work can then be justified and placed in an initial overall context in this introductory chapter. In the following chapters, it will then become clear that while the three central topics – municipal services organisations, digital transformation and leadership – are initially considered separately in this research, it is precisely the overlaps and connections between them that can provide answers to the research question and objectives presented in Chapter 1.6. In addition, the researcher's background and the motivation for this research are presented in this introduction.

1.1. Research Context: Municipal Services Organisations in Germany

Public organisations in general and municipal services organisations (MSOs) in particular differ from private companies in that they are entrusted with public tasks that must be performed in a different economic manner and under different conditions. In Germany, municipal services organisations are part of the Basic Law, and their task is to provide services that are in the hands of German cities and municipalities and that – due to the public mandate – are provided for the (municipal) public. There is no fully congruent equivalent in this context in EU law (Conen & Zimmermann, 2020), but a linguistic equivalent would be comparable to public services in the English-speaking world.

In Germany, according to the German Federal Government, the provision of public services is intended to fulfil an obligation of the state or its bodies towards the common good (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024). For this reason, these organisations are also seen as cornerstones of well-being, quality of life and participation, and therefore of a functioning society. Meier et al. (2024) emphasise that municipal

services organisations have a decisive influence on whether citizens perceive their state as reliable and capable of acting, which is why Lewé (2024) also sees municipal services organisations as the backbone of our society.

In Germany, municipal services organisations include organisations for water and energy supply, wastewater and waste disposal, hospital financing, educational institutions, kindergartens, cemeteries, local public transport and local fire services (Kersten, 2015). According to Rappen (2022), a distinction can be made between technical-economic services (including energy and water supply, sewage and waste disposal, and local public transport) and social services of general interest, including education (kindergartens, schools, culture), health (care for the elderly, drug counselling), social security (social assistance, basic security) and the promotion of housing construction. Table 1 presents this distinction according to Einig (2008):

Technical-economic services	Social services
▪ Transport infrastructure ▪ Transport services (public transport) ▪ Communication services ▪ Energy supply ▪ Water management ▪ Waste management ▪ Dike construction ▪ Housing (social housing)	▪ Cultural provision ▪ Schools and education ▪ Childcare ▪ Healthcare and care for the elderly ▪ Financial and insurance services ▪ Disaster control, fire brigade and ambulance services ▪ Social infrastructure such as sports and cemeteries

Table 1: Technical-economic vs. social services
Source: Adapted from Einig (2008).

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In the case of the former, these are indeed part of the municipality's mandatory duties, but they do not necessarily have to be provided directly by the municipality. The municipalities can largely decide independently on how they fulfil their tasks, including by contracting non-public organisations. Although this is no longer the case in most instances today, as will be shown later, this possibility alone gives rise to a form of competition, since private companies could – in principle – take on tasks in this area if granted access, e.g., through public tenders.

In this work, the context of municipal services organisations was chosen, and a restriction was made to the technical-economic organisations, for example, energy and water supply, wastewater and waste disposal and local public transport. Compared to social services of general interest (schools, social security, etc.), these technical-economic areas must be oriented and measured even more strongly by

economic or business management standards due to the potential competition from the private sector. Therefore, a focus on precisely these organisations seemed sensible for a business administration thesis.

The municipal services organisations hold a special position for many reasons, especially compared to private sector companies (Dümke, 2015). They often also follow business economic logics; for example, the purpose of these organisations in Germany is subject to different requirements and conditions, such as longer contract phases with cities or municipalities, which leads to different competitive conditions than in the private sector. Furthermore, these services are constantly influenced by political interests and are under constant public scrutiny, not least because taxpayers' money underpins these organisations. Organisations that provide these services at the municipal level in Germany also play a special role in social terms (Dümke, 2023), as will be explained in more detail later.

Other characteristics of municipal services organisations include the fact that the use of the profits generated is regarded as socially appropriated – although the focus within this context is no longer on forgoing profits – and these should or must therefore be spent for the common good (Röhrich et al., 1987). In practice, this leads to tax cross-linkages through holding organisations at the municipal utility level, where profits and losses can be offset and surpluses can flow back into the budget of the respective city and municipality.

Other decision-making parameters also apply this context compared to private sector companies, as other legal constraints prevail. For example, these organisations are entrusted with public tasks (in some cases to an increasing extent), while the resources for their realisation are limited by political decisions in particular (Sutter, 1971), as well as by demographic factors and public budgets. Ultimately, these organisations are also subject to the (changing) political influences of cities and municipalities and – in the broadest sense – to changes in German and European politics.

To summarise, according to Rappen (2022), the provision of municipal services has always held strong importance, from both a micro-level perspective – as they influence the quality of life and development opportunities – and a meso- and macro-level perspective, as these services also help to determine the quality of the respective location (municipality, city, region) for private households and companies.

At the same time, this context is not immune to changes, such as those triggered by digital transformation, as this thesis will show.

If changes such as those triggered by digital transformation apply to all (private) companies and (public) organisations, then public sector organisations in general, and the municipal services organisations selected for this research project – with a focus on technical-economic organisations – are also affected. In this context, the question arises concerning how these organisations, with their particular characteristics, develop responses to the challenges triggered by digital transformation and how they (want to) actively shape digital transformation. Based on the perspective that leadership shapes organisations (Wieland & Hammes, 2010), this raises the question of the extent to which leadership in the context of municipal services organisations has been considered from a scientific perspective to date. This notion also leads to the question of the extent to which the topic of digital transformation and the resulting changes have been addressed to date.

1.2. Public Sector Leadership and Leadership in the Context of Municipal Services Organisations

There are different perspectives on leadership in public organisations in general, which are usually summarised under the umbrella term of ‘public leadership’. In this context, Van Wart (2013) offers a distinction between political leadership, communal leadership and administrative leadership. Political leadership refers to elected leaders (e.g., county councillors, mayors, etc.), primarily concerning reforms introduced and driven by political leaders. In this context, the field of (municipal) leadership concerns the management and organisation of municipalities, as well as cross-sectoral cooperation. This thesis is based on so-called administrative leadership, which addresses leadership by appointed managers within public organisations (Van Wart, 2003).

The challenges for leadership within public organisations are manifold, ranging from the strong political influence or even pressure to which these organisations and thus top managers are exposed (Tharanga, 2018) to the increasing challenges in terms of budget constraints (Rubin, 2019) or the issue of accountability and transparency, since public organisations make expenditures on behalf of the public, for which they are accountable within a democracy (Bayrakcı & Taşpınar, 2010). Further challenges lie in the topic of bureaucracy and its associated structures and processes (Wright & Pandey, 2010). There are also special features in terms of efficiency and service

orientation (Erkoc, 2013; Rosenbloom et al., 2022), as well as the motivation of those who are to provide the services efficiently within this context (Perry & Wise, 1990). It is not least up to the leaders of top management to find answers to these and other challenges, which in turn must always be considered in the context of newer dynamics, such as digital transformation, since digital technologies are fundamentally changing how governments and citizens interact and communicate with each other (Pauluzzo et al., 2024).

A closer look at leadership research in the context of municipal services organisations reveals that there are currently few specific findings in the German academic literature, whereas the focus is typically placed on leadership in the administration of public organisations in general. This trend could raise the question of whether the findings of leadership research from public administration organisations are also transferable to organisations in the field of municipal services organisations. A further question that could arise from this is the extent to which findings from leadership research in the private sector could also be used by public sector organisations, and thus possibly also by municipal services organisations. The latter question is dealt with in various places in research, and differences – for example, in relation to contextual factors, cultural factors, leadership mechanisms, etc. – between the private and public sectors are recognisable (Vogel et al., 2016). However, this comparative aspect is not central to this thesis, as the focus is on the individual perspective of top managers within the chosen context.

Regarding the first question about leadership research in public administration, there are relevant findings that could be considered for this work. However, a closer look shows that there are hardly any well-founded scientific findings – especially in Germany – that extend beyond anecdotal evidence (Vogel, 2017). Among current findings from leadership research in public administration in Germany, Vogel (2016) examined leadership behaviour in the public sector as part of his work, focusing in particular on factors that influence it in this context in his quantitative analysis.

Looking beyond Germany's borders, Van Wart (2003) emphasised in his first literature review that there are only a few substantial strands of research on leadership in public administration, and that this also transcends national borders. A decade later, Van Wart (2013) re-examined publications in relevant academic journals on this topic and found that although the academic debate in the form of published articles had increased from 45 (1992–2001) to 123 (2002–2011), it was

still underrepresented compared to the private sector. It can therefore be stated that despite the increase in interest in this area of research, many (research) questions remain unanswered, and the specific context of municipal services organisations has remained largely unnoticed especially in Germany.

1.3. Digital Transformation

Although new technologies have always been and continue to be part of our working lives, the prevailing view is that digital transformation (DT) represents one of the most significant changes to the world of work and life since the first industrial revolution over 200 years ago (Precht, 2021). However, there is a heterogeneous picture of what can be understood by digital transformation or digitalisation (Genner, 2017), and there remains no generally accepted definition of the term (Hausberg et al., 2019).

Hinings et al. (2018) describe digital transformation as an interrelated effect of several digital innovations that create new actors (and actor constellations), structures, practices, values and beliefs, and can change, supplement or even threaten and replace existing rules of the game in organisations, ecosystems, industries or sectors. According to the software company SAP's definition on its homepage, integrating new digital technologies and solutions across all areas of a company is primarily a technological endeavour. At the same time, this integration also has consequences, triggering or entailing cultural changes in companies and organisations beyond the process level (SAP, 2024).

Digital transformation – often discussed in connection with the notion of Industry 4.0 – is primarily characterised by increasing connectivity and interaction between humans and machines as well as artificial intelligence (AI). Although the latter is still described as 'weak' in many areas at the time this research was conducted, it is also recognised that it is constantly "getting stronger" (Precht, 2021), which has also become clear to a wider audience, not least through the emergence of ChatGPT in 2022 (Hu, 2023).

Accordingly, digital transformation – in contrast to digitisation projects, for example – is about more than merely the digitisation of analogue things, such as the conversion of a paper file into a digital file. According to prevailing opinion, digital transformation will have an impact on the lives of many people in today's industrialised countries (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016), as well as emerging economies and third-world

countries (Matthess & Kunkel, 2020), whereby the positive and negative consequences are not yet fully foreseeable. Figure 1 summarises the developments leading to Industry 4.0:

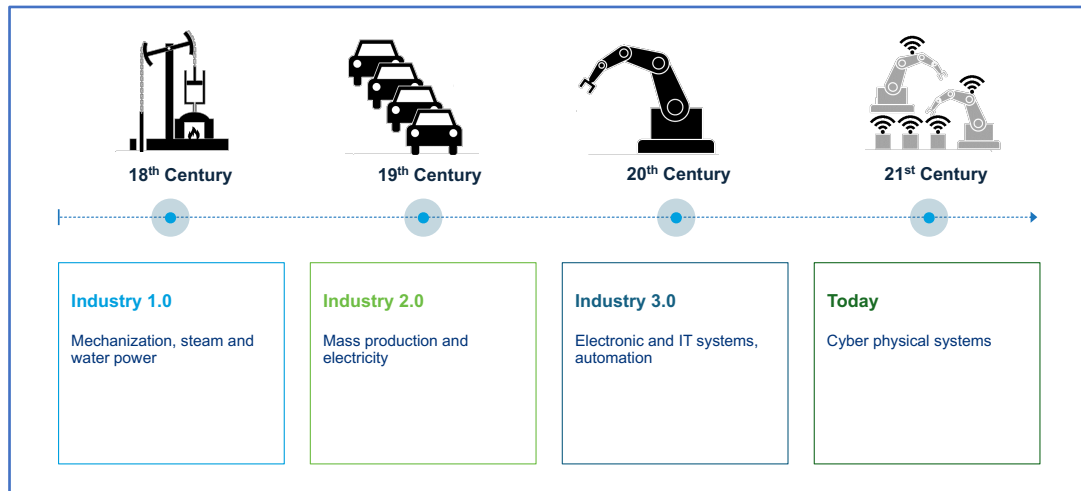


Figure 1: Development towards Industry 4.0
Source: Adapted from Ercan and Samet (2020). Original copyright holder: Ercan Oztemel. Permission to reproduce within the online version of this thesis received via email on: 6/7/26

Starting in the 18th century with Industry 1.0 and the use of steam and water power, through series and mass production in Industry 2.0 to Industry 3.0 – in which the first IT systems enabled even greater automation – the transformation has increasingly led to so-called cyberphysical systems, prompting a wide range of questions about how to deal with digital transformation (Homann-Vorderbrück et al., 2018). One of the central issues in this context is seen as shaping the impact of digital transformation on organisations and thus also collaboration and leadership in organisations (Hesse, 2018), as there is widespread agreement across all disciplines that the changes triggered by digital transformation will influence the working environment of people in companies and organisations in a manner that is difficult to reverse (Guggemos et al., 2018).

When applying this classification to municipal services organisations it becomes evident that digital transformation does not proceed in a uniform or linear manner. Rather, it unfolds as a complex and context-dependent process shaped by multiple interacting factors across organisational settings (Vial, 2019), and may simultaneously exhibit simple, complicated, and complex characteristics (Osborn, 2008). On the one hand, there are operational areas that continue to rely heavily on manual and physically demanding work. Activities such as waste collection – including the collection of bins from buildings, their loading and transport – are only partially digitised and are still largely organised through routine tasks and processes. In such areas, elements associated with earlier industrial phases – particularly

Industry 2.0 – continue to dominate, with a move towards 3.0 through semi-autonomous tasks, such as measuring fill levels in rubbish bins, the automatic measurement of water consumption and quality, etc. (Dornig, 2025; Solingen.digital, 2025). On the other hand, more technology-intensive organisations, for example in energy supply and grid management, exhibit characteristics associated with Industry 3.0 and 4.0. In particular, the increasing complexity of energy systems, for example, due to decentralised energy generation (e.g. private photovoltaic systems) or fluctuating demand patterns, requires advanced control systems, real-time data processing and increasingly AI-supported decision-making processes (Kagermann, 2013; Lasi et al., 2014; Schulte, 2023).

This coexistence of different stages of development within the same organisational context suggests that municipal services organisations cannot be clearly assigned to a single phase of industrial development. Rather, they operate simultaneously at several levels of industrial evolution. Against this backdrop, municipal services organisations can be understood as being in a multi-layered, fragmented and uneven transition towards Industry 4.0. In this sense, the ‘next phase’ of Industry 4.0 in municipal services organisations is determined less by a uniform technological level and more by the ability to integrate these heterogeneous stages of development into a coherent organisational framework. This involves managing tensions between highly digitised areas and those that remain largely manual, whilst ensuring coordination, legitimacy and a shared understanding across the entire organisation.

This uneven and evolving landscape also helps to explain why digital transformation is often perceived as uncertain and elusive in municipal services organisations. Rather than following a clearly defined path, the transformation may appear as a process spanning developments that are only partially visible and loosely interconnected. In this sense, digital transformation may be experienced less as linear progress and more as navigating through complex terrain, where direction, speed and outcomes remain only partially predictable.

Consequently, the classification of municipal services organisations within this heterogeneous transition forms an important conceptual foundation for this research. It highlights that the challenges addressed in this work do not stem from a fully realised digital state, but from a fragmented and evolving transformation process.

1.4. Connections Between the Subject Areas

Examining the intersections of digital transformation (DT) and leadership within municipal services organisations (MSOs), it becomes clear that there is currently little well-founded scientific debate in this form, but that the organisations in Germany selected for this research – represented by various associations, among others – tend to operate at the discussion and concept levels. However, in the course of writing this thesis, there was a shift towards the topic of digital transformation, for example, via new websites of associations with a focus on ‘digital’ (e.g., www.KommunalDigital.de). Moreover, in 2023, the sector’s largest association established a task force on “Digital Services of General Interest” (VKU, 2023). Nevertheless, the discourse on digital transformation within municipal services organisations remains nascent, particularly in the academic literature. Chapter 2.2 provides a differentiated account and critical reflection of digital transformation.

If it is assumed – irrespective of the context under consideration – that leadership practice fundamentally holds decisive importance for shaping change (Bommer et al., 2005), the discussions in connection with digital transformation in the literature primarily focus on technology and the structural and process levels, and less on the people in the organisations affected by the changes (Philip, 2021), even though these developments can have important implications for leadership (Foerster et al., 2018). At the time of writing, there was therefore less concrete discussion or research into the interplay between digital transformation and leadership in the context of municipal services organisations.

1.5. Knowledge Gap and Need for the Research

As outlined in the previous section, academic studies on leadership and the phenomenon of digital transformation (Morakanyane et al., 2017) in the public sector – particularly municipal services organisations – are scarce or non-existent, highlighting a research gap.

On the subject of leadership, the (partial) academic discussion in public administration in Germany can be traced back to the founding of the Bundeswehr (German army) in the 1950s (Genschel, 1982). However, various leadership concepts in public administration were discussed in more detail only in the 1970s, albeit primarily from a conceptual rather than a concrete leadership perspective (Boehret & Junkers, 1976; Laux, 1975). The topic of leadership in public administration in Germany was only taken up again in the 1990s with the ‘new

management model' for local government (KGSt, 2013), which can be seen as the German version of New Public Management (Proeller et al., 2014), albeit from a rather abstract perspective. In this context, only Klages conducted a more comprehensive scientific study of leadership in public administration in the 1980s, in which he analysed leadership in terms of autocracy, task orientation, and employee orientation (Klages & Hippler, 1991). However, work based on this has also not been carried out (Vogel et al., 2016), indicating a further research gap. At the time of writing, leadership in the context of municipal services organisations had not (yet) been examined in detail in relevant published studies, despite its significance for society in Germany. Although findings from public administration could be adopted in this context, many areas have not yet been sufficiently researched here (Vogel, 2017).

Therefore, the state of scientific debate on leadership in public administration (Van Wart, 2003; 2013) and in particular the lack of research in the context of the municipal services organisations in Germany can be addressed as a further research gap. In this context, Van Wart (2013) makes it clear that research into inspirational leadership, for example, could make a significant contribution to the field, including to leadership development in public sector organisations.

A necessary examination of the definition and description of digital transformation addresses a gap that extends beyond this, as the terminology is unclear and – for many, as will be shown below – not yet tangible.

Finally, at the time of writing, no research has been identified that establishes a conceptual and scientifically sound bridge between the phenomenon of digital transformation and leadership in municipal services organisations, which is why this research gap represents the central element and concern of this project.

In summary, the context of public organisations in general remains underrepresented compared to the private sector (Van Wart, 2003, 2013), which also applies to the context chosen for this work. In addition, previous studies have provided few insights and hardly any action-oriented guidelines for managers (Van Wart, 2013; Vogel, 2015), despite the fact that the chosen context makes a significant contribution to a functioning society (Dümke, 2015). Questions relating to the role and meaning of digital transformation, or the impact of digital transformation on leadership in the chosen context, could provide information not only on the status quo but also on

potentially helpful, scientifically sound advice on how to deal with these changes or actively shape them.

1.6. Research Aims, Questions and Objectives

This research aimed to gain insights that support managers in developing and effectively applying inspirational motivation (IM) in leadership practice in the age of digital transformation (DT) within the selected context of municipal services organisations (MSOs). Accordingly, the research topic is the role and meaning of inspirational motivation in shaping leadership to drive effective digital transformation in municipal services organisations in Germany.

The research questions chosen for a research paper are of central importance, as they serve as the anchor point for the study and provide a structural guiding framework (Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, the research question should be clearly related to one another, without being overly general, overly detailed, or overly global (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research is usually preceded by a general research question, which can evolve in the course of the research or from which new and/or broader questions can arise (Bryman, 2016). The general research question chosen at the beginning of this thesis was: *How can inspirational motivation in leadership behaviour effectively support and shape digital transformation in organisations of municipal services in Germany from a top management perspective, and how can this be effectively developed through a comprehensive and understandable framework?* During the course of this research, the initial phrasing “leadership behaviour” was refined to “leadership practice” in order to better reflect the study’s emphasis on enacted leadership activities in context rather than on behaviour in isolation.

The aim of this thesis was therefore to examine the individual perspectives of the top managers interviewed and maintain a constant focus on the relationship and interaction with the selected context (municipal services organisations) on the one hand and the ‘age’ (Industry 4.0) on the other. The following research objectives were therefore derived from the research question presented:

- (1) Explore and understand the phenomenon of digital transformation in the context of municipal services organisations from the perspective of top managers.

- (2) Investigate the meaning and role of inspirational motivation in leadership practice in the selected context from a top management perspective.
- (3) Explore and reflect on leadership development steps towards inspirational motivation in the age of digital transformation with municipal services organisations' top managers.
- (4) Develop a model for effective implementation in practice and make it applicable.

Building on an in-depth understanding of digital transformation, this research qualitatively analysed the role and meaning of inspirational motivation in leadership, as a sub-dimension of transformational leadership, from the perspective of top management. For this purpose, top managers were interviewed as experts with leadership responsibility from various municipal services organisations, as it was assumed that their views, understanding, and attributions of the role and meaning of digital transformation could be an important element in the effective handling of digital transformation in these organisations.

From an interpretative understanding of top managers' perspectives, it was necessary to derive concrete recommendations for action to effectively address the phenomenon of digital transformation in the selected management context. These recommendations should ultimately be usable for personnel development, organisational development, leadership development, management within the selected context, and consulting companies. Table 2 links the identified research gaps to the research's objectives, core methodological elements, and expected contributions:

Identified Gap	Linked Objective	Method (core elements)	Expected Contribution
Limited MSO-specific evidence on leadership in the age of DT in Germany	(1) Understand DT in MSOs from top managers' perspectives	Interpretivist qualitative design; purposive sampling of MSO top managers; semi-structured expert interviews; Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)	Empirical baseline on DT in MSOs; context-sensitive insights beyond generic public-sector findings
Terminological ambiguity around DT (DT vs. digitalisation etc.)	(1) Clarify the phenomenon of DT in MSOs	Theory framing; interviews	Clearer conceptual delineation of DT within MSOs
Underexplored interplay between DT and leadership	(2) Examine the role and meaning of Inspirational Motivation (IM) during DT	Interview guide aligned with research objectives; RTA to surface patterns of meaning	Findings on how IM can shape DT acceptance, motivation, and implementation within MSOs
Overemphasis on technology and structures in DT research	(2) & (3) IM in practice; development steps toward operationalising IM	Iterative coding to identify valuable mechanisms of IM during DT	Identification of effective IM practices and communicative routines supporting DT in MSOs
Scarcity of actionable, context-ready guidance for leaders	(4) Develop a model for practical implementation	Synthesis of themes; practitioner reflections	Practitioner-oriented framework for IM in DT contexts
Few qualitative, interview-based leadership studies in the German public sector	(1)–(3) Elevate lived perspectives of top management	In-depth, semi-structured interviews; interpretive lens	Methodological contribution: rich, senior-management perspectives rarely captured in public-sector leadership research
Limited focus on IM within public-sector leadership research	(3) Derive development pathways that can be operationalised	Development of IM-related pathways	Actionable development pathways for strengthening IM in MSOs
Fragmented view of the MSO-DT-leadership nexus (lack of integrative lens)	(4) Build an integrative model	Thematic synthesis across analytical pillars	Integrative model connecting IM and institutional logics during DT in MSOs

Table 2: Mapping research gaps to objectives, method, and expected contributions
Source: Own illustration.

1.7. Background and Motivation

The author of this research has more than 20 years of management experience, including over seven years as an internal manager in the municipal services organisation context and several additional years as an external consultant. Moving between private companies and public organisations over recent years – combined with a long-standing interest in leadership – raised the question of what meaning work represents for managers across contexts, a topic the author had already explored in a master's thesis in work and organisational psychology.

In the early phase of the doctoral programme, this interest evolved into a more specific question: the role and meaning of inspirational motivation, as part of transformational leadership, in the age of digital transformation – a topic increasingly present in organisations and public discourse. A review of the relevant literature showed that, while leadership and transformational leadership are widely researched, studies in the German public sector remain limited. Furthermore, at the

outset of this research, no scientific studies were found linking leadership practice to changes associated with Industry 4.0 within municipal services organisations.

These considerations, grounded in both professional practice and theoretical interest, formed the starting point of the research project. As a manager within municipal services organisations and as a consultant to various organisations, including public-sector entities, the author repeatedly observed that discussions with top management tended to shift quickly to structural and process-related matters (e.g. reorganisations), often overlooking the implications for leadership.

Given the ambiguity, complexity and dynamic nature of digital transformation – and the associated effects on leadership in these organisations – a scientific examination of these topics appeared necessary. The fact that only around 20% of articles published in *The Leadership Quarterly* were interview-based leadership studies (Lowe & Gardner, 2000), with little change in paradigmatic orientation at the time of data collection, further reinforced the value of this research approach.

1.8. Note on Linguistic Awareness and Overview of the Content

Before discussing the content in detail, it is necessary to note several linguistic considerations that are relevant to this thesis's qualitative paradigm, and in particular its reflexive approach.

Throughout the academic journey for this thesis, awareness was required of both linguistic subtleties in the author's native language (German) and the translations provided or used in the context of this thesis (e.g., translating the interview extracts). For example, English terms such as 'meaning' or 'role' were first translated from English into German (and later back into English) in the context of the present research especially for the interviews, always bearing in mind that the term 'meaning' can already be interpreted or understood differently in English (Fowers & Lefevor, 2015), and translations without critical reflection – for example, on the term 'meaning' – could fall short (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Although the subjective attributions of meaning that arise in the course of qualitative research are themselves part of the qualitative work, it was important always to be aware of the ambiguities that already exist in the German language.

Furthermore, it was important to constantly bear in mind that in contact with the interview partners (IP) and through the research approach chosen here, scope was

opened up for different (subjective) spaces of meaning, including regarding linguistic deep structures for words such as 'role' or 'meaning', which were not (previously) 'artificially' narrowed by the author through predefined definitions, for example.

The author is aware of the possible imprecision that might have been caused by translating into German or back into English, although this had to be accepted in the context of this thesis. For example, the term 'role' is comparable to its German equivalent. On the other hand, the term 'meaning' is more ambiguous and should therefore be understood in this research as the value that something holds for a person. This value is not intrinsic to the thing itself, but is always assigned by someone, which is why something can be valuable to one person but not to others (Nüchter, 2009).

Before providing a detailed presentation of the research findings, the results of the literature review relevant to this research are first presented in Chapter 2. The structure of this review is based on the three pillars (context, leadership, and digital transformation) to better categorise the various topics. The emphases placed in each pillar are also based on the topics identified in the data, so that the research results and findings can ultimately be categorised in a comprehensible and coherent manner for the reader.

The literature review is followed in Chapter 3 by a differentiated presentation of the research philosophy, methodology and research design on which this work is based. In this way, it should be possible to show in a thorough manner how the researcher of this work arrived at the findings presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides a critical discussion and conclusion of the research, outlines its limitations, sets out the implications for theory and practice and offers directions for future research, thereby concluding the thesis.

1.9. Summary

This research combines the three previously largely isolated concepts: digital transformation, inspirational motivation as a dimension of transformational leadership and the context of municipal services organisations. By combining these perspectives, the research addresses a previously little-researched interface of high social and theoretical relevance. It emphasises that leadership in municipal services organisations in the age of digital transformation must navigate the tension between stability and reliability and the need for innovation. This research focuses on

inspirational motivation as a central element of transformational leadership in environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The research also integrates concepts such as sensemaking/giving, management rhetoric and narratives as communicative mechanisms of organisational meaning-making and links these to institutional work theory, as will be shown later. This integration enables a deeper understanding of how leadership creates, legitimises and maintains institutional logics during digital transformation in municipal services organisations. At the methodological level, the research contributes to the empirical study of leadership and digital transformation through an interpretative, qualitative-inductive approach that focuses on top management's perspectives. The use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as described by Braun and Clarke (2021), provides a transparent and systematic process for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within the data. This design ensures both theoretical depth and practical relevance while maintaining a reflexive awareness of the researcher's role. The practical contribution of this work lies in the development of an application-oriented framework for promoting and implementing inspirational motivation within digital transformation processes in municipal services organisations. The framework provides managers, human resources and organisational developers, and consultants with actionable guidelines for promoting inspirational motivation, communicative meaning-making, and context-sensitive role modelling during digital transformation. Accordingly, it aims to strengthen leadership competence and improve the effectiveness of transformation initiatives across energy and water supply, waste management, and public transport. Overall, this thesis reinforces the finding that successful digital transformation in municipal services organisations is not primarily a technological challenge, but rather a question of leadership and meaning-making. It shows that context-sensitive, inspirational leadership can contribute significantly to the acceptance, motivation, and sustainable implementation of digital transformation, thereby becoming a decisive success factor for the future viability of municipal services organisations. This chapter has outlined the research background and motivation, defined the research problem, and presented the central research question and objectives. The following chapter builds on this foundation and examines the relevant literature on digital transformation, leadership, and the municipal services organisations context to establish the theoretical framework for the study.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for this thesis by examining the three central pillars of the research: municipal services organisations (MSOs), digital transformation (DT), and leadership. It first discusses the specific characteristics and challenges of municipal services organisations, then examines digital transformation as a complex and evolving phenomenon and finally reviews leadership with a particular focus on inspirational motivation (IM) and its relevance in public-sector contexts.

This literature review is organised around the context of municipal services organisations, the phenomenon of digital transformation, and leadership. Figure 2 outlines the structure and interrelations:

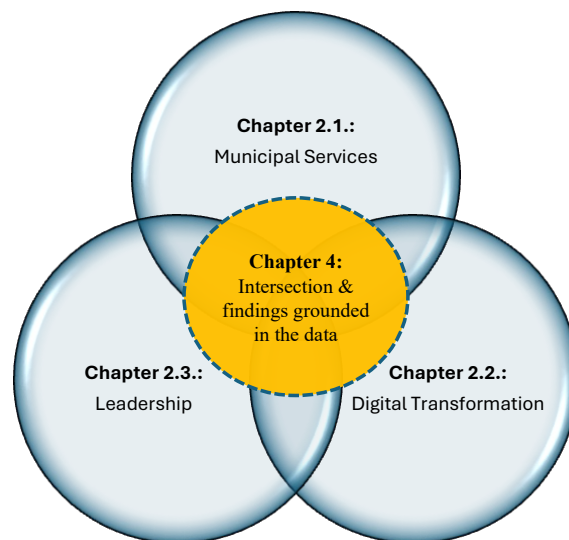


Figure 2: Chapter structure
Source: Own illustration.

The first sub-chapter introduces municipal services organisations (MSOs) as the empirical setting of this research. It highlights their specific characteristics, institutional logics and evolving challenges – taking into account both historical development and current transformation pressures. As municipal services organisations are inherently grounded in public values, collective welfare and social purpose, they provide fertile ground for inspirational forms of leadership that emphasise meaning and shared commitment, as will be shown.

The second sub-chapter explores digital transformation as a multidimensional phenomenon that shapes public organisations through technological, cultural and structural change. Digital transformation creates change and uncertainty on many

levels, but – as will be shown – also opportunities for further development. In such contexts, leaders are required to offer vision and orientation.

The third sub-chapter focuses on leadership, in particular transformational leadership, and on inspirational motivation (IM) as a relevant theoretical lens for understanding complex transformation processes. Within this framework, inspirational motivation represents a key dimension that connects leadership with sense-making and sense-giving processes.

Building on these three pillars, the chapter identifies their intersections and establishes the conceptual framework for the study. The selection and emphasis of the literature are guided by the research question and objectives, providing a theoretical basis for interpreting the empirical findings (Chapter 4) and framing the subsequent discussion (Chapter 5). Their interrelation – particularly the role of inspirational motivation as a leadership dimension in the age of digital transformation within municipal services organisations – forms the conceptual backbone of this research.

2.1. Municipal Services of General Interest

The following sub-chapter provides an overview of the context of municipal services organisations (MSOs) chosen for this research. Starting with a brief discussion of definitions, the background is presented from both a historical perspective and with consideration of the special position that the selected context occupies in Germany. This sub-chapter is supplemented by explanations of the political and economic dimensions intertwined with the context, so that the interrelationships between the various (stakeholder) requirements become apparent.

2.1.1. Background, Historical Perspectives and Definitions

Although the term municipal services organisation is not clearly defined in Germany (Böhm, 2022), these organisations have been considered an essential basis for security, provision and participation, as well as for cohesion in society in Germany since the Second World War at the latest (Neu & Wagner, 2022). According to the German Institute of Urban Affairs, municipal services organisations essentially contribute to securing livelihoods and basic civilisation services and represent the fundamental prerequisite for maintaining equivalent living conditions, which must be preserved and protected (Stielike, 2010).

A look at history shows that the term “Daseinsvorsorge” (municipal services) was first coined in this form in Germany by Forsthoff in 1938. Forsthoff summarises – in times of the National Socialist regime and therefore not uncontroversial as a name giver – under this term what is fundamentally at stake in his opinion, namely ensuring universal access to existential goods and services free from discrimination (Heinrich-Franke, 2022), which became the task of the municipalities that emerged at that time at the latest with the Prussian municipal code of 1808 (Nolte, 1990).

However, such services had already been provided, in various forms, many centuries earlier in different societies around the world. From an overarching perspective, these were primarily so-called infrastructural services established at the level of state authorities. Indeed, it was precisely these infrastructures that were established for the benefit of the economy and society in the pre-ancient era, for example, they were found in Mesopotamia in the form of canals, locks and dykes. These infrastructures can also be found among the Romans in the form of the expansion of road networks and canals, or – again, many centuries later – in the course of urbanisation in the age of the first industrial revolution, in

the areas of supply and disposal. Over time, the state gradually became the guardian of social and economic security (Gall & Pohl, 1999; Meier & Schulz, 2024).

The background to the developments during the first industrial revolution was – in addition to hygienic factors – above all to give the rapidly growing working class access to these infrastructural services (Hellermann, 2000). In England, as the central starting point for developments during the first industrial revolution, even liberal forces – represented here by Adam Smith, among others – were in favour of increased state involvement in this area (Smith, 2022 in the original from 1776).

The main reason was that a market-based system of supply and demand for these services only seemed to work to a limited extent, or not at all, due to the lack of profit opportunities for private companies. One example of this is wastewater disposal, which could hardly be organised profitably. However, at the same time, these infrastructural services in wastewater disposal were necessary, especially from a health perspective, for example, to prevent the spread of epidemics through higher hygiene standards. As a result, these infrastructural services benefited both citizens and companies then and now, as they have been used for centuries to fulfil important supply contracts for so-called public goods for both the economy and society (Heinrich-Franke, 2022).

The services provided by municipal services organisations also play a role at the European level in terms of a functioning European society, and the organisations in this context are part of the fundamental social concept of the European Union (EU). This was already documented in the 1957 Treaty of Rome: at that time still referred to in the European Economic Community as “Services of General Economic Interest” (Sauter, 2008), the term has been used since then (and especially since the 1990s), particularly in relation to the desired spatial cohesion within the EU. However, in contrast to the term “public services” commonly used in England, the term services of general interest is preferred in the EU (Humer, 2022).

In this context, the 1980s saw a turnaround due to a more liberal orientation among public organisations, and consequently an acceleration in the privatisation of public goods and infrastructure. According to Kersten (2022), this change in perspective also led to a gradual paradigm shift, whereby the role of the state

shifted from a provider of services to a guarantor of those services. As a result, for example, previously public contracts were increasingly carried out by private providers on behalf of the public sector, which since then has also led to a change in the self-image of the organisations (Kersten, 2022). The reasons for this 'new' orientation were to be found in particular in the ever-increasing financial burden of welfare state expenditure, which was further exacerbated by the economic crises of the time. Overall, this (neo-)liberal approach sought a more favourable provision of services through market involvement (Böhm, 2022).

However, even then, there was the challenge that – despite this more market-oriented focus – uneconomic infrastructures (in the sense of the public mandate for the community) should also continue to be served. According to current literature, this was not always successful in retrospect, which today is seen as a key argument for a trend reversal (re-municipalisation) since the turn of the millennium. In this context, current interpretations now assume wave movements between privatisation and (re)municipalisation (Böhm, 2022), which attempt to balance the respective advantages and disadvantages of the two systems against the background of (mega) trends and changes (such as digital transformation).

In summary, according to Heinrich-Franke (2022), it is more important than ever that municipal services organisations continue to contribute to the balanced development of society and the economy, thereby mitigating potential disadvantages (e.g., due to income disparities). This important function should also enable strengthening identification and cohesion among the state, individuals, and companies, and the creation of a framework for the free development of personalities (Kersten, 2022).

2.1.2. Special Features of Working in Municipal Services Organisations and on the Concept of Work

Municipal services organisations not only have special features in legal terms or regarding their position in society, but a look inside also shows that working in these organisations has special characteristics. Following on from this, a closer look at the concept of work and related topics should contribute to a deeper understanding relevant to this thesis. As shown below, the aspect of meaningfulness in relation to work plays a special role in this context. For this

reason, this sub-chapter will also take a separate look at the development of the concept of work and build a bridge to the topic of 'meaning' of work.

2.1.2.1. Self-image and Special Features of Work in Municipal Services Organisations

The context chosen for this work is considered to have received little scientific research (Schäfer et al., 2024), and employees in this sector are also largely unobserved by research. The following explanations in this section are therefore largely based on studies by Vogel et al. (2022), who have researched and published on attitudes and behaviours in municipal services organisations.

Both the (positive) overall economic development and the expansion of the public sector in general and municipal services organisations in particular up until the 1980s resulted in a large number of new career opportunities and associated social advancement for employees. In this context, (new) professional opportunities and career paths also arose for the less qualified, who benefited from this development, whereby today the lower middle class in particular can be found in the more basic services of municipal services organisations (Vogel, 2022).

Related research shows that the context tends to offer unskilled workers – such as garbage collectors – a place that promises security and long-term prospects (Grabe et al., 2012). On the other hand, for semi-skilled (but not university-educated) workers (such as most bus drivers), the context offers the opportunity to join the middle class in Germany through stable and well-paid work. Academics are also given status beyond these aspects, for example, through titles and (higher) positions. According to Vogel (2022), these and other developments have led to the emergence of a professional ethos within this context, characterised by a positive, value-oriented work consciousness. This professional ethos, within this context, is primarily fuelled by service to the community and is additionally strengthened by elements that address stability, status, and career needs.

However, developments over the past two to three decades – characterised by the increasingly tight financial situation of public budgets and changing demands on municipal services from both politicians and citizens – have also

altered the working conditions and employment relationships in this context (Gottschall et al., 2015). For example, conflicts of recognition are becoming clear in the services to be provided within this context: as long as they function smoothly and remain almost invisible (clean water from the tap, smooth waste disposal, etc.), they are increasingly taken for granted by the public (Vogel, 2022).

These (rather negative) work-related changes are significant because work that was previously considered valuable and worthy of recognition (such as that of bus drivers or garbage collectors) is now less valued by society. These developments – which can generally be described as recognition conflicts – can also lead to other conflicts, as Voswinkel (2012) argues that work is not just a source of income but also an important reference for social recognition for people (especially in this context).

Despite these critical developments, the attitude of employees has not developed in the direction of a new job mentality; rather, the orientation of their own work towards the common good remains consistently strong and relevant for employees. Vogel (2022) states here a kind of pride and – based on Kratzer et al. (2019) – a kind of ‘charisma of the position’, which is essentially fed by the meaning of the work within this sector. Contrary to the negative trends described above, employees continue to hold on to this pride.

Work still seems to have a special meaning for people within this context. The following sub-chapter examines this topic beyond the chosen context to identify clues about which aspects may have contributed to these developments, starting with the development of the concept of work. This also allows for a deeper understanding not only of the above explanations of the meaning of work in this context, but also of the results, which will be presented later. At the same time, linguistic nuances – particularly in English compared to German – will be discussed, as they are relevant to this research and the subsequent categorisation of the results.

2.1.2.2. Definition and Meaning of Work

There are several variants of the German term “Arbeit” in the English-speaking world (including: “job”, “work”, “labour”), whereby Precht (2022) states that a distinction can essentially be made between “work” and “labour” when comparing the English and German languages. The English word

“labour” (from the Latin *laborare*) stood for a form of toil and drudgery, while the term “work” can be considered to be related to the German word “*wirken*”. In the context of this thesis, the term work is used below for the German word “*Arbeit*”.

Depending on the era and its circumstances, the German term “*Arbeit*” (work) carried different values (Neuberger, 1985). What remains the same is that for most people, work is the basis for satisfying material and immaterial aspects (Volpert, 1992). According to Rubinstein (1973), work can be understood as a historically original and fundamental form of human behaviour across epochs. In this sense, work can be seen as an integral part of human life, in which the worker not only affects their work, but the work itself also influences the acting person, their coexistence with others, and the world around them.

Following Schmale (1983), “*Arbeit*” can mean burden and duty for people, so that the hardship associated with work also takes centre stage here, as in English “labour”. Similarly, work can be understood as ‘performance and value’, a view that has found expression in Protestant (labour) ethics, among other things. A third perspective on work lies in considering its social structuring function, as in this sense it involves social structures and (reciprocal) social dependencies. Fourth, Schmale (1983) recognises a mediating and changing function in work: work can also be understood as a transformation process between people and nature. From this perspective, work does not provide any immediate benefit but serves as a means to later, individually desirable effects (Popitz, 1995). As a fifth aspect – also based on Schmale (1983) – work can become an essential function for personality development, as work or work activities also change people (Hacker & Raum, 1980). These theses can be supported by research findings showing a connection between personality or personality development on the one hand and work on the other (Kleinbeck et al., 1987).

Just as the concept of work has developed, it can also be assumed that there has been a development in the consideration of meaning in connection with work. According to Luczak and Mueller (1997), various subjective moments of experience can be associated with work beyond an economic view: Work creates temporal structures or intervenes in the individual temporal structure, as it structures the (working) day and thus influences the sense of time and

rhythm of life in the context of the (working) biography. In addition, work involves a confrontation with reality – for example, by mastering work tasks using knowledge and skills – which also creates a connection between the individual and subjective reality. Following Jahoda and Brandt (1986), Luczak and Mueller (1997) explain that work must always be viewed in a larger context, as the division of work – for example – embeds one's own work in a larger social context. Another aspect of work is seen by Luczak and Mueller (1997) in the fact that work always takes place not in isolation, but in encounters with others and thus acquires its social character. Only in this relationship structure can (joint) achievements be made and results achieved, which can ultimately lead to knowledge of one's own competences and – if necessary – the (further) development of competences.

Work can therefore have a positive influence on a person's identity or – conversely have negative effects if unemployment has a negative impact on time structure, social integration, self-esteem, etc. (Jahoda & Brandt, 1986). Work can also be measured by its significance to one's own life within the family or community (Sennett, 2006). This aspect holds particular importance for this research, as the professional ethos described above is fuelled by the pride that employees in municipal services organisations take in serving the community.

Other studies also show recognisable connections between work on the one hand and the experience of meaning and identity on the other. For example, Negru-Subtirica et al. (2016) show that, even as young adults, a reciprocal relationship between identity formation and the experience of meaning can be recognised. This, in turn, can have a significant influence on (work) commitment, job satisfaction, or the feeling of pursuing one's vocation (Duffy et al., 2014). Individually developed norms and values also play a role in the choice of profession or employer (Rim, 1977). If there is a correspondingly high level of value congruence between the individual and the company, a positive effect on job satisfaction can be expected (Judge & Bretz, 1992).

The role and meaning of work can certainly vary, as can be seen in the current discussions about the upcoming generations (Generation Z etc.); however, the extent to which these considerations are accurate at the generational level, in the sense of evidence-based, or rather a myth without scientific

evidence (Schröder, 2018; Sachse et al., 2025), will not be considered in more detail for this research. To summarise, people attribute meaning to their work, and not only due to the salary, but also based on the activity itself and the context in which the work takes place. In the context of the current research, this suggests that this especially applies to work in municipal services organisations, and this could be an issue of importance for leadership in municipal services organisations and thus for this research.

2.1.3. Major Challenges of Municipal Services Organisations

Public services generally face major challenges such as rising public expectations, budget cuts and a mixed economy of welfare provision (Needham & Mangan, 2014). The tensions between the rather static dependencies of the context and the dynamic (especially technically necessary) innovation requirements, which also apply to municipal services organisations, pose a particular challenge, especially in view of the multitude of regulatory and legal backgrounds.

These dependencies are static because essential energy lines, water pipes, transport services, etc. must be guaranteed in the long term, and investments and possible changes to them must therefore be made within a long-term planning horizon. In addition, it is also important to flexibly take into account the (dynamic and complex) social, economic and – today in particular – ecological changes and the associated changes in the needs of stakeholders (politicians, citizens, employees, etc.) to provide a framework for social cohesion and the development of individual freedom in the future (Kersten, 2022).

Municipal services organisations are characterised by a complex structure, with a large number of players as well as rules and regulations (Steinführer, 2014). In the following, three main challenges will be presented, which apply not only to municipal services organisations but especially to them: first, the challenges resulting from demographic development in Germany; second, challenges resulting from the living environment (geographical developments) and social developments; and third, the challenges arising from the interaction between state institutions (federal government, federal states, etc.) and municipal services organisations, including the topic of exhausted budgets in public institutions. It concludes with an insight into the concept of public-private partnerships (PPPs), which can be seen as a way of meeting these challenges.

2.1.3.1. The Challenge of Demography

One of the most significant challenges for the Federal Republic of Germany – especially in relation to social systems, the labour market, and the country's competitiveness – is its demographic development. According to the Federal Statistical Office, the age structure in Germany is as depicted in Figure 3 (DESTATIS, 2025):

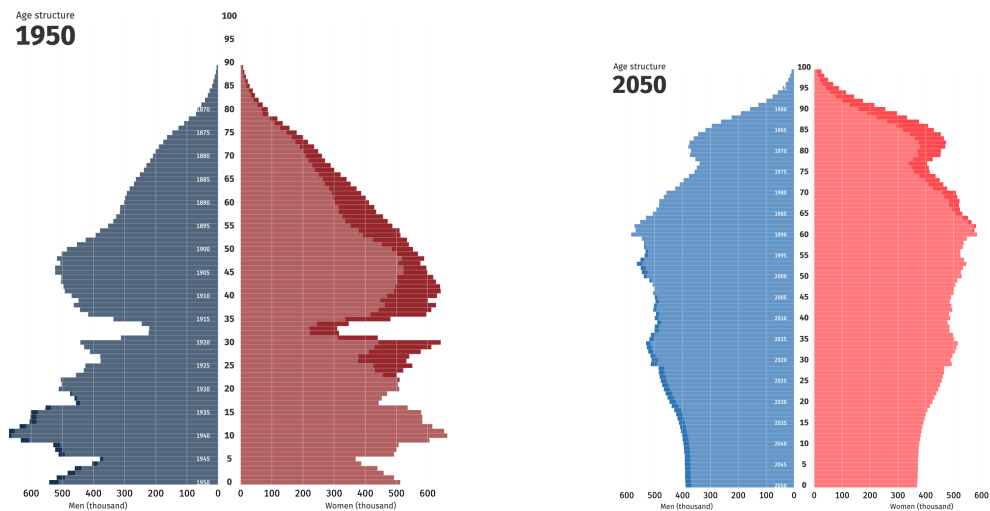


Figure 3: Population pyramid: Age structure of Germany from 1950 to 2070

Source: DESTATIS (2025). Original copyright holder: DESTATIS. Permission to reproduce within the online version of this thesis received via email on: 6/7/26

The main reasons for the critical economic forecasts for Germany lie in the falling birth rate (currently an average of 1.4 children, one-third below the level required to maintain the population) and the simultaneous steady increase in life expectancy of citizens (Birg, 2003). According to political representatives, these changes harbour an implosion risk (Kersten, 2006), which is further exacerbated by regional shifts, as the metropolitan regions in Germany in particular are constantly growing, while rural regions are steadily shrinking in terms of personnel, social and financial resources. Canzler and Knie (2009) describe this structural change as growth with simultaneous shrinkage, with corresponding consequences for infrastructure, as the nationwide provision of services by municipal services organisations is becoming an ever greater challenge (Lutter, 2006). This raises the question of how services – for example, in public transport – can still be sensibly financed if the utilisation of buses and trains continues to fall due to a dwindling population. On the other hand, the question arises concerning who should still provide and maintain these services when the number of people and therefore the number of potential workers is decreasing.

If – as described above – municipal services organisations are considered to hold fundamental importance for social development, the question emerges concerning how these organisations can respond to these (structural) changes. Neu (2009) makes it clear that municipal services organisations require a significant increase in flexibility, which must be geared more towards the needs of the respective regions and citizens. At the same time, the author emphasises that regarding the provision of these services, not only the question of “how” but also “who” (should provide these services) will lead to tough negotiation processes in the future – and a simple solution to this complex issue hardly seems possible.

2.1.3.2. Socio-spatial Challenges

If the infrastructures and services of municipal services organisations are to contribute to equal social opportunities and, as described above, to enable people in the country to develop freely, the question emerges concerning how this can also be realised in spatial terms. While growth, modernisation of infrastructure and immigration from rural areas tend to have a positive effect in urban areas, peripheral regions are faced with the challenge of migration and thinning out (Miosga, 2022).

One concrete example is that it is becoming more difficult to guarantee local public transport services in rural regions with dwindling populations, not just in terms of planning and (economic) organisation of bus and rail frequencies. Due to the developments described here (decreasing proportion of the working population, etc.), there is also an increasing shortage of personnel to operate at the planned frequencies. An additional challenge is also to critically reflect on the attractiveness of municipal services organisations as employers, as there is an increasing shortage of personnel even in metropolitan regions, for example, in public transport or waste management (hessenschau.de, 2024). In rural regions in particular, these developments can lead to a sense of being left behind, again with consequences for social cohesion. Indeed, it is precisely this perceived ‘breaking apart’ that can strengthen the position of populist opinions in general and right-wing parties in particular, especially in rural regions (Deppisch, 2019).

In summary, the consequences of these socio-spatial shifts in conjunction with demographic developments can lead to asymmetrical distributions of

power, inequality, social polarisation and an overall perceived increase in injustice (Soja, 2015). Effectively functioning municipal services organisations can contribute to dampening both actual and perceived social and territorial inequalities over time (Müller & Neu, 2022).

2.1.3.3. Institutions & Municipal Services Organisations

Well-organised municipal services organisations represent an important advantage for the citizens of cities and municipalities (Schaefer & Rottmann, 2022). The services provided in this context can only be offered across the board at politically or publicly controlled prices (Hesse et al., 2009). Against this backdrop, the increasingly strained public purse led to privatisation – as already described – until around the turn of the millennium, although this has since been followed by re-municipalisation, which was especially enabled by the expiry of long-term contracts with private providers (Schaefer & Rottmann, 2022).

In the context of these developments, the self-image of state institutions in relation to the context of municipal services organisations has also evolved: while in the past there was talk of a producing state, today there is increasingly talk of a so-called ‘guarantee state’, which can produce the services but does not have to, but then has to ensure the proper provision by private providers (Reichard, 2003). In addition to the municipalities and the associated municipal services organisations, the administrative levels above them also have a close relationship to the context chosen here. One reason is that only the public administration – as the executive branch – can provide (financial) resources for government services on a large scale (Böhm, 2022). This means that counties and districts play a role in municipal services organisations’ financial resources, as the financial scope at the local authority level is quickly exhausted today. This means that several political or state/institutional levels need to be involved, especially for major budget-related decisions. In addition, EU requirements and EU law play an increasingly important role in this context, for example, when it comes to tenders for contracts of a certain size, and (EU) procurement directives must be taken into account (Mitterlehner et al., 2013).

Overall, the federal government, the federal states and municipalities in Germany and Europe, and the municipal services organisations have a duty

to develop sustainable solutions to a variety of challenges. Solutions regarding overcoming financial challenges are currently seen, for example, in the definition of 'minimum standards' – comparable to British minimum standards ('Rural Service Standard'). Other (European) countries, such as Poland, also face challenges similar to those in Germany, meaning that (functioning) models from other countries could serve as models for future changes in Germany, or that the different countries could benefit from each other (Kopycka, 2009). However, due to this multitude of interdependencies, flexible solutions or even quick decisions seem unlikely (Schäfer & Rethmann, 2020). This is also due to the fact that, in Germany, there is a rather static view of regulatory and legal aspects, in particular, which tends to make sustainable and flexible development – for example, in cooperation between private providers and the public sector – more difficult. Additional regulatory developments at the EU level also appear to be exacerbating this in current developments (Zuber, 2022). One way of meeting the challenges continues to be to intensify partnerships with private providers, as shown below.

2.1.4. Public-Private Partnership

The term public-private partnership (PPP) refers to a form of cooperation that can be a possible response to the challenges presented here. The basic idea here is that private partners provide municipal services. This is then done in close cooperation with the municipal services organisations, and in practice often as a complementary element to the services offered by the municipal services organisations, as is regularly the case in the public transport sector and waste management. For example, existing bus routes are supplemented by services from private providers or newly established associated companies (with different fare structures for employees, for example) to offer a comprehensive and affordable network (dbb, 2021).

Although various advantages are associated with this type of organisation, such as different collective bargaining agreements and therefore greater flexibility, even proponents such as Schäfer and Rethmann (2020) conclude that this model does not necessarily lead to more favourable service provision by private providers than by public organisations. This assessment is based on the fact that overdue infrastructure projects in municipalities, which are often severely delayed due to financial constraints in public budgets, could be initiated more quickly

through PPPs. This is made possible above all by the fact that private providers generally pre-finance the project costs in full as part of these long-term models, and the public institutions become borrowers in return, thereby not having to bear the entire project costs at the outset. However, in this way, legal limits on public loans are only circumvented in the short term, whereas in the long term, the costs are merely shifted into the future due to the acute and hardly improving financial weakness of public budgets (Schäfer & Rethmann, 2020). Overall, it becomes clear that the selected context is already facing major financial challenges, and that this will continue to worsen from today's perspective due to empty budgets, which is why financially strengthening the municipalities is also seen as an essential option for action (Küpper, 2018).

2.1.5. Summary of the Municipal Services Sub-Chapter

This sub-chapter highlights that the context described here is subject to a variety of influencing factors, that change is complex, and that it affects a wide range of dimensions (Schulz-Nieswandt, 2015). On the one hand, these influences and developments can be found within the context itself, as illustrated by examples of recognition conflicts and related issues. External influences that have a direct or indirect impact on the context have also been discussed in the areas of demographic developments, public finance, and socio-spatial challenges. It becomes clear that municipal services must orient themselves in the area of tension between the market economy, society and politics (Humer, 2022). Also, due to their particular starting position, municipal services organisations must find their (own) way through the mutual and dynamic interdependencies and changes, including developments regarding digital transformation, which will be described in the next sub-chapter.

In addition, while the so-called systemic relevance and meaningfulness of municipal services organisations' work are emphasised, especially in challenging times such as the coronavirus crisis, these organisations also face challenges similar to – if not greater than – those of the private sector. For example, the acute staff shortage (PWC, 2022) is evident here when buses and trains are cancelled (Paul, 2024) or household waste is no longer collected at regularly scheduled intervals, even though the services should be guaranteed. In addition to today's challenges, other (macro and megatrends) are also having an increasing influence on organisations. For example, the keyword decarbonisation alone covers a wide range of topics that affect municipal services organisations,

such as electricity generation (keyword renewable energy and energy transition (Pfenning, 2018)), public transport (keyword energy transition and electrically powered vehicles) or waste disposal (waste avoidance (zero-waste), recycling, etc.). However, despite all the changes, the stability of services in the context of municipal services organisations must be guaranteed at reasonable prices and in a reasonable spatial distribution – and this must also be ensured in phases of expansion and restructuring to continue to fulfil the genuine mission (Weingarten & Steinführer, 2020).

In summary, it can be said that municipal services organisations operate in a unique institutional and normative environment in which public value, accountability, and social welfare take precedence over profit maximisation. This specific context shapes not only organisational structures and decision-making processes, but also expectations of leadership. Municipal service leaders face complex, often ambiguous demands arising from political, administrative and societal constraints. Based on these characteristics, leadership in municipal services organisations is less about control and efficiency and more about creating shared meaning and direction within institutional constraints. For the present study, this underscores the particular relevance of inspirational motivation as a leadership practice that can foster commitment, determination and collective engagement within the multifaceted reality of municipal services organisations. The challenges described in the context above will also become clear in the following sub-chapter, where the special characteristics of the digital transformation phenomenon will be discussed in more detail.

2.2. Digital Transformation

The digital transformation phenomenon has been engaging business and science from a wide variety of perspectives for many years (Kraus et al., 2022), and it is precisely this digital transformation (DT) in and of organisations that many consider to be one of the most profound changes since the first industrial revolution (Precht, 2021). Meanwhile, it seems that digital transformation has already taken hold of most areas of life in business, culture and politics in Germany (Schmitt et al., 2016), and the overall social change with which digital transformation is often associated has been further accelerated, not least by the coronavirus pandemic (Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023).

This comprehensive change also appears to be a key reason why a large number of representatives from a wide range of (scientific) disciplines – from philosophy (e.g. Precht, 2022) and (occupational) psychology (e.g. Rothe et al., 2019) to business administration (e.g. Spieler & Classen, 2018) or management theory (e.g. Malik, 2024) – are publishing on this topic. Digital transformation is considered to have a key role in the future of companies and organisations (Malleck & Mecklenbräuer, 2017), not least because it results in fundamentally different or new customer expectations that impact or pressure companies and organisations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The omnipresence of the digital transformation phenomenon in almost all areas of life is therefore increasingly reflected in organisational development within companies, which in turn can lead to the transformation of entire business models and companies (Harwardt, 2020).

In this context, it seems important to first ask to what extent it is possible to speak of at least an approximate uniformity in the understanding of digital transformation. In the following, it will be shown that, in addition to a clear definition of digital transformation, a further definition of the topic, as well as related or synonymously used terms such as digitalisation or (digital) change, does not provide a clear picture (Wischnevsky & Damanpour, 2006). The following discussion therefore first examines the terminology surrounding the digital transformation phenomenon before providing an overview of the status quo of digitalisation in Germany, both in general and for municipal services organisations in particular. Building on this, various perspectives on the developments, design options, and management of digital transformation are presented.

2.2.1. Definitions

Although there is still no universally valid definition of digital transformation today (Harwardt, 2020), the conceptual definition proposed by Lankshear and Knobel (2008) is used below, which essentially understands digital transformation as the use of information and communication technology that extends beyond the trivial application of a technology in the sense of automation. According to the authors, digital transformation leads to fundamentally new capabilities in the business world, government and in the lives of people and society.

On closer view, this definition shows that words such as 'digital' or 'transformation' are often taken for granted or understood, as they are in companies and organisations. A critical examination of these terms rarely, if ever, takes place in companies or the media, although they can be understood to mean completely different things (Schallmo & Rusnjak, 2017). For this reason, in addition to the formal definition presented above, the possible interpretations of the terms associated with digital transformation relevant to this thesis are discussed in more detail below.

2.2.1.1. The Digital and Digitalisation

The word digital – originally derived from the Latin word 'digitus' (index finger) and the English word 'digit' – today generally refers to the definition used in the field of technology and data processing and roughly means 'numerical' or 'occurring in stages' (Rys et al., 2021). In an examination of the term digitalisation, Harwardt (2020) distinguishes between a narrower and a broader definition. In the narrower sense, he sees digitalisation as the 'simple' conversion of analogue to digital data, which began with the development of the first telegraphs in the early to mid-19th century. In a broader sense, digitalisation can be understood not only as the conversion of analogue content to digital, but also as the conversion of entire processes and actions into a digital language that can be read and understood by machines.

Verhoef et al. (2021) distinguish three terms in this context:

- **Digitisation:** Automated routines and tasks that require a conversion from analogue to digital information. Examples of this include digitising internal and external documentation processes, albeit without any noticeable impact on customer value creation.

- **Digitalisation:** This involves adding digital elements to products and services for digital distribution or for use with digital communication channels, for example. IT and digital technologies are used here to enrich existing business processes that create added value for customers or to change them as a result (Li et al., 2016).
- **Digital Transformation:** A company-wide change that leads to completely new business models. Examples include 'product-as-a-service', digital platforms or purely data-driven business models.

In the following, the term digital transformation will be discussed in more detail as a focal point of this thesis to further deepen the understanding of the phenomenon.

2.2.1.2. Digital Transformation: Further Levels of Consideration

An initial approach to digital transformation via the concept of transformation (Latin 'trans' over and 'formare' form/shape) – which can be translated as remodelling or reshaping – shows that this term is used and categorised differently by different scientific directions and disciplines. For example, psychoanalysis uses this term to describe the transformation of a driving impulse through sublimation or transformation (Freedman, 1985), statistics to describe the transformation of variables (Tachtsoglou & König, 2017) or esotericism as a process of individual consciousness in the sense of reaching a new/higher level of consciousness (Janhsen et al., 2018). Further definitions can also be found in literature, anthropology, linguistics or cognitive theories (Freedman, 1985).

In addition to various academic disciplines, most management consultancies have adopted the term 'transformation' in this context (consultancy.org, 2024). A popular image on the topic of transformation can be found on the homepage of "Dr Kraus & Partner – Transformation Experts", a leading German consultancy company – according to the major German business magazine *brand eins* – in relation to the transformation of companies (Eggert & Laesser, 2018). Transformation is metaphorically compared here to a caterpillar becoming a butterfly during a metamorphosis (Kraus, 2024).

What most definitions have in common is the description of a change from one state to another. However, it seems controversial to what extent the

target state of such a change can be determined in advance or whether it only becomes recognisable in the course of a transformation. The latter perspective sees a transformation primarily as a complex endeavour with challenges that can only be met with complex models and complex answers (Khan et al., 2018).

If the terms transformation and digital are now brought together, due to the different ways in which digital transformation can be viewed and interpreted, Capone et al. (2024) recognise an inherent complexity in the term itself, which becomes apparent on closer examination of its development, use, and classification. In order to make important aspects of digital transformation more tangible, the following will take a look at three levels: the micro level (relating to the individual), the meso level (relating to a company/organisation) and the macro level (relating to society, a country or several countries, such as the EU) (Figure 4).

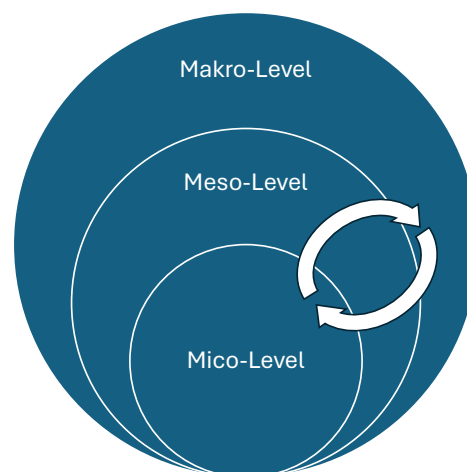


Figure 4: Three levels of DT
Source: Own illustration.

While these three levels can be viewed in isolation, they are always in a mutually influencing, dynamic relationship with one another. One example of this is the use of artificial intelligence (AI), which not only offers potential applications for individuals (e.g., ChatGPT as a digital generative AI) but also for companies (e.g., in data management) (Büchel & Engler, 2024). If both the individual and the company use an AI in mutual contact, a reciprocal relationship between the actors (the company with AI and the individual with AI) is created and guided by AI. In this context, Miebach (2020) points out that AI is not only able to take over business processes but can also influence, and even control, interpersonal communication and interactions. A prominent

example of this type of influence is certainly the role of AI in elections (Muñoz, 2024). Dąbrowska et al. (2022) recognise that digital transformation will, as a result, lead to socio-economic change at the levels of individuals, organisations, and society as a whole due to these reciprocal connections. These three levels are analysed in more detail below.

Digital Transformation at the Micro Level

Digital transformation and the associated digital technology can be understood on an individual level as a kind of interface between a subject (user/consumer/human) and the world. From this perspective, according to Capone et al. (2024), the digital (such as digital media) is no longer just an (additional) experience for a person; rather, the digital can also begin to shape the consumer themselves at both the cognitive and communicative levels. Following this logic of thought, people therefore not only use the digital (for example as a tool to make work easier, increase efficiency, communicate, etc.), but the digital also affects people in this reciprocal relationship, to the extent that Spitzer (2012) fears a 'digital dementia' concerning the cognitive and social skills of individuals, which is developing from the increased use of digital media.

In this context, digitalisation and digital transformation have a wide variety of associations. The answer to the question of why some people see digital transformation as a 'threat' and others as an 'opportunity' seems anything but trivial (Lühr, 2022). A study by IW Cologne (German Economic Institute) from 2023 provides some insight into this: concerns about not being able to keep up with technological progress are significantly dependent on a person's level of education, occupational status, income, and age. For example, the older people are, the greater their concerns about digital transformation. The unemployed and ordinary workers are also significantly more concerned about not being able to keep up with technological change than, for example, people with a degree, civil servants, or employees, whose concerns revolve much more around climate change (Hammermann & Monsef, 2023).

Cave and Dihal (2019) also deal with the hopes and fears associated with digital transformation in general and AI in particular. Among other things, they make it clear that the individual hope of a life without work ('ease') thanks to the integration of AI is also countered by a fear of not being able to keep up

with these developments and becoming superfluous ('obsolescence'). Lühr (2022) also describes how digital transformation is perceived positively from a subjective perspective, due to the potential expansion of individual room for manoeuvre. However, this perception is also countered by concerns about the loss of agency in the job.

For the public sector in particular, Volodina and Grossi (2024) emphasise that digital transformation can raise technological hopes among individuals within this sector, for example, regarding efficiency gains. However, these developments are also faced with human fears. Wang et al. (2023) also show that individuals associate both dystopian and utopian narratives with digital transformation, which can spark debates over concerns, hopes, and fears at all levels of society. However, the authors also make it clear that this perception or experience does not apply only to current developments but was also a constant companion in past technological developments.

Digital Transformation at the Meso Level

One of the main challenges of digital transformation for the meso level of companies and their business models is that digital data can be made available and processed globally within seconds at a favourable price. Today, this processing is not only carried out by people, but increasingly independently by devices and machines as part of a network (Internet of Things) or – in the further development of the Internet of Everything – in a network-like communication between people, processes, services, data and devices (Harwardt, 2020).

Verhoef et al. (2021) identify three main drivers that have an external impact on the meso level: technology itself ("www" and accompanying tech, e.g. smartphones, online payment etc.), digital competition (digital, global and intense competition, for example from Amazon, Alphabet or Apple) and customers or the change in (digital) customer behaviour, which is characterised by networked, informed, empowered and active customers (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). According to Henriette et al. (2015), these developments lead to massive reductions in market-entry barriers in some cases (e.g., Uber, Airbnb) and, in others, to drastic changes in customer expectations. Concerning the latter aspect, an ever-growing group of people expects a high level of technologisation and a high degree of

individualisation/personalisation of services, whether ordering from Amazon or receiving a service from a public authority (Lewe, 2024). As a result, these developments lead to increasing pressure for change at the meso level. However, as King (1997) explains, this should be understood here as an impetus for planned change to contribute to a significant improvement in an organisation's overall performance. According to King (1997), this should be achieved by changing the behaviour of the majority of an organisation's members on three levels: first, by transforming operational performance; second, by transforming strategic performance; and finally, by changing in such a way that a capacity for continuous renewal is achieved in the organisation.

Von Blumenthal and Haspeslagh (1994) highlight in this context that when considering changes at the formal level (processes, structures, etc.), it is always necessary to consider the (necessary) changes in the behaviour of the people in the organisations. While behaviour follows formal rules within an organisation – for example, via work instructions, manuals, etc. – it is also shaped by non-formal rules or patterns, which representatives of organisational sociology refer to as the so-called informal level or level of culture (Kühl, 2017). Following on from this, a possible, albeit highly simplified, view of organisational change can be to understand it as an interplay between structures and processes (the formal level of an organisation) and the informal (not 'controlled') behaviour of people within the organisation (leadership and cooperation) (Figure 5).

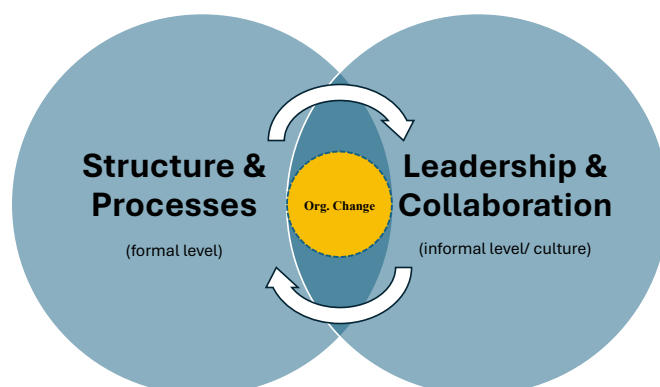


Figure 5: Interplay between formal and informal levels of change
Source: Own illustration.

Digital Transformation at the Macro Level

Digital transformation's potential for change – which encompasses all areas of life – has led to it being labelled a megatrend since the early 2010s (Schuster, 2022). A megatrend is a significant driver of change likely to have a transformative impact on individuals, organisations and societies. Megatrends usually develop over a period of years or decades and occur at the intersection of several political, environmental, social, technological, legal and/or economic trends (Naisbitt, 1982). Research on megatrends generally explores long-term future prospects across a variety of regions, industries, and socio-economic areas, and prepares organisations and individuals for uncertain futures (Naughtin et al., 2024).

In this context, it is debated whether digital transformation is an evolution, a revolution or even a disruption. From the perspective of the sociology of technology, it is argued that (long-term) change should be understood as normality, and against this background, digital transformation should not be understood as a disruptive break, but rather as incremental change (Schrape, 2021). Concerning the question of whether it is ultimately an evolution or a revolution, Precht (2022) sees digital transformation as a revolution that will result in a gradual departure from bourgeois labour and meritocracy. As a result, according to his point of view, far fewer people will (have to) work for money, as independently interacting computers and robots will take over many activities that are (still) carried out by humans (Vienken, 2017). Smith (2022) points out that both aspects are true, as digital technologies have undergone a development path to reach their current state (evolution). At the same time, the use of digital technologies in society, companies, and organisations can, in turn, partially or fundamentally change them (revolution).

Most researchers agree that digital transformation poses major challenges for individuals, companies/organisations and consequently entire countries and economies (Švarc et al., 2020). According to Kraus et al. (2021), on the path to a digital nation or society in which individuals, companies/organisations, and governments interact with each other and create value that benefits all participants, it is particularly important to learn from each other, especially from companies. In the public sector, according to Münch (2019), it is also particularly important that politics overcome today's

weaknesses (e.g., current knowledge gaps, slowness, etc.) to actually shape DT.

There are different points of view about where to start the transformation. However, how people experience digital transformation seems crucial, because without their trust and commitment, the digital society will not succeed. Indeed, even if there currently seems to be no fundamental ‘German Angst’ from a societal point of view regarding digital transformation, according to Lühr (2020), this perception plays an important role in actively shaping the challenges.

2.2.2. Status Quo: Digital Municipal Services

According to the European Commission’s current benchmark, Germany lags behind in the digitalisation of the state as a whole; for example, the country ranks below the EU average (European Commission, Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, 2024). The reasons for this are manifold, but are also seen – among other things – in a sometimes very restrictive handling of data protection regulations, especially within public organisations (Pfaffl et al., 2022).

However, as outlined above, both the public sector in general and municipal services organisations in particular will have to face up to and shape the developments associated with digital transformation, particularly the changing requirements of service recipients. These developments also hold crucial importance for the latter context: while in the past, the standard of equipment and modernity of a sewerage system, the quality of the water supply or the cleanliness of a city were essential characteristics of a modern city or municipality, digital transformation is now also becoming increasingly important for municipal services organisations (Weingarten & Steinführer, 2020). Thus, at the beginning of the preparation of this thesis in 2021/2022, the examination of the topic of digital transformation from the perspective of municipal services organisations still primarily relied on an approach via associations and project groups, as described above. It was not until 2024, with the publication of the book “*Digitale Daseinsvorsorge*” (Digital Municipal Services) by Meier et al. (2024), that an examination of the topic from various practice-oriented perspectives was undertaken, which are integrated in this research.

On closer inspection, it becomes clear that municipal services organisations are undergoing a process of change that has affected cities, municipalities, (public) administrations, and public organisations/companies as a whole (Papenfuß & Meier, 2024). Indeed, there is little doubt – at least in the current literature – that there is no way around the change triggered by digital transformation for municipal services organisations either (Rost & Brosze, 2024). With reference to the fields of action of municipal services organisations described above, Papenfuß et al. (2022) therefore expand the concept of municipal services organisations to include so-called *digital* municipal services. This includes digital infrastructure, services, and goods that are essential for sustainable social participation, equal living conditions, and digital sovereignty in the digital society. Corresponding examples of areas of application for digital municipal services can currently be found, e.g., in the area of sensor-based monitoring of waste container fill levels, optimised route planning for waste collection vehicles, energy-optimised street lighting or under the motto “Water 4.0” (use of weather and consumption data for data-based forecasts for wells and water supply) (Brosze & Pergande, 2024).

The challenges applicable to the context and described above – such as the demographic-induced shortage of skilled labour, the density of regulation (also in relation to data use) or tight public budgets – now appear to be intensifying. This and possible responses to these challenges are discussed below to provide an overview of the status quo.

2.2.2.1. Digital Transformation and Shortage of Skilled Workers

The shortage of skilled workers described above further exacerbates municipal services organisations’ existing challenges, as many organisations lack the urgently needed skills to shape digital transformation. For this reason, employee training and development also plays a central role in this context, enabling suitable employees to shape change in the first place.

Another important aspect in this context concerns the recruitment of qualified personnel. It is here that municipal services organisations may hold a distinct advantage: the purpose of the organisation. Purpose is increasingly recognised as a key factor for applicants and employer attractiveness (Hornung, 2022). In the case of municipal services organisations, this purpose is immediately apparent, as it is rooted in the provision of essential

services to citizens. While many private-sector organisations continue to search for a convincing or meaningful articulation of their purpose (Kühl, 2023), municipal services organisations operate within a context in which purpose is inherently given through their public mandate and made visible to citizens on a daily basis.

In addition, the need for innovation and the associated scope for action within this context (e.g. against the backdrop of the climate transition, the transport transition or the energy transition) could also be attractive to applicants (Schäffer & Grottschreiber, 2024). Initiatives – for example, in the sense of cross-context personnel development in cooperation with public organisations, the cities etc. – could also further strengthen the future viability of municipal services through an attitude of ‘learning from each other’ (Papenfuß & Wolfsdörfer, 2024). This could also include cooperation with universities, so that not only the consequences of the shortage of skilled workers could be counteracted, but also important impulses could be developed for the context of (digital) municipal services (Papenfuß & Meier, 2024b).

2.2.2.2. Digital Transformation, Data and Data Protection

The prevailing density of regulation in the age of ‘big data’ represents an obstacle, which is already the subject of discussions and escalations at the EU level (Schäffer & Kessel, 2024). One characteristic of municipal services organisations that could have a positive effect in this context is that these organisations continue to enjoy a high level of trust among the population in many places (Güllner, 2023). This trust in the context could now be a building block for a successful transformation, as doubts about the (secure) handling of citizens’ data in particular are likely to be less pronounced in these organisations. Schoon-Pernkopf and Aden (2024) therefore also see this important confirmation of trust in the use of data by municipal services organisations as a central task of top management in the organisations, as secure and intelligent use of data will continue to be an increasingly important factor for the confirmation of trust by the citizens in the future (Buchholz & Kessel, 2024).

2.2.2.3. Digital Transformation and Investments

The investment requirements for digital transformation in the context of municipal services already far exceed the budgets of individual organisations. As a result, some organisations are already operating ‘under the radar’, developing their own solutions to the digital transformation-challenges. However, this means that other organisations in the same context cannot benefit from these ‘isolated solutions’.

Schulz (2024) therefore considers increased cooperation between municipal services organisations to be essential to jointly meet challenges through synergies. In this context, Papenfuß (2024) also proposes an intensive, integrated design of digital transformation across the entire public sector, involving municipal services organisations. This overarching cooperation between public administrations, and (local) authorities, including the EU level, could then be a possible answer to the complex issues associated with digital transformation.

According to Pergande and Buchholz (2024), a further possibility is to actively involve citizens in the developments triggered by digital transformation, and use this transparency to promote understanding for necessary investments, which in turn would have to be financed by citizens through an increase in levies. This could also further strengthen citizens’ trust, as it would become clear what the money is actually being used for. In this context, Schoon-Pernkopf and Aden (2024) and Schacht et al. (2012) emphasise that all these answers to the various questions require a management that has recognised the signs of the times, and has the necessary expertise to lay the foundations for a sustainable organisation. Top management and the associated topic of leadership thus hold particular importance.

2.2.3. Management of Digital Transformation

(Academic) knowledge on the topic of digital transformation is in the making and can – in analogy to Badley (2009) – always be considered contested, as new findings will always lead to new perspectives. When considering approaches to the successful design of (organisational) digital transformation, it is logical that the perspectives on this not only constantly evolve, but it might even diverge or appear to contradict each other, as the following discussion shows.

While various researchers attempt to describe the characteristics of a successful (organisational) transformation or successful transformation management in the private or public sector, Frei (2014) points out from a work and organisational psychology perspective that the use of the term 'management' in connection with 'organisational transformation projects' is, in his view, a contradiction in terms, not least due to the complexity and the resulting 'uncontrollability' of transformation processes. For Frei (2014), the excessive use of the term 'management' – especially in the context of transformations – is more evidence of managers' exaggerated notions of control. Wischnevsky and Damanpour (2006) also point out that the outcomes of organisational transformation projects can be controlled only to a very limited extent, if at all, and are therefore ultimately uncertain. The systems scientist Kruse (2004) also makes it clear that transformations, which he understands as fundamental changes to process patterns in companies, are always accompanied by uncertainties. For him, trivialising complexity through simple management concepts therefore appears to be more harmful than beneficial.

However, in practice, companies and organisations need to shape change in the best possible way. This also requires appropriate approaches to demonstrate the ability to act. Siebel (2019) shows that leaders tend to rush through the changes associated with digital transformation (including investment) and tackle everything at once, and then hope for the best. As a result, this not only regularly leads to unnecessary failures but even causes companies to row back on their course and adopt a back-to-basics strategy. In this context, Li (2020) recognises a growing gap between (management) rhetoric and the reality in companies, which has negative consequences for the consistent implementation of digital transformation strategies in particular. The need for a methodically tested and realisable approach is becoming increasingly urgent.

This is one reason why (management) consulting firms, in particular, offer models designed to support, or even enable, the management of transformation. For example, Anderson (2013) proposes an integrated system for (organisational) transformation. The consulting firm McKinsey & Company describes an operating model that is intended to enable the management of digital transformation through plannable changes in four dimensions: Structure, technology, processes and people (Brosseau et al., 2019). Verhoef et al. (2021) in turn recognise a total of four areas that must be considered in the course of a digital transformation:

- Digital assets (such as data storage, information and communication infrastructure), digital agility (the ability to sense digital market opportunities), digital networking capability (bringing together users and their digital means), and competence in big data analytics (analysing data for decision-making).
- Organisational structure (i.e., agile organisation forms and separate business units to react fast to the fast-changing environment and requirements).
- Digital growth strategies (e.g. via using a digital platform for their business models).
- Metrics and goals in the sense of measuring performance improvements and progress in the implementation and value creation of/by digital transformation.

In terms of a structured approach, Appelfeller and Feldmann (2022) provide a guideline for developing a digital organisation. They use a so-called reference model for a digital company and explain what a maturity assessment could look like concerning predetermined elements. Concerning the implementation of digital transformation, the authors also differentiate between five phases, which guide the process (Figure 6).

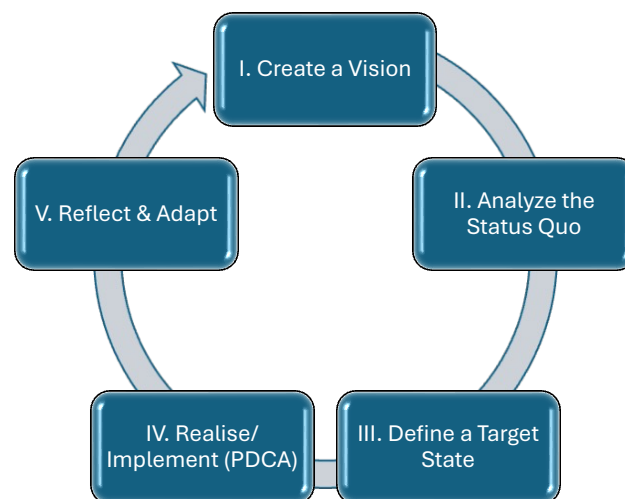


Figure 6: Reference model for digital change
Source: Adapted from Appelfeller and Feldmann (2022).

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The digital transformation process can be understood as a multi-phase and iterative development cycle. It begins with the creation of a shared vision that outlines the organisation's desired future state, such as working largely paperless or developing digitally based business models. Building on this vision, the current

situation is analysed and contrasted with a defined target state. To support this assessment, a reference model comprising key digital transformation-related elements, such as digitised processes, digital products and digitally competent employees, is used. These elements are evaluated using a maturity model that highlights the gap between the actual and desired states and allows progress to be systematically documented. Implementation then follows an iterative cycle of planning, action, evaluation and adjustment. In a final step, progress is reflected upon in relation to the overarching vision to ensure that the digital transformation process remains adaptable to changing conditions. Rather than relying on detailed long-term planning, this phase emphasises more agile forms of working, such as short development cycles or sprints, which enable organisations to respond flexibly to emerging challenges (Vecchia, 2021). The first step of the model shown is to develop a vision. As will be shown in the following Sub-Chapter 2.3.2, this is also an essential aspect of inspirational motivation.

2.2.4. Summary of the Digital Transformation Sub-Chapter

An examination of the term digital transformation shows that (cross-disciplinary) agreement on a standardised definition as a starting point for discussion is difficult to find. When companies and organisations use digital technologies to develop new business models or modify existing ones, and this results in changes to organisational structures, processes, and resources and relationships, this can generally be described as digital transformation (Plekhanov et al., 2023). However, the changes not only affect companies at the meso level but also impact individuals (micro level) and society (macro level) as a whole, so that – as has been shown – one can speak of a megatrend today. This megatrend is contrasted by sceptics with rather dystopian perspectives on the one hand and the sometimes utopian ideas of those who see only the opportunities in the developments (Kotte & Webers, 2024). However, it has been shown that a more differentiated debate makes more sense than ‘black and white thinking’ to adequately address the concerns and fears associated with digital transformation and to develop solutions to the specific challenges.

Municipal services organisations are also not immune to these changes, which is why this topic is attracting more and more attention. Under the motto ‘digital municipal services’, a growing discussion is taking place at the time of writing this thesis. At the same time, it is becoming clear that the existing challenges of the public sector, in general, and of municipal services organisations, in particular,

are becoming even more apparent. For example, the high level of investment required or the lack of suitable personnel for digital transformation are generally seen as core problems (Biffar, 2016), which subsequently also have a particular impact on these organisations.

Digital transformation constitutes an ongoing reconfiguration of how municipal services organisations interact with stakeholders or deliver services. Beyond technological adoption, it requires a deep cultural and structural shift that challenges established routines, hierarchies, and identities. As municipal services organisations navigate this transformation, leaders face the task of guiding their members through uncertainty, ambiguity, and often resistance. That is why an ongoing process of interpretation and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) seems relevant: for leadership and employees, understanding what digital transformation means for their work, values, and purpose becomes a central challenge. Hence, leadership practices that facilitate collective sensemaking are particularly critical in this context. Shaping digital transformation depends not merely on technical competence but on the ability to articulate a compelling vision and a narrative that aligns digital transformation with the organisation's mission, as will be shown in Chapters 4 and 5. This underscores the need for inspirational motivation as a key leadership dimension that can connect technological change to collective purpose and meaning, thereby transforming anxiety into shared aspiration. These changes are essentially initiated and/or accompanied by the (top) management of the organisations. The role that leadership can play in this context is described in more detail in the next sub-chapter.

2.3. Leadership

Leadership is a long-established and extensively researched phenomenon, examined from a wide range of perspectives over many years (Grint, 2011). Given the breadth of this field, this sub-chapter does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of leadership research. Instead, it situates leadership within the conceptual scope of this study, with a particular focus on inspirational motivation (IM) as a dimension of transformational leadership. The section therefore outlines key definitions and boundaries of leadership, introduces transformational leadership as the primary theoretical lens, and subsequently considers leadership in the public sector. The sub-chapter concludes with a brief synthesis of these perspectives.

2.3.1. Leadership: Introduction, (Reflexive) Definition and Categorisation

An approach to the term 'leadership' shows that numerous research results, opinions, and guides are available on this topic. For example, Google alone had over 150 million hits for the German term "Führung" on 7 February 2024 and over 2.6 billion hits for the term "leadership." A closer look at the term leadership also shows that the topic appears to be characterised by different perspectives and 'interpretive sovereignties'. For example, in both English and German literature, there is a long-standing discussion solely around attempts to define the term, such as a distinction between leadership and management (Malik, 2014).

Various disciplines are also in apparent disagreement about a starting point for effective leadership. In this context, representatives of organisational sociology, for example, call for the context and the formal level in organisations to be placed at the centre of attention as an essential element of smart organising (and leadership of organisations) – and thus for people and, in particular, leaders to be given little or no consideration (Matthiesen et al., 2022). Representatives of (business) psychology in Germany, on the other hand, argue primarily in favour of looking at intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics (Schermul, 2024). These ongoing discussions and controversies can be made more understandable through the reference made by Grint (2011), who points out that the topic of leadership and associated views and interpretations are always closely linked to the respective cultural mores and a prevailing "zeitgeist" at a given time. For this reason, it is likely that different, sometimes controversial perspectives on and discussions about 'good' or 'right' leadership will continue in the future.

It therefore seems important to consider that the selection of a definition of leadership that is considered suitable for a research project (as well as the selection of a research paradigm etc., as shown in Chapter 3) is always connected with the perspective of the respective author with their individual view of the world. And this perspective or paradigm always acts (as in the context of this research) as a kind of 'glasses' through which the object of research is viewed. Furthermore, the author's perspective can be influenced by very different sources; for example, from the perspective of a 'leader' who has been working in the field for many years (the practitioner, so to speak, which applies to the author of this research), the 'follower' (almost every leader/manager is usually also a follower as is the author of this thesis) or with a more or less strong theoretical influence (as in the case of the author of this paper, in business administration and psychology) or a mixture of all these and more. And this 'lens' of an author can – despite all endeavours – never be described as completely objective and certainly not as 'the only correct one', according to the point of view represented here. The perspective chosen (here) therefore always remains fragmented to a certain extent, as well as being linked to the subjective world view of the author and therefore cannot be suitable for everyone.

In the context of this work, it is assumed that leadership always takes place as an interaction between people or – as Frei (2013) puts it – as an interplay between person and context, understood as a complex structure of effects. Rosenstiel et al. (2014) summarise this perspective, which underpins this study, by defining leadership as influence exerted through communication.

Before the topic of leadership is examined from various angles in the following section, it should be noted that the German word "Führung" is consistently translated as or equated with the English term "leadership", as well as with "management" in some places. Beyond this, there is no further discussion of the distinction between leadership and management, as the content and positioning in this regard do not appear relevant to this research and – according to Malik (2014) – they provide only limited added value.

2.3.2. Leadership: Taking Action in a Complex World

According to this research's understanding, leadership occurs within a complex and dynamic network of relationships among diverse, and sometimes even seemingly contradictory, elements, which will be outlined and described in the

author's model below (Figure 7). Although this model represents a (strong) reduction or abstraction of reality, it is nevertheless intended to help structure the explanations in this research and in this way to visualise and describe key aspects of leadership:



Figure 7: Complexity of leadership
Source: Own illustration.

A central aspect of this model is the (work) **context** in which leadership occurs, as shown above on the right in Figure 7. Both the popular leadership literature such as Sinek (2020) and academic research (e.g., Muster et al., 2023) provide numerous examples that shift attention away from the individual leader and towards the significance of the organisational context – identifying it as a key lever for effective organisation and leadership. One of the underlying assumptions here is that behaviour is understood to be controllable or can be sustainably influenced via the formal level (structures, processes, etc.). However, this view sometimes goes so far that some (German) researchers call for the individual as a ‘leader’ to be completely excluded from organisational development (Matthiesen et al., 2022). The perspective chosen for this research acknowledges the relevance of the context, but – as will be shown below – also addresses aspects that go beyond this, such as specific leadership actions or practices.

(Leadership) **behaviour** can be understood – following Lewin (1953) – as a product of the person and the environment/context (Bischof, 2009). The

behaviour-oriented perspective has received particular attention through the so-called leadership grid by Blake and Mouton (Blake & Mouton, 1980) or the situational leadership approach by Hersey and Blanchard (Blanchard et al., 2015). The latter assumes that – just like the manager – the **followers**, i.e. the employees, must also be considered in their individuality and led accordingly. Among other things, situational leadership attempts to address this assumption by considering followers individually, based on their competence-related maturity levels, relating each situation (i.e., the specific context and its tasks) to this, and then suggesting the appropriate leadership style. However, studies have shown that the effectiveness and practicability of this leadership approach have been criticised (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009), partly due to the sometimes complex leadership situations and the resulting demands on leaders. Overall, this perspective is primarily about understanding leadership as human, reciprocal behaviour (i.e., in relation to both the leader and the followers) (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010). This perspective is also included in the considerations of this research and supplemented by two further aspects: leadership success and leadership personality.

Leadership and **success** are the subject of many discussions, particularly in the literature on business management. The background to this is that success can be defined in very different ways: For example, (business) indicators such as turnover or earnings per team or employee can be used to assess (leadership or employee) success. Other aspects, such as presenteeism, absenteeism, fluctuation rates, employee satisfaction, or customer satisfaction, can also be used as success factors for leadership. This shows that the definition of success – beyond a purely accounting-related perspective – both outside and within business administration cannot be success per se. In addition, the perspective on leadership is constantly changing, making it difficult to clearly define the relationship between leadership and success (Horner, 1997; Lieberman & O'Connor, 1972). According to the perspective represented here, success – and in particular leadership success – is determined by a variety of influencing factors and perspectives.

Finally, considering the aspect of the '**leader**' in the aforementioned model, one can speak of a rather reserved attitude or even a mistrustful view of the leader as a 'success factor', at least for Germany, especially in the last century, and this is certainly not least due to the German history of the last century (Hanft, 1994).

However, this perspective on leadership seems to be experiencing a renaissance in Germany (Frei, 2006). The 'Great Man Theory' often mentioned in this context, as well as other so-called trait theories, focus on certain 'traits', i.e. personality traits of leaders, and thus place the acting leader with their characteristics at the centre of the considerations. Scientifically sound findings, such as on the Big Five model of personality (Little, 2016), derailment factors (Bäcker & Haag, 2014), or the so-called dark or shadow side of leadership (Externbrink & Keil, 2017) have received increasing academic attention. For example, according to this perspective, the shadow side of leadership can provide indications as to which behaviours leaders are likely to exhibit in certain contexts and situations concerning certain personality traits and motives of leaders, and thus provide an indication of the probability of failure or success (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010).

Although the point of view of the individual 'leader' is only one of several aspects in the author's model, this perspective plays an important role in this work, as it is assumed below that leadership can, or should at least, (co-)shape success in and of organisations. The perspective adopted in this study is based on the assumption that leadership – conceptualised as specific leader behaviours, potentially shaped by individual traits – has a significant influence on organisational performance. In this context, Wieland and Hammes (2010) and Schermuly (2024) showed that leadership can positively influence work results, employee satisfaction, and employee well-being. Indeed, it is precisely in this context that particular attention is paid to transformational leadership, as it reveals (positive) correlations between leadership, motivation, health, stress levels and (leadership) success and provides indications of how leadership – under certain contextual conditions – can be successful (Felfe & Heinitz, 2010). At the same time, a one-sided view of the leader without taking contextual factors, etc. into account can lead to an overemphasis on the role of leadership and – for example – heroic ideas of leaders (Haslam et al., 2024).

The focus of this thesis is on inspirational motivation, which in turn represents a sub-aspect of transformational leadership. Although this perspective on leadership focuses on the person of the leader or certain behaviours of leaders, it should be understood in the context of this thesis as only one factor among several necessary to shape digital transformation. The following explanations provide insight into the origins of transformational leadership and take a closer look at possible areas of application as well as the empirical state of research

regarding the measurability of transformational leadership. It concludes with a brief critical analysis of this (normative) perspective on leadership.

2.3.2.1. Definition and Genesis of Transformational Leadership

The concept of transformational leadership has received more attention in leadership research than almost any other leadership theory (Diaz-Saenz, 2011; Northouse, 2018). While the names Burns and Bass are often cited as the namesakes of transformational leadership, the term was already taken up by Downton in 1973 in his essay 'Rebel Leadership' (Downton, 1973). However, in its current use, the concept of transformational leadership was researched in more detail by Burns in particular, and subsequently familiarised with a wider audience by Bass who attracted considerable attention with his 1985 publication 'Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations' (Sturm et al., 2011). Bass was, in turn, particularly inspired by House's 'A Theory of Charismatic Leadership' in the mid-1970s (House, 1976), who had already dealt with the concept of charismatic leadership (Felfe, 2005), as well as 'Leadership' by MacGregor Burns (Heyna & Fittkau, 2021). The focus these days has been on political leadership, especially on aspects of transactional and transformational leadership (Weibler, 2016).

Before taking a closer look at transformational leadership in the following sub-chapter, it is first necessary to briefly describe the connections between transactional leadership on the one hand and transformational leadership on the other, as these aspects are not only important for the history of the development of transformational leadership but are also relevant for the understanding of leadership in the context of this research.

2.3.2.2. Transactional and Transformational: Opposites or Complements?

Even today, leadership is still often understood as a kind of exchange relationship between leader and follower – in other words, somewhat abbreviated as an exchange between performance and money. This exchange relationship is also discussed in the literature as transactional leadership (Heyna & Fittkau, 2021).

The term transactional can be traced back to Burns, who analysed leadership in his research, particularly in political contexts. He worked out that the

understanding of leadership in this context primarily comprised leaders working by exchanging rewards for performance, and that a kind of community of obligation developed between leaders and employees via extrinsic incentives (Schmidt, 2012). Burns then described this behaviour as transactional and considered transactional and transformational leadership as poles on a single dimension (Heyna & Fittkau, 2021).

However, this juxtaposition has led to transactional leadership often being seen as the opposite of transformational leadership (Bycio et al., 1995). However, according to Schriesheim et al. (2006), this contrasting view overlooks the fact that transformational leadership can be counterproductive, as both perspectives can positively influence each other. Wang et al. (2001) note in a long-term study that the full effect of transformational leadership can only be realised through a combination of transformational and transactional leadership elements. Weibler (2016) also emphasises that (positive) effects can only be achieved through the combination of transactional elements in leadership and transformational leadership, which neither approach would be able to achieve on its own. According to Weibler (2016), this effect – also known as the augmentation effect – describes how it is only against this background that a significant part of the variance in the success variables of transformational leadership can be explained.

Although this amplifying effect is widely recognised, some scholars have also criticised the overly dichotomous treatment of transactional and transformational leadership. Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) argue that both constructs exhibit conceptual overlap and methodological ambiguities, particularly when measured with self-report instruments. Furthermore, research on transformational leadership tends to romanticise leadership and attribute success primarily to individual leaders, thereby neglecting contextual and systemic influences (Meindl et al., 2001; Yukl, 2013). In highly regulated public environments, transactional clarity – in terms of structure, role definition and accountability – can indeed serve as a necessary foundation on which inspirational and transformational elements can unfold their potential. Accordingly, the combination of transactional mechanisms that provide stability and transformational mechanisms that promote meaning and innovation appears particularly relevant for leadership in complex organisational contexts such as municipal services organisations.

Furtner (2016) also takes up this idea and recognises it as an essential addition to transformational leadership, particularly in the transactional sub-dimension of 'contingent reward'. He associates contingent rewards with setting or agreeing goals in conjunction with demanding performance, which is either rewarded upon success or penalised upon failure. In addition to this aspect, the transactional side of leadership also includes so-called 'management by exception'. This means that, based on the negotiation and exchange process in transactional leadership, managers only need to intervene in their employees' work in exceptional cases, namely when corrections are necessary or when the achievement of objectives is at risk (Schmidt, 2012).

To summarise, based on current research findings, it can be assumed that transformational leadership is not diametrically opposed to transactional leadership, but that transformational leadership can only unfold its (full) effect through elements of transactional leadership (Riedelbauch, 2011). Transformational leadership can then (together with transactional elements) contribute to reshaping or transforming work into something meaningful (Schermy, 2024), which is described in more detail below.

2.3.2.3. Transformational Leadership: An Overview in a VUCA World

With reference to the author's model presented above, a basic assumption of transformational leadership is that a certain *behaviour* of leaders – which in turn is favoured (but not determined) by the *personality of the leader* (Furtner, 2016) – can have a positive effect on employees (*followers*) within *certain leadership contexts or situations* and that this in turn can have a positive influence on a variety of *success parameters*. While the concept of success – which can be interpreted in many different ways – is only briefly discussed below, the context (including the followers) and the person of the leader are examined in more detail against the background of transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership: Success

Parameters of success that can be positively influenced by transformational leadership include, e.g., followers' customer and job satisfaction, as well as their performance and health. Geyer and Steyrer (1998) point out that transformational leadership has measurable, positive effects in the short

term, for example, in sales organisations. Felfe (2005) shows that transformational leadership appears to be demonstrably superior to other leadership approaches in terms of its positive impact on performance.

The perspective adopted here considers success not only in terms of achieving defined results, but also in terms of the people involved in achieving the goals within the leader-follower dyad. However, as the concept of success (“What is leadership success?” or “What is successful leadership?”) can be interpreted in many different ways (for example, in terms of performance success, behavioural success, satisfaction success, etc. (Neuberger; 1976)) and therefore different facets of success can also be measured (for example, efficiency, effectiveness, profitability, etc., here, among others), this aspect will not be examined in more detail in the context of this research as the focus is essentially on the interaction between leader and follower from the perspective of top management within the context chosen here.

Transformational Leadership: Context and Follower

Concerning the context in which transformational leadership is most likely to be effective, Furtner (2016) points out that contextual characteristics such as uncertainty, instability and a high level of dynamism represent an ideal starting point for transformational leadership. One reason is that these very characteristics of the context increase the likelihood of followers’ dissatisfaction with the status quo. This dissatisfaction with the status quo combined with a (latent) fear of uncertain future developments can – additionally fuelled by the hope of a ‘better’ future – make positive change possible through transformational leadership (Furtner, 2016).

Before both ‘leadership’ and transformational leadership are explained in more detail below, the context will be examined as this is relevant to this research.

Specific Context Characteristics in the Age of Digital Transformation

The age of digital transformation seems to be associated with various fears and anxieties, such as the latent fear of losing one’s job, ‘no longer being able to follow’ or the uncontrollability of developments. Today, this development, or the perception of these developments, is regularly associated with the

acronym VUCA: the present and future are perceived as increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Oschinsky, 2022).

In this context, Bergquist (2024) examines the concept of the VUCA world. On the one hand, he recognises aspects in the terms *complexity* and *volatility* that relate in particular to external changes, i.e. changes that take place *outside* of people. According to Bergquist, increasing external *complexity* initially leads to a steady increase in the number of issues (elements) that must be taken into account in our own thinking and actions. If then – according to Kruse (2004) – the preferred learning strategy of people in complex situations is to initially master complexity through a purely rational understanding of details, then this regularly leads to an exaggerated trivialisation of reality, as a purely rational understanding can no longer be mastered due to the multitude of topics and elements. According to this perspective, this is also due to the fact that today's multitude of topics and elements is increasingly interdependent (Miller et al., 2007). Looking at one element or a few elements alone is no longer enough to get an idea of the 'big picture'. Furthermore, coping with complexity is made even more difficult by the fact that this multitude of elements is not only interdependent but also constantly changing or shifting position, which can be described as *volatile*.

According to Bergquist (2024), the terms *uncertainty* and *ambiguity* can in turn be viewed from an epistemological perspective. Thus, *ambiguity* concerns the *evaluation of available evidence* as well as its *subjective significance* for one's (own) reality. *Uncertainty* refers to the *stability of a (subjective) assessment* of reality: in uncertain situations, it appears as if reality can change in unexpected ways within a very short time. One of the challenges is that both (epistemological) evidence and its evaluation appear increasingly uncertain and ambiguous to people. As a result, knowledge today appears far less characterised by lasting clarity and certainty than it did in the past.

For Bergquist (2024), this results in the central realisation that (especially) leaders in the 21st century have to deal with diffuse 'fear' attributable to or triggered by the VUCA world, as volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity would override existing rules. This not only intensifies the fear itself but also makes it more difficult to improve conditions in ways that would

reduce fear, with the result that people's views can become oversimplified, unrealistic, and polarised (Bergquist, 2024). In this context, Kahraman (2024) points out that the development of ambiguity tolerance is therefore increasingly important for individuals because it seems the only way to learn to better tolerate the space between 'black and white', as quick, easy and unambiguous answers and solutions are becoming increasingly rare in an ever more complex world.

Transformational Leadership: Leader

Psychological research provides a wide range of results concerning the person of the 'leader' and related traits and aspects of personality in connection with transformational leadership. For example, a so-called socialised power motive (Frei, 2013), combined with extraversion, openness and agreeableness, can promote transformational leadership according to Furtner (2016). Transformational leadership is also often associated with aspects of charismatic leadership, which are said to further strengthen its effects. Meindl et al. (2001) see particularly positive effects here if the following aspects are recognisable in the leader: strong convictions in their own ideas, a sense of mission, visionary thinking and future orientation, rhetorical and communicative talent, determination and dominance, self-assurance and self-confidence, as well as a strong need for power. In addition, there is a certain sensitivity towards those being led and their needs, as well as towards the environment and the various situations that a manager encounters in the course of their work.

Given the focus of this business management thesis, further psychological research results will not be discussed in detail below, as this would go beyond the scope of this work and distract from the research questions. However, it is already clear from these explanations that a variety of characteristics that managers might favour for successful transformational leadership should be present, even if their realistic combination in 'just' one person may seem utopian or even too heroic (Yukl, 2013). This aspect is also a key point of criticism for both transformational leadership and the charismatic leadership approaches often associated with it. Regarding the behaviour that characterises transformational leadership, the following sub-chapter aims to provide a more differentiated insight, as this is a focal point in this research and its associated objectives.

2.3.2.4. Transformational Leadership in Action

Transformational leadership describes how the performance of individuals and teams in organisations can be positively influenced and how a close emotional attachment of people can be combined with a collective commitment to a higher moral cause (Heyna & Fittkau, 2021). Bass (1985) emphasised four essential aspects of transformational leadership (Diaz-Saenz, 2011):

- **Inspirational motivation** describes the creation of an inspiring vision, i.e., a future state that gives people meaning and challenges them with agreed goals. Wegge and Rosenstiel (2007) add that it is also about achieving mutual trust and confidence that agreed-upon goals will be achieved. Since this is the focus of this work, the particular salience of this topic will be examined in more detail in the following Sub-Chapter 2.3.2.6.
- **Idealised influence** describes the importance of the role models followers want to identify with. Wegge and Rosenstiel (2007) add that this is not least about the pride that can arise from working together.
- **Intellectual stimulation**, in turn, encourages people to be innovative and to throw old assumptions overboard or to regularly review them; intellectual stimulation is about a (recurring) confrontation with problems and beliefs from different perspectives (Wegge & Rosenstiel, 2007).
- **Individualised consideration** means that leaders understand their followers as individuals with their own needs, abilities and aspirations, and should support them in developing their individual strengths through coaching and appropriate guidance.

Table 3 shows how Schermuly (2024) summarises these aspects and describes specific behaviours of transformational leadership:

Dimension	Role of Leader	Explanation	Behaviours
Inspiring Motivation	Visionary	The leader inspires through a clear and meaningful vision and communicates confidence in achieving future goals.	- Develop and communicate compelling visions - Articulate meaning and purpose that energise people - Express confidence that goals can be achieved even in challenging times
Individualized Consideration	Coach	The leader recognises the individual needs, strengths and aspirations of employees and supports their personal development.	- Provide individual attention and support - Assign tasks and responsibilities based on individual strengths - Support personalised development based on clear development plans
Intellectual Stimulation	Problem-Solver	The leader encourages employees to think independently, question assumptions and explore new ideas.	- Challenge established routines, assumptions and mental models - Encourage unconventional ideas and creative approaches - Strengthen analytical and problem-solving capabilities
Idealized Influence	Role Model	The leader acts in a credible, ethical and exemplary manner and earns trust through integrity and consistency.	- Demonstrate high personal standards and integrity - Act authentically and with moral courage - Pursue continuous professional development and model expert behaviour

Table 3: Transformational leadership
Source: Adapted from Schermuly (2024).

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2.3.2.5. Measurability and Current State of Research

Bass and Avolio drew on Bass's (1985) original conceptualisation and developed it into a factor model combining transactional and transformational elements – the “full range of leadership model” (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Harazd & Ophuyzen, 2011). This model positions three forms of leadership along a continuum: transformational (effective), transactional, and laissez-faire (ineffective) (Furtner, 2016). The authors emphasise that leaders display all behaviours within this model to varying degrees, which in turn reflects different levels of effectiveness (Bass & Riggio, 2006a).

Instruments such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and related measures are used to assess this approach (Diaz-Saenz, 2011). However, the methodological challenges of capturing transformational leadership remain substantial and require further research (Felfe, 2013). Qualitative and interpretive studies – as advocated by Beyer (1999) – may offer deeper insights, particularly regarding contextual influences and interactions across organisational levels (Osborn & Marion, 2009). Also, concerns about construct validity persist: transformational leadership is often empirically difficult to distinguish from other leadership constructs such as charismatic or servant leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). The reliance on single-source perception data also raises questions about common-method bias and inflated correlations (Hoch et al., 2018). Nevertheless, meta-analyses continue to show positive associations

with performance and well-being, albeit with notable contextual variation (Banks et al., 2016). For this study, these findings support an interpretive, qualitative orientation that emphasises meaning-making and contextual sensemaking rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators (Beyer, 1999b). Overall, despite concerns regarding conceptual clarity and measurement reliability, transformational leadership remains a relevant – though context-dependent – predictor, particularly in complex environments such as municipal services organisations.

2.3.2.6. Inspirational Motivation

Schermuly (2024) takes up the sub-aspect of inspirational motivation as presented in this research and describes the leader's role as a visionary who inspires others through their vision. This includes the development and communication of a compelling vision, combined with the confidence that even challenging goals can be achieved under difficult conditions. Such visions play an important role, particularly for organisational success (Haque et al., 2016).

Khan et al. (2020) describe this aspect of transformational leadership as an attitude that addresses followers' emotions and builds trust in employees' capabilities. A collective vision can create a shared understanding of tasks, which in turn may increase intrinsic motivation. This form of leadership has been associated with positive outcomes at both team and individual levels, including increased optimism, enjoyment and satisfaction. Empirical studies further suggest that inspirational motivation is closely linked to the frequency with which leaders communicate vision, goals and values to their followers (Kim & Cruz, 2022).

In summary, the development and communication of a motivating vision can be seen as central to this dimension of transformational leadership. However, the actual impact of vision development and communication in driving organisational change remains under-researched (Haque et al., 2016), particularly in public-sector contexts such as municipal services organisations. Although transformational leadership and inspirational motivation are receiving increasing attention in areas such as corporate management, education and healthcare in Germany, they remain

comparatively underrepresented overall (Miezel, 2016; Rathke & Harris-Huermann, 2025; Töpfer & Maertins, 2017).

While transformational leadership, with its four dimensions, is widely regarded as a comprehensive framework for understanding leadership in organisational change (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994), this study deliberately focuses on inspirational motivation as a distinct analytical entry point. This focus is not arbitrary: Compared to other dimensions of transformational leadership, inspirational motivation is particularly concerned with articulating future-oriented meaning and providing orientation under conditions of uncertainty. In the context of digital transformation, where established structures and ways of creating value are increasingly questioned, this future-oriented dimension becomes especially relevant. While other dimensions, such as intellectual stimulation or individualised consideration, focus more strongly on cognitive development or individual support, inspirational motivation is uniquely concerned with articulating collective meaning and providing shared orientation under conditions of uncertainty. This makes inspirational motivation particularly relevant in the context of digital transformation in municipal services organisations, where ambiguity, legitimacy and the need for shared direction become central.

Consequently, inspirational motivation is selected because it most directly addresses the core challenges identified in this study. Conceptually, inspirational motivation directly addresses the articulation of vision and, implicitly, questions of purpose and meaning, which are widely recognised as central elements in processes of organisational change. In this sense, inspirational motivation can be understood as a key mechanism through which leadership shapes not only behaviour but also the interpretive frameworks through which organisational members make sense of change (Burns, 1978; Shamir et al., 2018).

This focus can be further supported by insights from sensemaking theory, which emphasise that organisational action is shaped by how individuals and groups interpret their environment and construct meaning, particularly under conditions of ambiguity (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). From this perspective, leadership extends beyond unilateral decision-making or control and involves the shaping of shared understandings and the coordination of

collective interpretation. Inspirational motivation aligns closely with this view, as it foregrounds the role of vision and purpose in orienting actors and enabling coordinated action under conditions of uncertainty.

At the same time, digital transformation in public sector organisations is closely linked to questions of legitimacy, public value and societal contribution (Mergel et al., 2019; Suchman, 1995). As outlined in Chapter 2.1, municipal services organisations operate within institutional environments characterised by political accountability, regulatory frameworks and diverse stakeholder expectations, which shape and constrain organisational action in ways that differ fundamentally from private-sector contexts. In such environments, leadership cannot be reduced to the implementation of technological solutions or process improvements alone. Rather, it involves the continuous negotiation of meaning and legitimacy, both within the organisation and in relation to external stakeholders.

In this context, inspirational motivation can be understood as a bridging mechanism that enables leaders to frame transformation processes in terms of purpose and future orientation, thereby supporting alignment among organisational members and stakeholders around a shared understanding of change. This is particularly relevant for municipal services organisations, where transformation initiatives must not only be effective, but also socially and politically acceptable. Furthermore, digital transformation in municipal services organisations is often characterised by ambiguity, uncertainty and a lack of clearly defined pathways (Hinings et al., 2018; Vial, 2019). Under such conditions, the ability to articulate a compelling vision and foster shared understanding becomes increasingly important.

Despite its relevance, transformational leadership, and thus also inspirational motivation, has been subject to critique, particularly from the perspective of critical leadership studies, which challenge individualised and leader-centric conceptions of leadership by emphasising power, context and relational dynamics (Collinson, 2014). Traditional conceptualisations tend to place strong emphasis on individual leaders and their ability to articulate and communicate a compelling vision. Such leader-centric perspectives risk underestimating the complexity of leadership in organisational settings characterised by institutional constraints, multiple stakeholders and

distributed responsibilities. Moreover, such critiques highlight that leader-centric models, including transformational leadership, may obscure issues of power, suppress alternative perspectives and overestimate the role of individual agency in complex organisational settings (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Tourish, 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This limitation is especially salient in the context of municipal services organisations, where leadership is embedded in public accountability structures and shaped by political, societal and organisational pressures.

These considerations raise the question of whether a primarily leader-centred understanding of inspirational motivation is sufficient to capture leadership processes in such contexts. Empirical insights from this study suggest that leadership in municipal services organisations during digital transformation cannot be fully captured through a unidirectional understanding of inspiration. Rather than being driven solely by individual leaders, processes of sense-giving, meaning-making, vision development and orientation emerge through ongoing interactions between actors, organisational structures and the broader institutional environment. Leadership, therefore, can be understood as a relational and context-dependent practice involving continuous negotiation and reflection. This observation is supported by perspectives that emphasise the relational and collective nature of leadership (Crevani et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Moreover, the dynamic and uncertain nature of digital transformation challenges the assumption that leaders can provide a clear and stable direction solely through vision. Transformation processes are non-linear, complex and ambiguous, aligning with theoretical perspectives that conceptualise organisations as complex adaptive systems in which outcomes emerge from interactions rather than being fully controllable (Heifetz et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

For the present study, these considerations show why inspirational motivation remains important, but also why it is not sufficient on its own. While it captures essential aspects of leadership related to purpose, vision and orientation, a purely leader-centred understanding does not fully account for the relational, reflective and context-dependent nature of leadership in complex environments. This suggests that inspirational motivation, while highly relevant, needs to be conceptually extended in order to address these limitations more adequately.

From this perspective, the study draws on inspirational motivation, but also critically extends it in light of insights from critical leadership studies that question leader-centric assumptions. While retaining the importance of vision and purpose, it shifts attention towards the collective, reflective and institutionally embedded nature of leadership processes. In doing so, the study moves beyond individualised models of inspirational motivation towards a more context-sensitive understanding of leadership. These limitations provide the conceptual foundation for the subsequent development of the framework introduced later in this study as a re-conceptualisation of inspirational motivation that more adequately reflects the complexities of leadership in digital transformation within municipal services organisations. The following section extends this perspective by considering system-oriented approaches to leadership, which further highlight the relational, distributed and non-linear nature of leadership processes in complex environments.

2.3.2.7. Systemic and Complexity-Oriented Leadership

Building on the previous discussion, which examines in detail, amongst other things, the significance of inspirational motivation and of visions, this section takes a closer look at the limitations of an understanding of leadership that focuses primarily on the level of individual leaders and their sphere of influence. In the context of digital transformation, as already outlined in the preceding chapters, leadership appears to be embedded within broader organisational and societal dynamics characterised by complexity, interdependence and non-linearity. Therefore, the following section turns to systems-oriented approaches that explicitly address these specific conditions and requirements.

A key contribution in this regard is made by complexity leadership theory, which views organisations as complex adaptive systems in which outcomes emerge from dynamic interactions between interdependent actors (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) and can be seen as an emergent collective phenomenon (Osborn, 2008). From this perspective, the starting point for understanding leadership is not primarily situated in individuals but is rather understood as an emergent and interactive dynamic that unfolds within the relational space between people, ideas and contexts (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). This perspective shifts the focus away from traditional linear cause-

and-effect assumptions towards an understanding of organisations as non-linear and adaptive systems characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001).

Within this framework, leadership is distinguished into administrative, adaptive and enabling dimensions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Administrative leadership refers to formal structures and coordination mechanisms, whilst adaptive leadership arises from informal dynamics linked to learning, innovation and change. Enabling leadership then connects these areas by creating conditions under which adaptive processes can unfold. From this perspective, leadership in complex environments is understood less as the direct control of people and outcomes, and more as the facilitation of adaptability, interaction, and, above all, adaptive responsiveness (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017), thereby enabling the emergence of adaptive outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In this sense, leaders become one element within a broader system, exercising an enabling function that supports adaptive dynamics (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Recent research highlights adaptive challenges – problems without predefined solutions that demand continuous learning across organisational boundaries. This is particularly relevant in the public sector (Uhl-Bien, 2021).

Adaptive Leadership offers a complementary perspective, focusing on how organisations and individuals can deal with such adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz et al., 2009). Here, a key distinction is drawn between technical problems, which can be solved using existing knowledge, and adaptive challenges, which require changes in values, beliefs and behaviours. In this context, leadership is no longer understood as a formal position, but rather as an activity that mobilises people to engage with complex and uncertain situations. Research also supports the assumption that leadership processes are not, and need not be, limited to formal authority structures. Shams and Linsky (2025), for example, demonstrate that adaptive leadership behaviour can be observed across different hierarchical levels and thus does not necessarily depend on positional or hierarchical power. Similarly, they highlight capabilities such as integrating diverse perspectives, surfacing tensions, and acting in an experimental and iterative manner. At the same time, the distributed and processual nature of adaptive leadership makes it inherently difficult to operationalise and measure, as recent work

highlights ongoing challenges in capturing adaptive leadership behaviour and self-awareness in a valid and reliable way (Shams et al., 2025).

Leadership can therefore be understood as a process of collective learning and ongoing meaning-making under conditions of uncertainty. These system-oriented perspectives are also consistent with relational leadership approaches. For example, Uhl-Bien (2006) understands leadership primarily as a socially constructed process through which coordination and shared meaning are continuously generated. From this perspective, leadership no longer lies primarily with individuals but arises through interaction processes and relational dynamics embedded in organisational and institutional contexts (Crevani et al., 2010).

This study assumes that digital transformation, in the context of municipal services organisations, can be interpreted as a complex and non-linear process in which technological, organisational and societal changes are closely intertwined. Consequently, rather than following clearly defined paths, transformation processes often appear fragmented, evolving and only partially predictable (Hinings et al., 2018; Vial, 2019). This is consistent with the view of organisations as complex adaptive systems in which outcomes arise from ongoing interactions rather than being fully planned or controlled. Building on this, leadership appears less as the steering of change and more as a process that enables orientation, fosters shared understanding and maintains legitimacy across different stakeholder groups. This perspective takes on particular significance in public sector contexts such as municipal services organisations, where leadership is embedded in institutional environments shaped by political accountability, regulatory frameworks and societal expectations. At the same time, whilst system-oriented leadership perspectives emphasise the importance of emergence, relational dynamics and collective processes, they tend to place less direct emphasis on how purpose and vision are articulated, maintained and embedded across organisational levels. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of municipal services organisations, where leadership must not only enable adaptation but also provide orientation and maintain legitimacy internally and externally over an extended period.

Overall, these considerations extend existing leadership perspectives by showing more clearly the systemic and processual character of leadership in complex environments. They offer a theoretical perspective that complements and deepens the understanding of inspirational motivation developed in the previous section, whilst also highlighting its limitations and clarifying why a conceptual extension is necessary. Against this background, the development of a framework as a central research objective of this study can be understood as an attempt to combine the strengths of inspirational motivation with insights from system-oriented leadership perspectives. In doing so, the study moves towards a more relational, reflective and context-sensitive understanding of leadership that extends beyond individualised and unidirectional conceptions. Whilst inspirational motivation emphasises vision as a central orienting mechanism, the concept later presented in this study extends this view by explicitly incorporating the relational, reflective and context-dependent nature of leadership processes across organisational levels. In this way, leadership is no longer understood as a unidirectional act, but as an ongoing process of aligning vision, structures and interactions within complex and evolving organisational systems.

Whilst system-oriented leadership perspectives emphasise the importance of emergence, relational dynamics and complexity, the following section illustrates how shared meaning can be actively constructed, communicated and stabilised within organisational contexts. Concepts such as management rhetoric, sensemaking, (public) narratives and institutional work further illustrate how meaning-making processes unfold and operate in practice.

2.3.2.8. Rhetoric, Sensemaking, Narratives and Institutional Work

While classic perspectives on transformational leadership primarily emphasise motivational and emotional mechanisms, the notion of leadership can also be expanded to include its role as a source of organisational meaning. In this context, leadership can create a framework for interpreting organisational reality and, for example, enable employees to cope with ambiguity and better understand change (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). In this way, leadership can fundamentally entail shaping the interpersonal, structural, and procedural conditions for collective purpose under uncertainty (Ganz, 2010).

The communicative dimension of leadership plays a central role in this process, as leaders actively construct interpretations of organisational reality and legitimise them within the organisation. This approach can be summarised by the concept of management rhetoric, which describes the strategic use of language in organisational contexts (Green, 2004). From a rhetorical perspective, ideas, strategies or change initiatives prevail less because of their objective superiority and more because of their rhetorical persuasiveness. Leadership thus becomes a rhetorical practice in which language and interpretation become central media for creating organisational meaning. Through rhetorical strategies such as metaphors, visions or symbolic narratives, managers support collective meaning-making processes and help employees to understand complex or contradictory changes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995).

Within this communicative and rhetorical understanding of leadership, the concept of public narrative takes on particular significance. Ganz (2010) defines narrative as an essential skill for motivating others to join in, thus becoming a leadership tool that translates values and emotions into collective action. Narratives enable meaning-making, emotional activation and collective mobilisation, and thus represent a central resource for effective leadership – especially in complex public service environments like municipal services organisations. Narratives function therefore as a social technology that enables collective action, supports non-heroic forms of leadership, and is based on shared meaning and interpersonal connectedness. The function of narratives based on Lawrence-Pietroni & Needham (2019) is summarised in Table 4 below:

Function of narratives	How narratives work
Narratives are compelling	Strong narratives capture attention, spark curiosity, and create sustained emotional engagement.
Narratives impose temporal order	Narratives structure experience across past, present and future, creating coherence and showing how change unfolds.
Narratives appeal to values and emotions	Narratives connect to deeply held values and persuade through emotional resonance rather than information alone.
Narratives are social and co-constructed	Narratives emerge in social interaction, create shared meaning, and reinforce norms, roles and collective identity.
Narratives simplify complexity	Narratives offer simplified interpretive frames that reduce ambiguity and make complex issues understandable and actionable.
Narratives are purposive and mobilising	Narratives attribute responsibility and urgency, legitimise action, and offer a shared call for collective commitment.

Table 4: Functions of narratives

Source: Adapted from Lawrence-Pietroni & Needham (2019).

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In this sense, narrative enables a mindful form of response rather than a thoughtless reaction. In contrast to a purely paradigmatic mode of reasoning, which prioritises the ‘how’, narrative foregrounds the ‘why’. By doing so, it renders meaning explicit: why an issue matters, why hope is warranted, and why a deliberate decision to act becomes necessary (Ganz, 2024). In leadership contexts, narratives function as a core mechanism of sensemaking and sensegiving, allowing leaders to interpret ambiguity and orient collective action.

Following the logic of “Public Narrative” by Ganz (2024), narrative meaning emerges through the interplay of a plot (challenge, choice, outcome), a protagonist (character), and a moral. This structure is commonly articulated through three interrelated narrative layers: the ‘Story of Self’ expresses a values-based leadership stance by explaining why a leader engages with a specific challenge. The ‘Story of Us’ evokes shared values and collective identity, reframing the challenge as a matter of joint responsibility. The ‘Story of Now’ introduces urgency and agency, emphasising that shared commitment and coordinated action are required to address the challenge, clarify available choices, and anticipate potential outcomes. In this way, narratives could become a central vehicle for hope and therefore for inspirational motivation, aligning meaning, values, and action in the context of digital transformation in municipal services organisations.

At the same time, narratives are ethically sensitive, as their effect can also be used manipulatively and therefore require a clear value-based foundation. This ethical tension is also highlighted by Alvesson & Spicer (2012), who warn that language in leadership can slide into forms of grandiosity, impression management or ideological control. Similarly, Tourish (2013) argues that overly dominant change narratives could suppress dissenting voices, reduce psychological safety and create organisational climates in which alternative interpretations are marginalised. Consequently, leadership narratives need to be grounded in reflexive awareness and transparent value orientation to ensure that meaning-making processes empower collective agency rather than enforce conformity.

This narrative perspective can be further deepened by viewing leadership not only as an individual or interactional process, but as part of a broader organisational dynamic conceptualised as institutional work. This refers to purposeful actions aimed at creating (e.g., introducing new values or practices), maintaining (e.g., reinforcing legitimacy and collective meaning), or disrupting (e.g., questioning established logics) institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). From this perspective, leaders are not passive carriers of institutional norms, but active agents who shape them. This conceptualisation aligns closely with the understanding of leadership as sense-giving and rhetorical practice: through rhetorically mediated sense-making and targeted communication strategies (Green, 2004), leadership itself becomes a form of institutional work, legitimising new organisational forms and delegitimising outdated institutional logics. In the context of digital transformation (which challenges established institutional orders and requires new norms, roles and practices), this connection is particularly relevant, as leadership can bridge the gap between old and new institutional logics and contribute to the institutionalisation of digital practices and the collective redefinition of organisational meaning in municipal services organisations through rhetorically supported sense-making processes. Overall, sensemaking, rhetorical leadership, public narrative and institutional work offer complementary perspectives for understanding how organisational meaning is constructed and legitimised under conditions of uncertainty. This becomes particularly relevant in digitally transforming municipal services organisations, where existing institutional arrangements are increasingly challenged and collective purpose must be continually re-negotiated.

2.3.3. Public Sector Leadership

Public sector leadership has emerged as a distinct research field within public management as governments worldwide face increasingly complex social, demographic, digital and economic challenges. In particular, demographic change, skills shortages, increasing environmental demands and advancing digitalisation call for adjustments of leadership within public organisations (George et al., 2019). These developments require leaders to continuously adapt and strive for change to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic environment.

Vogel and Masal (2012) point out that the expectations of stakeholders – including citizens, politicians and other interest groups – towards public organisations and their leaders are becoming increasingly complex. These demands include not only the need for flexibility, e.g., through service portals or e-government, but also for greater transparency and efficient processing of enquiries. However, these increasing demands often collide with the challenges of a public sector characterised by cost-cutting pressures and a high level of regulation. The structure and bureaucratic processes of the public sector pose another particular challenge: While private companies are often more flexible in their management, public managers must balance regulatory requirements with the need to drive change. While the structure of the public sector provides a clear framework to guide leaders in their decision-making, it can also limit innovation and the ability to adapt quickly to new circumstances.

In Germany, leadership in the public sector is considered under-researched (Vogel et al., 2016). One approach to improvement could be to apply private sector leadership concepts to the public sector. Vivona (2024) emphasises that adopting a more private sector-oriented leadership can make a positive contribution to achieving objectives and shaping culture in the public sector, provided the specific context (e.g., the country and its contextual conditions, the type of organisation, etc.) is taken into account. However, Vogel and Masal (2012) warn that the direct transfer of private sector leadership approaches to the public sector can be problematic. This is mainly due to significant structural differences between the two sectors, for example, in terms of bureaucratic orientation and regulatory requirements, or in relation to motivational factors among employees. This critical point highlights the debate whether leadership concepts developed in the private sector can be meaningfully applied to public

organisations or require contextual adaptation. While it is emphasised that transformational leadership can promote commitment and determination, it often underestimates the structural and procedural constraints inherent in bureaucratic systems (Trottier et al., 2008). Furthermore, the assumption that public service managers can act freely as visionary change agents may conflict with accountability structures and legal frameworks that prioritise stability and procedural justice over innovation. Therefore, transformational leadership in the public sector should not be understood as a normative model that must be implemented, but rather as an analytical lens for examining how leaders interpret and balance competing institutional demands.

The behaviour of organisational members in the public sector is often highly formalised and regulated by processes and structures. These bureaucratic elements can facilitate leadership and increase the importance of communication and interaction, as managers are often forced to act beyond the usual hierarchies and structures. Especially in organisations with high bureaucratic influence, the role of leaders who provide guidance through communication and foster a shared sense of purpose becomes increasingly important (Vogel & Masal, 2012).

According to Perry and Wise (1990) and Heyes (2005), the motives of public sector employees can also differ considerably from those of private sector employees. Employees in the public sector show a stronger orientation towards the common good, which poses a particular challenge for managers: intrinsic motivation – which is associated with stronger identification with the profession – could be weakened, for example, by extrinsic incentives (Nelson & Folbre, 2006; Heyes, 2005).

The public sector can be understood as a dynamic network in which different stakeholder interests – such as citizens, politicians, and trade unions – interact. Leaders in the public sector must therefore be able to deal with the paradoxes and contradictions of this network. Such paradoxical leadership, which is becoming increasingly important in research (Franken et al., 2020), enables managers to develop a ‘both-and’ mentality and transfer this to their employees. Initial research suggests that leaders who successfully manage these paradoxes can achieve better results (Backhaus et al., 2022).

Transformational leadership has also recently become increasingly important in the public sector. A meta-analysis by Bao et al. (2024) shows that transformational leadership is positively associated with both individual and organisational aspects, such as employee motivation, performance and innovation. The dimension of inspirational motivation in particular plays a central role in this context: Leaders who can communicate a clear vision and emphasise the importance of the organisation's values and goals can significantly increase employees' commitment (Wright et al., 2012). Studies also show that inspirational motivation in the public sector can be an important lever for increasing employee performance and motivation, especially when a clear and attractive vision is developed and communicated effectively (Chau et al., 2022). The perception of bureaucracy and administrative processes can also be positively influenced by inspiring communication (Moynihan et al., 2012). The role of the manager as a communicator and inspirer of change in public organisations is therefore becoming increasingly important (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010). Research also shows that transformational leadership, and inspirational motivation in particular, can be key to increasing employee performance and engagement in the public sector.

The challenge is therefore not so much to adopt management models from the private sector per se, but rather to translate them into rhetorically legitimate and institutionally compatible practices within the bureaucratic logic. In response to these developments, calls for a fundamental rethinking of leadership in public services have intensified. In this context, the 21st Century public servant by Needham and Mangan (2014) represents a radical change: away from rule-based administration towards an empathetic, networked, entrepreneurial and reflexive public service approach that navigates complex systems and sees citizens as partners and enabling this in structures that no longer function in a hierarchical and bureaucratic manner (Needham & Mangan, 2014). Leadership in this sense is adaptive, entrepreneurial, collaborative, and ethically grounded. The practitioner works relationally, reflects critically, and navigates complexity through shared leadership, organisational agility, and human-centred engagement. Table 5 below summarizes five elements of Mangan and Pietroni's perspective on leadership in public services in the 21st century:

Element of 21st Century Leadership	Description	Implications
Leadership beyond organisational boundaries	Leadership must operate across organisational, disciplinary, geographic and stakeholder boundaries to enable systemic collaboration and cross-institutional problem solving.	Requires risk-taking, boundary-spanning skills, negotiation, influence, perspective-taking, and willingness to share authority and resources.
Leadership as a shared and distributed process	Effective leadership emerges from many actors and decision points rather than a single heroic leader; leadership is a relational and collective capacity distributed across networks.	Encourages distributed decision-making, empowerment, flattening of hierarchies, and rejection of heroic command-and-control models.
Leadership based on interdependence	Outcomes depend on the quality of interactions between actors rather than the excellence of individual contributions (orchestra metaphor).	Requires trust, humility, systems awareness, and collaborative strategies to support whole-system health rather than isolated problem-solving.
Leadership driven by passion and intrinsic motivation	Leadership in complex systems has an emotional and moral dimension (referred to as <i>heartset</i>). Passion is a catalyst for overcoming resistance and inspiring collective action.	Implies emotional intelligence, purpose-driven leadership, capacity to mobilise energy and commitment, and authenticity in change processes.
Leadership as narrative and meaning-making	Leaders must craft compelling narratives that mobilise diverse stakeholders, synthesise complexity, articulate shared purpose, and hold the tension between vision and reality.	Requires storytelling skills, capacity to communicate difficult truths, and ability to integrate multiple perspectives into coherent meaning.

Table 5: 21st Century Leadership

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When leadership in public services in the 21st century is different (systemic, distributed, interdependent, emotionally intelligent and narrative-driven), it enables the community to cope with complexity rather than relying on individual heroism (Mangan & Lawrence-Pietroni, 2019). Following this, also leadership development has to be adapted to the new challenges. The authors point out different components for a new leadership development approach which cultivates the capacity to navigate complexity, enables collective leadership, reflects critically, learns through real system challenges, and mobilises people through narrative and emotional engagement - rather than training individuals to perform heroic control. Table 6 below shows key ideas of the authors:

Development Component	How to develop	Why (Purpose)
Horizontal Leadership Development	Acquisition of new knowledge, skills and practical proficiencies (e.g. storytelling as a “craft” or leadership practice taught through training formats).	To equip public servants with additional tools and skills required for changing roles and tasks.
Vertical Leadership Development	Exposure to situations that challenge existing ways of knowing and require more sophisticated levels of consciousness (e.g., via heat experiences).	To enable leaders to operate effectively in VUCA contexts, e.g. by revealing the inadequacy of existing action logics.
Development of Meaning-Making Capacity	Reflection on how meaning is constructed; recognising worldviews as constructions rather than objective truths.	To move beyond technical problem-solving towards more advanced interpretation of complexity and ambiguity.
Public Narrative – Story of Self	Narrative work that reframes personal experiences as value-based narrative resources; repeated re-authoring of one’s story.	To surface values, motivations and purpose.
Public Narrative – Story of Us	Construction of shared narratives that integrate multiple perspectives and shared values.	To enable collective meaning-making, shared identity and coordinated action across difference
Public Narrative – Story of Now	Framing challenges as requiring immediate collective action; articulating choices and consequences.	To create urgency and agency by connecting values to purposeful action.
Narrative Practice as Developmental Pedagogy	Sustained narrative practice combining storytelling, peer feedback, reflection and iteration.	To support both horizontal skill development and vertical shifts in consciousness.
Maintaining the Heat	Increasing complexity over time (e.g. mixed seniority groups, ongoing shared work contexts) to sustain disorientation.	To prevent premature stabilisation and allow continued vertical development.
Learning How to Learn	Using public narrative as a recurring developmental bridge between current and more advanced meaning-making stages.	To support continuous development rather than one-off skill acquisition.

Table 6: Leadership-development in the 21st century

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Leadership in transformation processes in this sense cannot be understood without the development of the underlying reflective and thinking skills of managers. The decisive factor for successful leadership is not the amount of knowledge, but the ability to think complexly, tolerate ambiguity and create meaning (Petrie, 2013). In this context, Petrie (2013) argues that effective leadership is based on an integrated combination of horizontal and vertical development, in which competencies and awareness can be built up together. While horizontal development expands knowledge, skills and tools, vertical leadership development transforms internal thinking and perception structures – it is not about what leaders know, but who they are and how they think. Against this backdrop, vertical development – for example, through heat experiences that consciously break established patterns of thinking (Mangan & Pietroni, 2021) – can bridge the gap by understanding inspirational motivation not as a charismatic individual performance, but as a leadership skill that conveys shared orientation, creates meaning and mobilises collective creative will. In this sense, vertical

development provides the cognitive and reflective foundation necessary for leadership capable of navigating transformation and building collective agency.

2.3.4. Summary of Leadership Sub-Chapter and Consideration of the Intersections

In the context of public administration in general and municipal services organisations in particular, the need for digital transformation is increasingly recognised, not least because it appears to be driven by changing stakeholder requirements and the need to digitise administrative processes. These requirements range from flexible opening hours and digital service portals to increasing demands for transparency and efficiency. At the same time, such developments often seem to conflict with financial constraints and the high level of regulation that characterise the public sector. Digital transformation may therefore play a central role in addressing these tensions, as it can enable the optimisation of administrative processes, improve access to services and enhance communication between citizens, businesses and municipal institutions.

However, digital transformation also appears to be associated with significant challenges, particularly with regard to the adaptation of existing structures and processes, as well as changing requirements for employees and leadership. Leadership in the age of digital transformation is therefore confronted not only with technological change, but also with organisational, structural, procedural and cultural transformation. Moreover, digital transformation does not seem to unfold as a uniform or linear process, but rather as a complex, evolving and context-dependent development shaped by uncertainty, ambiguity and interdependence (Hinings et al., 2018; Vial, 2019). In public sector contexts such as municipal services organisations, these dynamics appear to be further intensified by the need to maintain legitimacy, public value and accountability (Mergel et al., 2019; Suchman, 1995).

In this context, transformational leadership in general and inspirational motivation in particular can be understood as an important analytical entry point. While transformational leadership comprises several dimensions, this research suggests that inspirational motivation appears to be particularly relevant, as it most directly addresses the articulation of future-oriented meaning and the provision of collective orientation under conditions of uncertainty. In the context of digital transformation in municipal services organisations, where established structures and ways of creating value are increasingly questioned, the ability to formulate a clear and inspiring vision seems to become especially significant. Such a vision may render digital transformation comprehensible as part of a shared mission and provide orientation

and motivation (Podsakoff et al., 1990), while also fostering identification and commitment in public sector contexts (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010).

At the same time, the review highlights limitations of transformational leadership and inspirational motivation, particularly in highly regulated public contexts. Critical leadership studies suggest that leader-centric conceptions may underestimate institutional constraints, relational dynamics and issues of power (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2014; Tourish, 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This limitation appears particularly salient in public sector contexts, where the transferability of transformational leadership is constrained by bureaucratic structures and formal accountability requirements (Trottier et al., 2008). Accordingly, leadership may need to be understood not only structurally, but also relationally and interactively (Vogel & Masal, 2015).

Managers must therefore balance complex stakeholder expectations that extend beyond efficiency to include public welfare, transparency and legitimacy. While the integration of transactional and transformational elements may support innovation and commitment (Wright & Pandey, 2010), the literature suggests that leadership in digital transformation cannot be fully understood through these perspectives alone. System-oriented approaches, such as complexity leadership theory and adaptive leadership, indicate that leadership in complex environments appears to emerge through interaction, learning and adaptation rather than through direct control (Heifetz et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). From this perspective, leadership seems to shift away from the steering of change towards processes that enable orientation, adaptive responsiveness and shared understanding across organisational levels.

As shown, inspirational motivation is traditionally understood as the ability to articulate a compelling vision and convey optimism. However, it can also be interpreted as a process of collective meaning-making. Sensemaking and sense-giving perspectives (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995) suggest that leaders may shape shared interpretations and enable coordinated action under conditions of uncertainty. Through inspiring communication, leaders may act as meaning makers by constructing narratives that provide coherence and orientation. In the context of digital transformation in municipal services organisations, inspirational motivation can therefore be understood not only as a behavioural dimension of leadership, but also as a mechanism that connects values, emotions and collective action.

At the same time, meaning-making appears to extend beyond communication alone. Perspectives on rhetoric, public narrative and institutional work suggest that leaders may actively construct, communicate and stabilise meaning while legitimising new practices and questioning existing institutional logics (Ganz, 2010; Green, 2004; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This seems particularly relevant in municipal services organisations, where digital transformation challenges how public value is understood and delivered.

Taken together, successful transformation in municipal services organisations appears to depend on leadership that integrates technological, organisational, institutional and human dimensions. The connection between these areas lies in the creation of shared meaning: leadership may translate institutional values into digital visions that inspire, mobilise and legitimise. At the same time, leadership does not seem to be adequately captured by purely individualised conceptions, but rather appears to emerge as a distributed, relational and context-dependent process. This perspective forms the conceptual basis of this study and prefigures the development of a more reflective and institutionally embedded understanding of inspirational motivation. To further structure the analytical framework of this study, Table 7 below summarises how leadership and DT can be examined at the micro, meso and macro levels, and how inspirational motivation can serve as a mechanism for creating meaning across these levels:

Level	Focus	Dynamics in MSOs	Implications for leadership	Relevance
Micro-Level (Individual)	Leader-follower interaction, cognition, motivation, and behaviour	Individual sensemaking of change; ambivalence between job security and innovation demands; perception of DT as threat or opportunity	Leaders need to translate digital change into personally meaningful narratives; strengthen (psychological) safety and optimism through vision communication	IM provides emotional and motivational anchoring; helps employees link DT with personal purpose and contribution to the common good
Meso-Level (Organisational)	Organisational structures, culture, routines and communication structures	Bureaucratic structures, high formalisation, slow adaptation cycles; competing logics between reliability and innovation	Leadership must bridge institutional inertia and the need for adaptive capacity; create shared meaning around DT as part of organisational mission	IM enables articulation of a coherent vision that aligns technological change with organisational purpose and stability
Macro-Level (Institutional/ societal)	Institutional logics, governance frameworks, societal expectations	Legal mandates, regulatory accountability, public scrutiny; citizens take services for granted yet expect flawless performance	Leadership operates as institutional work - legitimising change, translating policy narratives into organisational sense	IM supports legitimacy-building by framing DT as contribution to public value and democratic resilience rather than as purely technological modernisation

Table 7: Analytical levels for leadership in MSOs
Source: Own illustration.

Taken together, these levels illustrate that leadership in municipal services organisations operates simultaneously at individual, organisational and institutional levels. Inspirational motivation can be understood as a cross-level mechanism linking personal meaning (micro), organisational coherence (meso) and public legitimacy (macro), thereby contributing to collectively significant transformation. From this perspective, the notion of the heroic individual leader appears increasingly inadequate, while leadership instead seems to emerge as distributed, relational and grounded in shared responsibility and narrative construction.

The literature review suggests that the interplay among digital transformation, inspirational motivation and public sector leadership remains under-researched, particularly in the context of municipal services organisations in Germany. While inspirational motivation provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding how leadership may create orientation, purpose and meaning under conditions of uncertainty, its traditional leader-centred conceptualisation appears insufficient to capture the complexity of leadership in digitally transforming municipal services organisations. Before the findings are presented, Chapter 3 describes in detail the research design, methodological approach, and underlying research attitude, anchored in an interpretative understanding of leadership within social systems.

3. Research Paradigm, Methodology and Design

This chapter outlines the research paradigm, methodology, and design underpinning this study. Building on the theoretical foundations presented in the previous chapter, it introduces the interpretivist research philosophy and justifies the ontological, epistemological, and axiological positioning adopted. It then explains the chosen research approach and strategy, including the rationale for a qualitative, case study-based design, and clarifies the primarily inductive and theory-informed approach, complemented by an abductive logic guiding the analytical process.

Subsequently, the chapter details the data collection and analysis procedures, including the use of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). It further addresses issues of quality, ethics, and reflexivity, drawing on established frameworks of trustworthiness and qualitative research quality. In doing so, the chapter makes transparent how methodological choices are aligned with the research objectives and philosophical positioning. It concludes with a critical reflection on the methodological decisions made and their associated limitations, thereby ensuring transparency and methodological rigour.

3.1. Overview

Based on the research onion by Saunders et al. (2019), the following sub-chapter first provides an overview of the various levels of research methodology, which also essentially reflects the structure used in this chapter.

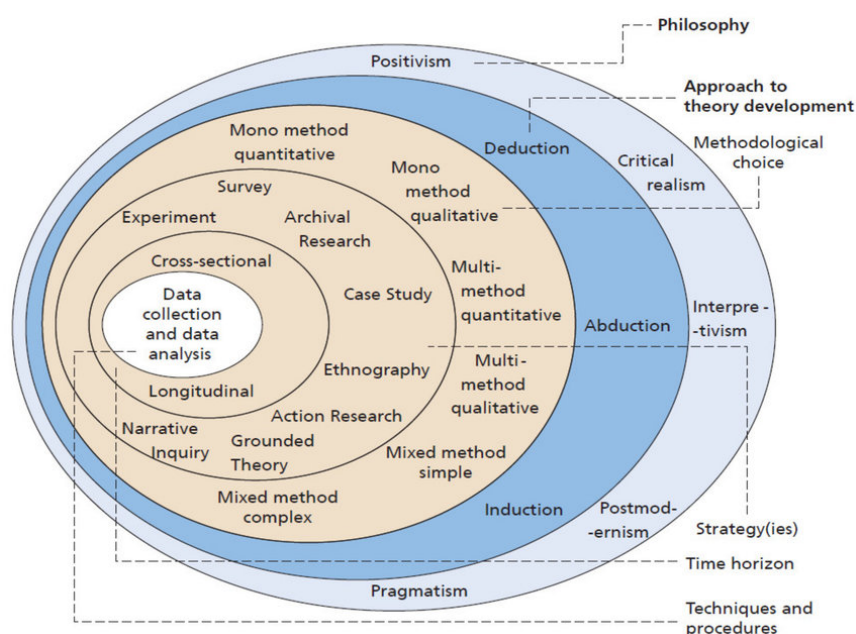


Figure 8: Research onion
Source: Saunders et al. (2019).

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Starting with the outermost shell of the research onion in Figure 8, Saunders et al. (2019) identify the five essential research paradigms (positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism) that are central to research work.

The authors make it clear that a decision in favour of a paradigm is always shaped by both the researcher's individual convictions and the type of research (Saunders et al., 2019). The interpretivist research philosophy was chosen for this thesis because – unlike positivism, for example – it aims to research social contexts characterised by high complexity (Saunders et al., 2019), as will be shown and explained in detail in the following section.

The next shell includes the three main research approaches in the analysis: deduction, induction and abduction. The key question here is whether something should be developed from the field (inductive), a theory tested (deductive) or a combination of both approaches (abductive) (Saunders et al., 2019). The aim of this research was to develop a new perspective on research in the field, leading to a (new or expanded) theory or perspective on inspirational motivation as part of

transformational leadership in municipal services organisations. In this study, a primarily inductive and theory-informed approach was adopted, while the analytic process followed an abductive logic characterised by iterative movement between data and relevant theory.

According to this logic, the definition of an approach is followed by the definition of the research strategy and the methodological choice, which must enable the objectives of the research project described above to be achieved. Here, as will be shown, a distinction can be made between a number-oriented, measurable (quantitative) focus, a non-numerical, qualitative focus, or a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first focus is primarily on obtaining numerical data, for example via (standardised) questionnaires, for the purpose of testing predefined hypotheses, evaluating them statistically, and thus arriving at generalisable statements. A qualitative approach is used to generate data from, e.g., experts via interviews, which (in this case) result in transcribed interviews and enable new and in-depth insights and findings about the subject of the research through subsequent analysis. Another possibility is to combine these data (qualitative and quantitative) within a multi-method research framework. The research presented here is based on a qualitative case study approach, implemented through semi-structured interviews, enabling the researcher to generate insights that offer new perspectives on IM in leadership practice in the chosen context, as shown below. A case study is suitable for exploring and describing (everyday) phenomena such as leadership behaviour (Aberdeen, 2013). As detailed in the following sections, this study adopted an interpretivist philosophy and a critically reflective, primarily inductive approach, employing qualitative methods within a case study design. RTA was used as the analytical method to address the research questions outlined above.

3.2. Rationale for the Research Paradigm

There is a multitude of perspectives and approaches to research in the context of scientific work, in which the aim should always be to select a paradigm for the planned research project that appears most suitable for this purpose and to justify this accordingly (Saunders et al., 2019). However, as Braun and Clarke (2021) describe, even experienced scientists do not always succeed in making this clear determination. Therefore, a continuous process of critically questioning and justifying the background against which decisions were made is required, especially because a selection is always associated with certain basic assumptions of the researcher, which in turn provide information about underlying research paradigms, from which

certain (directional) decisions about design and methods for achieving the research objectives then follow (Braun & Clarke, 2006a).

It is therefore fundamental to engage intensively with various research paradigms, which can be understood as a kind of 'lens' that – influenced by certain beliefs and worldviews of the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) – shapes or filters the researcher's view and thereby also guides (basic) understanding in both ontological and epistemological terms (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this context, ontology concerns what we believe fundamentally exists. Epistemological questions, on the other hand, are concerned with how we know what we know and who can be a knower (Berryman, 2019). Ontology and epistemology thus also always provide information about the researcher's worldview, namely what they consider the nature of truth to be and how they live in this world. In the first step, three different perspectives are presented, followed by a justification of the researcher's or research's positioning. Niglas (2010) describes how research philosophies – particularly in the business and management context – can be mapped onto a two-pole continuum, with a subjectivist pole or extreme on the one side and an objectivist pole on the other. Following this perspective, a positioning on this continuum is then associated with certain assumptions in relation to ontological and epistemological questions. Table 8 provides an overview of the questions and assumptions associated with the respective maximum expression (objectivism vs. subjectivism), supplemented by the aspect of axiology, which addresses the additional question of the role of and dealing with values of the researcher in the context of research.

The 'Ologies'	Key Question	Objectivism	Subjectivism
Ontology	What is the nature of reality?	- Reality is real, external and independent of human perception - One single, objective reality - Stable, structured, ordered	- Reality is socially constructed - Multiple, context-dependent realities - Dynamic, negotiated, evolving
Epistemology	- How can we know what we know?• What counts as acceptable knowledge? - What constitutes good data? - What kinds of knowledge contributions can be made?	- Knowledge derives from assumptions of natural science - Facts, numbers, observable phenomena - Emphasis on measurement, prediction, generalisation	- Knowledge derives from interpretive assumptions of arts/social sciences - Meanings, experiences, written/spoken/visual accounts - Contextual, situated, specific insights rather than universal claims
Axiology	- What is the role of values in research? - How should we deal with the values of participants? - How do researchers' own values shape interpretation?	- Value-free stance - Researcher neutrality and detachment	- Value-bound stance - Reflexive integration of researcher and participant values - Transparency about how values guide interpretation

Table 8: The Ologies
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In this research, the focus in the first step (see research objective one) was on exploring different perspectives on leadership in municipal services organisations in the age of digital transformation. These different (multiple) subjective realities can be understood as ‘socially created’, so that a subjectivist ontology seemed appropriate based on this overview. From an epistemological point of view, this research was less concerned with neutral, objective aspects than with individuals and contexts with their specific characteristics, so an epistemology characterised by subjectivism was appropriate. With regard to axiology, the researcher's values play a role in this research, as the researcher is also understood as part of the results presented here. These influences had an integral effect and therefore had to be constantly reflected upon.

Another possibility is offered by Braun and Clarke (2021b) regarding ontological perspectives, where they contrast relativism with realism and position so-called critical realism between the two poles on a continuum (Figure 9). Realism is understood here as a perspective that assumes a pre-social reality that can be made accessible through research. On the other side of the continuum (relativism), reality is understood as always dependent on how we come to know and experience it. In between, Braun and Clarke (2021) situate the perspective of critical realism, which affirms the existence of a pre-social reality but also acknowledges that this is only ever partially accessible to us.

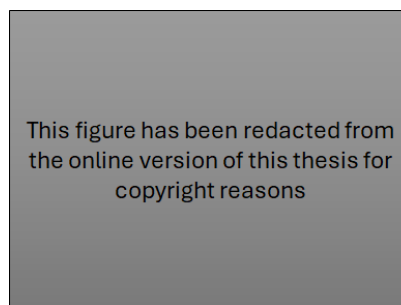


Figure 9: Ontological perspectives (1)
Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2021).

Based on the thoughts of Braun and Clarke (2021), this research could be categorised in the area between relativism and critical realism, because this work does not deny that there is a ‘world out there’, but that this or parts of it are only recognisable to us through interaction and only in part.

A model by Burrell and Morgan (2011) offers another way of approaching different perspectives as well as one's own philosophical positioning (Figure 10). The authors

differentiate between four basic paradigms and compare objectivist and subjectivist perspectives, supplementing this view with a further dimension comprising two poles: 'radical change' on the one hand and 'regulation' on the other. From the 2X2 matrix derived from this, four paradigms become clear, which in turn allow four different perspectives on the social and organisational world (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000):

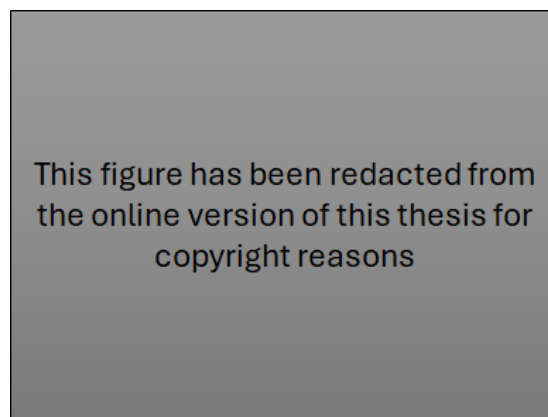


Figure 10: Ontological perspectives (2)
Source: Adapted by Burrell and Morgan (2011).

The view of the first quadrant on the right – composed of 'radical change' and 'objectivist' – describes the perspective of the so-called *radical structuralist*, whose core lies in the analysis of organisational phenomena; for example, in relation to power relations or conflicts, as well as the fundamental changes that become possible as a result. 'Radical change' primarily refers to the adoption of a critical perspective on organisational life (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000) and focuses in particular on political levels and the consequences of interactions in the respective context (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008). From this perspective, the focus is less on individuals and more on structural relationships within a given context (e.g., a company) (Burrell & Morgan, 2011). According to Saunders et al. (2019), this paradigm is often based on a critical realist philosophy.

According to Saunders et al. (2019), the second of the two right-hand quadrants – the *functionalist* paradigm (objectivist and regulation) – includes most research from the context of business and management. This perspective, which is aimed at rational explanations, should make it possible to transfer findings to other contexts due to their generalisability, similar to scientific findings (Burrell & Morgan, 2011). Research conducted based on this paradigm is usually underpinned by a positivist

research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2019). However, this research should not be concerned with generalisable or purely rational, scientific findings, nor with an examination of organisational life. This research focused on the individual, i.e., on subjective perspectives from which findings about patterns/themes were to be developed, so that these two perspectives – radical structuralist and functionalist – did not appear appropriate for this work.

On the left-hand side, which takes up the subjective perspective, is the quadrant of the so-called *radical humanist* (subjectivist-radical change) and the interpretive paradigm (subjectivist-regulation) in the logic of Burrell and Morgan (2011). Radical humanists attempt to explore reality by subjectively analysing it to get closer to the source of social reality and then (better) understand this reality (Burrell & Morgan, 2011). Here, again, in line with the characteristics of radical change, aspects of power and politics or domination and oppression are in the foreground, but – following a subjectivist ontology – characterised by a perspective that emphasises subjectivity and is primarily aimed at social (re)construction (Saunders et al., 2019).

Burrell and Morgan (2011) list the *interpretive* paradigm as a fourth quadrant, which aims to explore how we – as humans – make sense of the world around us. According to Saunders et al. (2019), it is therefore primarily about understanding the meanings associated with organisational life and exploring not just one reality but multiple realities and thus different subjectivities. In contrast to the paradigm of critical change, which emphasises change more strongly, this is primarily about a perspective of understanding and explanation. Concerning this research and the associated research question, the initial aim was to explore different subjective perspectives in order to achieve an (approximate) understanding and explanation of these perspectives in the first step. Only in the second step – building on this understanding and this explanation – should a way be developed to reflect on the insights gained for the development of IM in leadership, so that the focus of this work within this model was placed on the 'interpretive' quadrant.

To summarise, this work adopts a subjectivist perspective, assuming that reality arises from perceptions and the resulting actions of social actors (Saunders et al., 2019). The philosophy of interpretivism was therefore suitable because roles, meanings, attributions, etc., could be explored, and interpretivism is particularly concerned with researching meanings and role attributions created by people (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019). Only in this way could new,

richer understandings and interpretations of the social world and contexts become possible for this research, because the individual lifeworld (“Lebenswelt”) (Schütz & Luckmann, 2017) was regarded as an unquestioned reality that was previously perhaps taken for granted and assumed to be recognised or understood by everyone in the same way (Berger et al., 2003).

Acceptable knowledge, in the sense of an epistemological view, was understood in the context of this research as knowledge arising from the perceptions and interpretations of experts, in this case top managers, rather than from causal explanations or exclusively objectively ascertainable facts. From an axiological point of view, the reflexive researcher in this thesis was seen as part of the research, contributing to the generation of (new) knowledge through interpretations that can hardly – or not at all – be made in a value-free and neutral manner.

In addition, based on the above explanations, a positioning in the area of a rather relativistically oriented ontology with a subjectivistically influenced epistemological perspective was adopted, because the assumption was made that (social) realities and knowledge are only constructed in interaction. At the same time, it was not denied that there could be an objective world, which, however, is either not accessible or only partially accessible (critical realism) and which only becomes ‘real’ through construction, interaction and interpretation. As a critical researcher, a position was taken that transformation should be promoted in the sense of further development, whereby the position here is characterised by a view of subjectivity as embedded in society and inseparably influenced by cultural or contextual forces (Levitt, 2021). Furthermore, this view is based on the constructivist realisation that a research process – from the beginning to the presentation of the results – is inevitably influenced by the perspectives of the researcher (Teo, 2015).

A justification for a research paradigm or for an ontological, epistemological and axiological positioning – as well as the related aspects presented in this sub-chapter – is always associated with limitations resulting from this positioning or decision. These decision-related ‘disabilities’, which – based on the nomenclature of business administration – could also be described as opportunity costs, will be critically reflected upon below and thus form the conclusion of this sub-chapter.

As the argumentation shows, a major limitation of this positioning is that the results presented here cannot be simply transferred to others or other contexts. The aim

was to gain a deeper understanding of complex phenomena within a specific context, which had the consequence that, as will be shown later, traditional criteria such as validity and reliability are not directly transferable to interpretivist research. Instead, trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) and the quality principles were applied to ensure methodological transparency and rigour (Cohen et al., 2007). The chosen subjectivist perspective – which is reflected in the interpretivism chosen here – also means that from an axiological perspective, this work was also influenced or distorted by the researcher's ways of thinking, beliefs, values or even cultural 'glasses' (Mack, 2010). Mack (2010) also makes it clear that this perspective or positioning cannot adequately account for key characteristics of our society, such as power structures.

However, these limitations are inherent to the choice made here, because a choice in favour of something is always associated with a decision against something. This research endeavours to counter these limitations as explicitly as possible using a reflexive approach. The aim was to make reflections explicit as continuously as possible and to maintain an 'alert awareness' throughout the entire research process as well as a sensitivity to the fact that – for example – generalisations are not possible or only possible to a limited extent, and that the results always (can) have as much to do with the researcher and their view of the world as with the research object itself.

After presenting the ontological, epistemological and axiological classification of this research as well as a critical reflection of the associated limitations, the aim was to work out possible suitable methodological approaches, to evaluate these against the background of the research question and justify the approach chosen for this research, as will be shown below.

3.3. Justification of the Theoretical Approach

In order to validly justify the chosen path to the research results, it is necessary to consider suitable approaches for developing and/or expanding a theory in terms of an inductive, deductive or abductive approach. If research aims to develop a (general) theory from the data obtained, Saunders et al. (2019) state that an inductive approach is particularly suitable for this purpose, as it is not primarily aimed at generalisability, but rather takes the individual case as its starting point. A deductive approach, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with testing hypotheses derived from existing theories and falsifying or verifying them; for example, by means of experiments. Verification via experiments, for example (Eisend & Kuß, 2016), was

not considered appropriate, as this work – based on findings on the roles and meanings of IM in the selected context in the age of DT – was intended to develop a framework that contributes to the effective design of challenges and takes into account the individuality of people (and contexts) by drawing on the subjective data obtained in the field (Helfferich, 2013).

It should be noted here that the choice of the inductive approach is also associated with certain limitations. One of the main arguments of an inductive approach was recognised early on in that it is not suitable for ‘proof’ (Raths, 1967). Furthermore, it was recognised that the research, or the results from it, must stand up to a ‘trustworthiness assessment’ (Thomas, 2006). These and other aspects, such as the fact that the findings developed in this research are only partially detached from the researcher’s prior knowledge but are also connected to and consequently influenced by it, will be subjected to further critical examination in Sub-Chapter 3.10.

3.4. Justification for the Research Methodology

The research paradigm of interpretivism and the primarily inductive approach chosen for this thesis now had to be followed by a selection of methods, which, on the one hand, determines how the research should be conducted and, on the other hand takes into account both the theoretical and the philosophical assumptions presented (Saunders et al., 2019).

A basic distinction can be made between quantitative methods – which tend to be used in the context of hypothesis testing – and qualitative methods, which focus on understanding individual human experience (Silverman, 2000) and are regularly used in the development of new theories and ideas (Eisend & Kuß, 2016). Although a clear division into qualitative research methods and quantitative research methods is not always clearly possible and mixed forms also exist (Creswell, 2007), this schematic differentiation made it possible to weigh up and – above all – decide which research methodology seems most suitable for this research.

One starting point could now have been to approach the research project from an objectivist perspective and to view the research through the lens of the philosophy of positivism, as Vogel et al. (2016) have done, examining leadership and the factors influencing leadership behaviour in the public sector in Germany on the basis of a descriptive analysis. Moreover, Szebel (2015) focused on employees’ change competencies in a public organisation (not across companies) and adopted a

deductive, mono-methodological quantitative approach. This deductive approach to theory development, combined with the methodological choice of mono/multi-method/quantitative, allows data to be collected and analysed using questionnaires and statistical procedures (Bryman & Cramer, 2011). For this study, this would have had the advantage that the results developed from it could have had a certain degree of generalisability due to the applicable quality criteria of objectivity, validity, reliability and that this study could also have been comparable with other quantitative studies on this topic (Saunders et al., 2019). In addition, it would theoretically have been possible to analyse a larger sample so that – with a suitable population – representative research results could also have been achieved.

However, this perspective is generally only suitable to a limited extent for understanding the meanings that leaders ascribe to certain events in their leadership lives (Klenke, 2016). In particular, the high degree of standardisation would have meant that survey flexibility would have been lost or practically excluded, as the questions in such a research setting are always fixed a priori, and it would therefore no longer have been possible to respond to interview partners (IP) on an individual and situational basis. In addition, a strong reduction in complex questions would have meant that only limited space could be given to the specificity of the individual perspectives. However, the present research aimed to precisely examine the individual, complex meanings and roles of IM in leadership in relation to the phenomenon of digital transformation in municipal services organisations from the perspective of top management and to make the findings usable.

From an ontological perspective, therefore, this work was not about objective and objectifiable as well as universally valid and generalisable findings that should apply to all companies and individuals (Creswell, 2007), but about subjective, rich, complex perspectives of top managers as experts in this context, which were to be discovered through exploration of individual realities (Saunders et al., 2019). Attributions of meaning to the topic of IM in leadership are just as subjective as the understanding of the phenomenon of digital transformation in the context of municipal services organisations.

Collecting numerical data as part of quantitative research therefore did not seem suitable for this project, as it was about participants' views, perceptions, etc., which needed to be understood in depth. The specific nature of the sample of top managers in the context of municipal services organisations, which was already considered to

be relatively small in advance, also makes it clear that a qualitative approach was more appropriate. Ultimately, the aim of this research was to determine what IM could look like from a top management perspective to shape an effective digital transformation in municipal services organisations in Germany. Indeed, attributions of meanings, opinions, etc., play a significant, if not decisive, role in this, so the decision in favour of a qualitative approach was justified (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The limitations associated with this choice, such as the lack of generalisability of the results or representativeness – not least due to the (small) sample – are inherent to this research methodology, as it is first and foremost an approach that discovers the individual case rather than an explanatory approach (Hedderich & Loer, 2003). This does not mean, for example, that the findings that can be derived from this and any explanations should not satisfy intersubjective comprehensibility, as will be explained in more detail in a later section on quality criteria. However, here again, there are sometimes controversial views on the application – for example, against the background of the research method chosen – as will be critically reflected in the following sections.

First, the following explains which research strategy appears suitable for this research, before looking at various qualitative research approaches and methods that can be used to identify patterns and themes in the data. This is followed by an introduction to Thematic Analysis (TA) and the justification for the selection of the method chosen for this research work, Reflexive TA (RTA), which is described in more detail in terms of its special features and its suitability for this research work.

3.5. Research Strategies

The aim of this research was not – as described – to work out causal relationships between variables (as is done in explanatory studies, for example) or to carry out assessments of existing business strategies (via an evaluative study). This study pursued an exploratory approach to the research question outlined above. Exploratory studies usually approach a research question – for example, in the context of expert interviews – using open questions in a flexible and open-ended manner and allow or require the direction to be changed during the research in the sense of the intended research results if new data leads to new findings (Saunders et al., 2019).

Concerning the research strategy, which establishes the link between the chosen philosophy on the one hand and the methods for data collection and analysis on the other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), both experiments and surveys can be assigned to a primarily quantitative research design based on a deductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019), making these strategies less suitable for this work. For those strategies that can be associated primarily with qualitative research (narrative inquiry, ethnography, action research, grounded theory) or with both qualitative and quantitative research (case study and archival/documentary research), a decision had to be made on the most suitable research strategy for this research.

According to Creswell (2007), narrative research is essentially about capturing an individual's life experiences in the form of a 'story' to organise these narratives and embed them in a meaningful framework. However, this focus on individual 'life stories' is not suitable against the background of the research question presented. The so-called ethnographic approach also appeared less suitable for this research project, as according to Creswell (2007) – based on anthropologically and sociologically oriented research – it examines which behavioural patterns, languages, actions, etc., exist within a cultural group in its natural and intact environment, and this takes place over a longer period.

When considering action research strategies, it became clear that these were only suitable to a limited extent, as they focus in particular on joint participation and collaboration within a chosen context and the researcher acts as a kind of facilitator of the process with several participants to enable organisational learning (in and during practice) to improve a situation (Saunders et al., 2019). However, since several organisations and top managers from different organisations were part of the research, this strategy did not seem suitable either. An archival/documentary research strategy also seemed unsuitable, as findings were to be developed in contact with the social world in the field. However, it had to be taken into account that one aspect of this research involved engaging with relevant literature in advance (as well as during and after the data collection) – in the sense of informed research – so that documentary research can be seen as a partial aspect, but not as the primary strategy of this research (Saunders et al., 2019).

For the remaining research strategies considered here (grounded theory and case studies), it did not initially appear possible to weigh up and decide so clearly, not least because grounded theory can be understood both as the grounded theory (GT)

strategy and the grounded theory methodology (GTM). In the context of this research, GT was considered more closely as a methodology for data collection and analysis, as will be shown below, which is why a closer examination of the remaining strategy 'case studies' was necessary first.

Case studies can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed in content. Within the interpretivist perspective, however, case studies primarily contribute to understanding individual and shared social meanings from different perspectives to develop a theory (Stake, 1995). Based on this insight, case studies appeared to be a suitable research strategy, and this was also the case because this research was to include the perspectives of various managers from different municipal services organisations. It also became clear that a case study strategy based on (qualitative) interviews, particularly those to be conducted within a shorter time frame, was suitable for this research as a cross-sectional study (Saunders et al., 2019). The unit of analysis in this research was therefore limited to the individual leadership perspectives of top managers from various municipal services organisations, which were examined as a collective case in order to explore common patterns of meaning. The limitation that the selection reflects only the behaviour or perspective(s) of one person, group, or organisation must therefore always be taken into account, with the result that the behaviour or perspective of the units examined in this study may or may not reflect that of a similar unit. For this reason, causal conclusions based on this study's findings are not possible, as alternative explanations cannot be ruled out (Simon & Goes, 2012).

3.6. Qualitative Research Methodologies

In the discussion of the research and analysis methods potentially suitable for this research, the first step was to take a closer look at two options in particular: GT and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). According to Bryman and Bell (2015), phenomenology in general can be understood as a philosophy that explores how people make sense of their environment; it is particularly concerned with structures of consciousness and how these are reflected in the lives of individuals from the 'first-person perspective' (Gallagher, 2012). IPA, in particular, aims to understand individual everyday experiences to approach phenomena in this way (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). However, the (narrow) focus applied here on both individual characteristics (ideographic perspective) and the respective patterns of meaning of the research participants was also not suitable against the background of a strongly interpretative approach, not least because both a larger sample was

sought and – in particular – a concentration on potential patterns/themes was to take centre stage. Although this research was certainly about individual experiences, the main objective was not to exclusively attribute or classify meaning, but to identify concrete ways in which IM in the age of DT can be used in the selected context to support effective shaping of DT from the perspective of top management.

GT would have made it possible to carry out systematic research in the sense of the project, as it allows research data to be systematically analysed and yields plausible, and – above all – useful findings about a ‘core phenomenon’ (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Although there is no ‘one’ GT or GTM (Charmaz, 2006), it is essentially about working out social processes within a context and presenting and categorising them, so that a (comprehensive) theory could have resulted.

Initially, GT therefore seemed suitable for this research; however, a closer examination – particularly in comparison with thematic analysis (TA) – led to a decision against GT and in favour of (R)TA. This decision-making process is outlined and reflected on below, based on an extract from a cluster offered by Braun and Clarke (2021):

Theory Development vs. Explanatory Patterns

The aim of GT(M) is to develop a well-founded theory, whereas (R)TA primarily aims to work out patterns in data, to describe and interpret them, and (only) if necessary to provide a theoretically sound explanation for them, which was understood as a core idea of this research.

Social Processes

GT tends to focus on research questions that investigate social processes; however, in the context of this research, the primary aim was not to research social processes, as can be deduced from the central research question, but rather generate both theoretically and – in particular – practically relevant findings that are as little abstract as possible, but rather concrete findings that provide answers to the research question.

Time Approach

Although (R)TA cannot be described as ‘fast’ in application, according to Braun and Clarke (2021), this approach makes it easier to work to a fixed, and possibly tighter,

schedule than would have been the case with GT, as was the case in this research work.

Sample Size

In its approach and basic understanding, the GT is based on a rather large and above all heterogeneous sample and above all on theoretical sampling (Strauss et al., 1996), whereas the (R)TA is also suitable for relatively small and/or more homogeneous samples and is also not aimed at theoretical sampling. The research is focused on the generation of data, which should be obtained from (semi-structured) interviews with executives from top management within the selected context, as will be shown below. As the number of IPs was already considered to be relatively small due to the choice of focus group before the start of the research and the willingness to be interviewed at these hierarchical levels was considered to be lower, the choice of (R)TA appeared to be more suitable than GT.

Complexity

Finally, the fact that (R)TA was able to offer a clearer path for the research journey due to its – according to Braun and Clarke (2021a) – lower complexity compared to the GT should also be taken into account at an early stage, so that the researcher could also meet the requirements of the research setting within the framework of a DBA.

Although GT(M) was not chosen for this study, the results of this study are naturally also 'grounded in the data', albeit without using the key procedures of GT(M) (theoretical sampling, constant comparison, saturation, memoing (Levitt, 2021)), but rather the (R)TA approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021).

3.7. Quality Criteria

Mayring (2015) considers quality criteria to be just as important for qualitative research as for quantitative research. Nonetheless, the quality criteria in the context of qualitative research are controversial, not least because researchers' positions can differ greatly across research paradigms, as shown above. This can also raise the question of whether the same criteria can (or should) apply to quantitative and qualitative research, and what advantages and disadvantages are associated with each perspective.

If an attempt is made to transfer the quality criteria considered essential in quantitative research – validity, reliability, and objectivity – to qualitative research without reflecting on this critically, this could result in the overriding of essential (basic) principles of qualitative research (Zepke, 2016). Using the example of objectivity in quantitative research, an unfiltered application in qualitative research would mean that an essential characteristic of qualitative research would be disregarded: the significance of the subject and its reality in its context, which – for Helfferich (2013) – is an essential characteristic of qualitative data. As described, qualitative research is not about identical reproducibility, but about contextuality, and the (not objective, but subjectively characterised) interpretation itself is already part of the scientific work process (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2012).

Apart from the philosophical positions, it remains a concern of qualitative research to place the quality of qualitative data on a solid foundation. Thus, terms such as validity and reliability are also used by some researchers in a qualitative research context, albeit in an adapted form. For example, reliability in qualitative research focuses on the consistency of the results, while validity focuses on the appropriateness of the results (Mohajan, 2017). To separate the different (philosophical) positions, alternative terms are often used; for example, the term 'trustworthiness of the results' is used to avoid being too close to quantitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

This does not mean that qualitative research dispenses with more specific quality criteria; rather, it means that research quality criteria should take into account the appropriateness of the (research) philosophical position. In this context, Helfferich (2011) emphasises methodological control in particular, which should relate to openness, reflexivity, and the intersubjective comprehensibility of both the work and the results in qualitative research. Braun and Clarke (2021) discuss whether the quality criteria of quantitative research, such as validity (construct validity, internal validity, external validity and in some cases ecological validity) generalisability and transferability, can be meaningfully transferred to qualitative research. To summarise, the authors make it clear that qualitative research cannot do without quality criteria, but that these are particularly dependent on the theoretical position and epistemological assumptions. For example, they critically reflect that member checking could be considered a quality criterion in the context of qualitative research, but that its suitability also depends on the ontological perspective. Member checking, for example, involves having the (data) analysis cross-checked and reflected on by interview partners to achieve the most accurate reproduction possible. From the

author's perspective, however, this approach can be categorised as a realist one, in which the aim is to bring the truth of participants to light through the chosen approach. However, this one truth – which could also be interpreted as an objectivist claim or epistemological claim to truth and knowledge – was not the basis for the quality criteria used in this research, as has become clear from the argumentation in the previous sections.

The discussion about quality standards for qualitative research is still wide-ranging and unfinished, and at the time this thesis was written, there was no uniform (international) standard for defining quality criteria for qualitative research. However, the following list based on Helfferich (2011) provides an overview of the criteria relevant for qualitative research, which were also used as the foundation for this research:

- Procedural documentation to create intersubjective comprehensibility (for example, by explaining the preliminary understanding, explaining the evaluation steps, explaining the survey context (settings), explaining the transcription rules).
- Argumentative interpretation validation and interpretation of contradictions in the data based on theoretical concepts (by uncovering the respective interpretation, which must be coherent (conclusive), explicit search for and verification of alternative interpretations).
- Communicative validation by discussing results with experts.

The following recommendations for quality principles included in this work are from Yardley (2017) and are to be understood as a supplement to Helfferich's recommendations:

- Sensitivity to context (e.g. in terms of sensitivity to participants, context, theoretical and empirical literature, etc.).
- Commitment and rigour (e.g. during data collection, analysis, etc.).
- Transparency and coherence (e.g. through a clear and powerful as well as convincing interpretation of the data, the fit of research question, the theoretical framework and the methods applied, etc.).
- Impact and importance (practical usefulness, theoretical impact and/or socio-cultural impact).

In addition to these more general aspects, the checklist offered by Braun and Clarke (2006b) – which also addresses the topic of quality criteria for TA – was used for this

research, and the data analysis method used. Figure 11 also presents the basic procedure of TA and concludes the considerations on quality criteria for qualitative research for this research work.

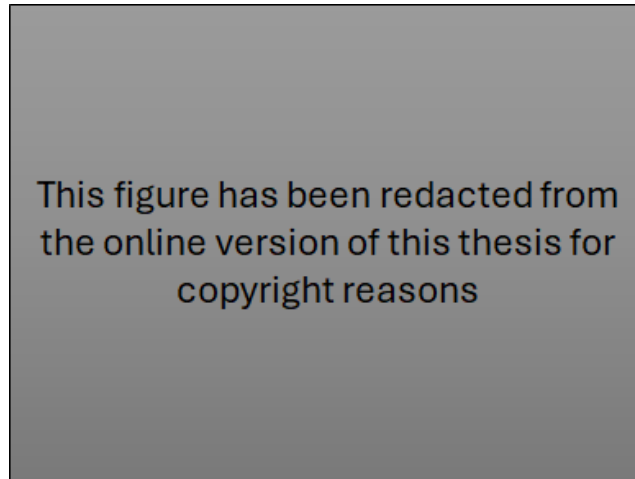


Figure 11: Fifteen-point checklist for good thematic analysis
Source: Braun & Clarke (2006).

3.8. Qualitative Interviews

In qualitative research, interviews are a central method, although not the only one. It was therefore first necessary to determine how the data to be analysed later should be obtained. Observations, interviews, documents and audio/visual material represent different forms of qualitative data collection (Creswell, 2007).

As part of the research question and research objectives presented, the first step was to obtain data to understand the phenomenon of digital transformation in the context of municipal services organisations from the perspective of top management. This was followed by an investigation of the meanings and roles of IM. Based on the objectives chosen for this research, the decision was made to use qualitative interviews as a suitable method, as the researcher believed this was the best way to explore the IPs' perspectives on the individual questions.

Although qualitative interviews generally require a comparatively high investment of time and money compared to other methods – due to acquisition, coordination, travel and transcription costs, among other things – and only a relatively small number of participants can be included (compared to surveys, for example), it was important to prioritise the research objective and accept this 'effort'.

The researcher recognised the inherent limitations of the study design, including the small sample size, the purposive recruitment of interview partners personally approached by the author, and the resulting lack of randomisation. Such constraints are characteristic of the interpretivist paradigm and consistent with its emphasis on depth over breadth (Alsaawi, 2014). In addition, qualitative interviews also offer many advantages. For example, possible ambiguities in the interview questions can be clarified ad hoc in direct contact, i.e., during the interviews, or it is possible (or even necessary) to respond flexibly to the respective IP. In this way, it was possible to generate new perspectives for and on the research project during the course of collecting and analysing data (Saunders et al., 2019), thereby maintaining a consistent approach to the research questions and the research objectives, or their answers (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the researcher was and is aware at all times that (individual and collective) reality(ies) could never become fully tangible and generalisable in the context of this research, but that the researcher always had to be satisfied with the 'partiality' of the findings. However, an attempt has been made to take appropriate account of the risks associated with this decision through a reflexive approach.

However, there is not only one form of interview, but a large number of different variants that can be used depending on the research interest (Helfferich, 2013). The interview used in this research will be described and justified below, as will the choice of IPs, the chosen interview process and the processing of the interview data.

3.8.1. The Semi-Structured Interview as a Data Collection Method

The multitude of interview forms can appear confusing, which is why the method chosen for this research, as proposed by Helfferich (2013), is categorised below. According to this, the partially or semi-structured interview can be considered a form of qualitative research interview. As various topics were to be dealt with within one interview in the context of this research, the guided/semi-structured interview was an adequate instrument for this work. With an overview of open questions, it was possible to work towards the research objective in a meaningful way and at least offer the opportunity to reconstruct social phenomena (Gläser & Laudel, 2010).

As a result, the guidelines were used to adhere to a range of specifications, more or less detailed and, above all, manageable. A combination of different types of questions (open or theory-driven, etc.) was also used to address the object of

research (Helfferich, 2013). Greater standardisation – for example, compared to a purely narrative interview – also offered the advantage of being able to better connect the data obtained. However, it was always important to ensure that the researcher did not choose an overly narrow focus, but rather maintained openness throughout the process (Lamnek & Krell, 2005).

According to Helfferich (2013), when creating the interview guide, it makes sense to determine which aspects should have a narrative-generating effect based on the research question. According to a principle described by her (collect, check, sort, and subsume), questions were first collected, then checked, sorted, and finally subsumed under the premises of prior knowledge and openness. The result was an interview guide divided into five blocks with a narrative question at the beginning of each block and subsequent in-depth, open-ended individual questions (Appendix A).

The interview for this research therefore followed a predetermined sequence of questions and topics, along with associated sub-questions, so that a higher degree of standardisation could be assumed. On the other hand, sufficient openness was left for the IP to set their own priorities during the interview. This made it possible for the IP to express individual actions, assessments, interpretations, and processing without the researcher having too much control, enabling subjective references to meaning to become clear, which – according to Witzel (2000) – would correspond to a more problem-centred interview.

Thus, the interview used in this research can be regarded as more structured on the continuum of standardisation; however, the open-ended questions also ensured that freely narrative elements characterised by openness could be taken into account. Ultimately, this allowed the IPs to set their own (thematic) priorities and thus explicate subjective contexts of meaning.

3.8.2. Interview Partners: Number

As shown, there are many differences between qualitative research and quantitative research, including the size of the sample considered necessary for research. It is important to bear in mind that qualitative research based on an inductive approach focuses on new knowledge and a deeper understanding – and, consequently, a more intensive examination of each participant and their (interview) data is central.

As a result of this perspective, the sample in qualitative research is generally comparatively smaller than in quantitative research (Mason, 2010). According to Dworkin (2012), an appropriate number of IPs is between 5 and 20, depending on the research topic and the degree (PhD, DBA, etc.). However, there are very different views on a minimum number: While Patton (2001) considers a fixed rule for sample size to be of little use, Marshall et al. (2013) point out that a sample of 15-30 IPs can be considered appropriate.

Braun and Clarke – on whose work the data analysis method chosen for this research work is based – give between ten and 20 IPs as a guide for a medium TA project as part of a UK Professional Doctorate programme in mid-2022 on their website www.thematicanalysis.net/faqs. This was also used as a guideline for this work. However, it had to be taken into account that – as already explained – both the focus group of ‘top managers’ and the selected context municipal services organisations had a limiting effect on the size of the sample.

3.8.3. Recruiting Strategy, Piloting and Interview Process

In a first attempt, a test interview was conducted with a top manager in leadership development with a background in industrial and organisational psychology, but this was not integrated into the research. On the one hand, this interview was intended to test the interview procedure, subject the structure and dynamics of the question sequence to a final critical review, and obtain feedback on the procedure and, in particular, the (perceived) attitude of the researcher. On the other hand, the devices (recorders, etc.) could also be tested in this way before going into the field.

Potential IPs were then contacted via (social) business platforms (LinkedIn, Xing) and by email (if email addresses were available on freely accessible websites) to ascertain whether they were generally interested in participating in or supporting this study.

In the course of the research, due to a small number of IPs, it was also useful to consider recommendations for further IPs from participants who had already been interviewed for the research (Appendix 3). Although the recommendation included a first and last name and – if applicable – a company name so that the contact could be established in the first place, it was also ensured here that the requirements described (GDPR, DSGVO, etc.) were complied with. For example,

the information about the possible participation of a recommended person remained exclusively with the author, and no feedback was sent to the recommending person. All references that could have allowed conclusions to be drawn (e-mails via LinkedIn, XING, mail) were deleted immediately in accordance with the specified requirements.

After receiving a response and a basic declaration of willingness, a more detailed description of the research project was sent by email (Appendix D) – together with a request for confirmation that the potential IP still agreed with the aim, content, and procedure. Only then – and after clarification of all open questions – was an appointment made for an in-person interview.

A few days before the interview, each IP received a short reminder containing the consent declaration. After this, the IP still had time to make sure that they would participate. This also ensured that all ethical and legal aspects were up to date and that the IP actually turned up for the appointment. This also reduced the risk of travelling long distances without the prospect of an interview, as the author had set himself the goal of conducting all interviews in person (not remotely).

From an ethical point of view, it had to be taken into account throughout the entire process that potential IP could have had reservations about participating. In addition to the aspects described below, such as data protection, right of withdrawal, etc., reservations may have already arisen during participant recruitment, e.g., that top managers are afraid of being tested during the interview. This 'fear' may have had to be minimised beyond the cover letter, in subsequent written and personal exchanges, to be able to interview as many open-minded participants as possible.

For this reason, in addition to the factual information provided in the cover letter etc., it was equally important that participants make any (inner) 'reservations' clear from the outset during the trust-building process to establish a relationship, so that the researcher could address and dispel them. This was done especially during the 'warm-up' before the actual interview was recorded.

In addition to the formal and factual aspects (ethical guidelines, data protection, transparency about the objectives of the research, etc., etc.), the intention and attitude of the researcher were constantly made clear in the process of

establishing the relationship, so that reservations or even fears could be minimised as part of this trust-building (interpersonal) process.

Another aspect that played a role in recruitment was that people who had decided to participate could potentially have spoken to third parties about their participation and learned that others (e.g. colleagues) were not included in this study. This meant that a narrative had to be found that was fair to both participants and those not included. For this reason, the recruitment strategy was made transparent to all (potential) participants from the outset, and it was made clear that there were certain limits to this research; for example, in terms of time or the scope of top managers to be interviewed or the timeline.

At the beginning of each interview, after an appropriate greeting and thanks for the willingness to be interviewed, the documents already sent (Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent form, Appendix D & E) were handed out in hard copy, with a request to read them again critically and to question unclear aspects directly. Only after all questions had been clarified did both the IP and the author each complete the form in duplicate, with one copy given directly to the IP and the second remaining with the author for documentation. The (further) processing of these documents is described in more detail in Sub-Chapter 3.11.

All interviews were then recorded using an iPhone secured by passwords and Faceld or the Dictaphone application. After the interviews were conducted, the IP were also asked some personal facts and notes were made in the form of a postscript (Appendix F). This additional data and the postscript were intended to help the researcher to analyse and interpret the data afterwards. This postscript proved to be an essential source of reflection in the course of the research, as will be discussed in more detail in the penultimate section. The (further) processing of this document is also described in more detail in Sub-Chapter 3.11.

3.8.4. Transcription and Language

There are a number of rules and suggestions for the transcription of interviews that provide for varying degrees of differentiation. The following transcription rules – based on Kuckartz et al. (2008) – were defined: a literary transcription was used, and incomprehensible passages were labelled, and pauses were marked with “(...)”. A more precise transcription with additional rules was initially

carried out only for the first interview, as it was transcribed by the researcher himself. This was done to familiarise the researcher with the entire process. However, as further personal transcription would have required an enormous amount of time, a transcription agency was engaged for the subsequent interviews. The transcription rules, as well as data protection and ethical aspects, were also agreed upon and formally regulated in a contract (Appendix G) and approved by the ethics committee (Appendix H). It was also determined that a higher level of detail – for example, in the form of descriptions of pause fillers, additional sounds, etc. – was not necessary, as the researcher had already listened to the interviews several times in advance and had made corresponding notes. In addition, the transcripts created were subsequently listened to or read several times in parallel with the recording, so that a corresponding picture of the interview situation was retained even after several weeks. An AI-supported transcription programme was not used, as the author's own tests showed that too many linguistic nuances were lost in the interviews or that post-editing would have taken (too) much time.

The audio files of the interviews were anonymised before they were sent to the transcription office, whereby the file names were coded accordingly so that it was not possible to assign the interviews to a specific time or place, yet the researcher was still able to make meaningful assignments (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). If names were mentioned during the interviews, the previously concluded contractual agreement ensured that these were treated in strict confidence. The transcribed data was then transferred to the MAXQDA programme on a MacBook secured by several passwords and subjected to RTA.

Both the interviews (data collection) and their evaluation/analysis were conducted in German. Due to the complexity of the data structure, working with German texts seemed more suitable to best capture the subtleties of the author's (native) language and the (German) IPs' language. Only afterwards were both the interviews and the analyses translated into English by the author, with care taken to capture possible linguistic subtleties as best as possible.

3.8.5. Reflection on the Researcher's Attitude

The quality of qualitative data depends not least on the moment at which this data is generated, namely in the interview itself (Helfferich, 2013). Authors such as Alsaawi (2014) point out that it is therefore essential to create a pleasant

atmosphere, especially for successful interviews. Patton (2001) suggests concrete rules and assistance for interviews, such as asking open, clear and simple questions or the importance of attentive listening, etc. In the context of this research, particular reference was made to a model developed by Bäckér (Etzel & Etzel, 2005) on a set of conditions in the context of interviews, as this provided the researcher with good starting points for preparing and conducting, but especially for reflecting on the interviews, as described below.

It should be noted at the outset that although this thesis does not deal with the use and reflection of management diagnostic interviews as in Bäckér (2005). However, the framework presented by Bäckér (2005) offered an opportunity to subject the interviews to critical reflection before, during, and after they were conducted, aimed not only at the interview techniques, for example, but above all at a reflection on the interviewer's attitude. This approach also seemed sensible given that the author of this research has over 15 years of experience as an interviewer in a variety of settings (e.g., qualitative interviews on cultural and leadership analyses, management diagnostic procedures, various questioning techniques from the sales sector, etc.) and is familiar with common questioning and interview techniques, including 'warm-up', rapport-building, etc. It therefore seemed sensible to focus the reflections more on the researcher's attitude (and less on individual behavioural aspects or techniques). In the following, the framework by Bäckér (2005) is presented in more detail, as a reflexive approach was adopted, for which Bäckér's model provided a good basis.

Bäckér (2005) bases his reflections on interviews on the premise that an interviewer's attitude has a decisive influence on the quality of interviews, and with this premise he extends beyond the (purely technical) mastery of questioning techniques. At the same time, he does not disregard questioning techniques or the specific course of an interview, but for him, these aspects are (only) part of an overarching whole.

Following this premise, Bäckér (2005) proposes the following six theses, which – particularly in points two and three – are reminiscent of an ontology characterised by subjectivism and an epistemology characterised by interpretivism/constructivism:

- The quality of an interview results from the totality of a) a reflected interview concept, b) an appropriate structure, c) the mastery of professional interview techniques and d) the personal skills of the interviewer.
- An interview should always be seen as a joint endeavour between the interviewer and the IP.
- The interview involves working on and in subjectivity.
- Each interview has a unique “shape” (Gestalt).
- Design and participation are central dimensions of the interview.
- The art of the interview also involves listening.

Based on these theses, Bäckér (2005) presents a framework with six cornerstones (Figure 12) that can serve as a guide for designing, conducting, and reflecting on an interview. These aspects – described by Bäckér (2005) as conditions – were used in the context of this research both for the preparation of the interviews ex ante, as well as during the interviews and for reflection ex post (Appendix F).

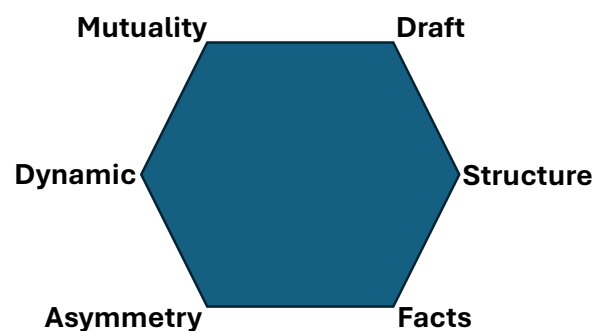


Figure 12: Framework for interview reflection
Source: Adapted from Bäckér (2005).

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Structure and Dynamic

With this first (as Bäckér calls it) pair of opposites, Bäckér (2005) emphasises that interviews should follow a comprehensible structure, as was also the case in the interview guide developed for this research to meet the requirements of a semi-structured interview.

In addition to the structure, Bäckér (2005) also offers a corresponding complementary concept with the condition of dynamics and makes it clear that a successful interview should not only follow the structure, but also the individual (relationship/conversation) dynamics. According to Bäckér (2005), this dynamic

enables people and their relationships to interact spontaneously within the interview situation.

In this way, according to Bäckér (2005), it is also possible to create space for the openness in dialogue described above, thereby taking account of the individual development potentially inherent in the interview (in contrast to stereotypical questions in the context of fully standardised interviews). According to Bäckér (2005), it is possible to allow for sensitivity, creativity and spontaneity within this (conversational) space characterised by openness, which goes beyond mere information exchange.

With reference to Bäckér's (2005) concept and its transferability to this research, achieving and maintaining a balance between structure and dynamics can be seen as a challenge, particularly during the first interviews. Particularly at the beginning (test interview), it became clear that the researcher's focus was still very much on the pre-formulated questions to 'stay within the structure' and not forget anything. However, with each subsequent interview, it became evident that the endeavour to achieve this balance was a helpful image for the appropriateness of the content/questions and the IP and the dynamics of the conversation.

By reflecting on the course of the individual interviews after they had been conducted, it was also possible to gradually achieve a more harmonious balance and work towards it in the next interview. At the same time, the author's ability to recognise the balance or focus of the respective interview gradually increased, so that countermeasures could be taken to achieve a better balance if necessary.

Following Wyss (2014), one can speak here of a reflection-in-the-interview (during) and a reflection-on-the-interview (ex post), which in turn can be open (according to own criteria) or closed (according to predefined criteria). The reflection sheet created by the author in the form of a postscript (Appendix F) particularly supported the reflection-on-the-interview as a closed reflection afterwards.

The insights gained were expanded with each postscript or after each additional interview, and these findings were then successively incorporated into the next interviews. This consciously reflexive approach (Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015) proved to be an important element for the preparation and follow-up as well as

for the conduct of the interviews, thereby increasing the quality of data collection during the interviews through (even) stronger rapport with the IP. The specific learnings that emerged from each interview are presented in the individual postscripts (Appendix I).

Asymmetry and Mutuality

According to Bäckér (2005), there is always an asymmetrical relationship between interviewer and IP, not least because the interviewer wants to find out something in order – in this research – to obtain usable information for analysing the qualitative data. In addition, the researcher has considerable control over the questions asked as well as the framework and course of the interview, so that one could speak of a certain position of power, which is considered in more detail in the chapter on ethics.

However, the IP is not ‘powerless’ either; for example, they can deliberately evade questions, fail to share essential findings and insights with the interviewer, or withhold significant data, thereby creating a changing asymmetry. To the condition of this asymmetry, Bäckér (2005) therefore adds the condition of mutuality, which emphasises that every interview is always also a reciprocal event and that an interview therefore also becomes a ‘reciprocal’ relationship event. According to Bäckér (2005), it is only out of this structure that a ‘joint work’ emerges, which – although not entirely, but nevertheless not insignificantly – is also determined by the interviewer’s ability to shape this very relationship.

In the research, these two conditions played a decisive role in obtaining the data. In various interviews, the researcher benefited from pre-existing trust in the relationship, as some IPs were already familiar with the author’s work and person, for example, through presentations at conferences or articles published. Since asymmetry tends to be an everyday occurrence for top managers – not least due to their (high) position in primarily hierarchical organisations in the context of municipal services organisations – a conversation at eye level could be achieved more quickly by attributing competence to the author by the IPs. It also became clear after some interviews that the researcher’s background, specifically the completion of a doctoral thesis, helped establish a corresponding level of equality.

The author's experience as a manager in the chosen context and the associated familiarity with the content of the context also played a role, to the extent that it was possible to speak of a kind of halo effect, which gave the author – despite no previous relationships – an advance of trust, as became clear in some (albeit unrecorded) pre- and post-interview conversations. Ultimately, these aspects increased the willingness to talk.

At the same time, in addition to the conditions described by Bäckér (2005), it was necessary to critically reflect on the appropriate distance, on the one hand, and closeness to the IPs, on the other. For example, there was a danger that – if the IP were too close – the interview could turn into a 'chat'. There was also the risk that the interview data – again via a too pronounced 'closeness' – would be too strongly coloured by the author's perspective and the possible biases in the sense of insider assumptions (McNair et al., 2008).

Here, again Bäckér's model (2005) provided support to constantly sharpen one's own awareness of conducting the respective interview in the 'lead' (asymmetry), adhering to the interview structure (structure) and shaping the interaction dynamics as constructively as possible in terms of the research objective and 'humanity' (dynamics). A further finding of the interview phase was that the clearer the potential added value of this research became to the participants, the greater their interest in the results and in cooperating to implement the findings in practice.

Facts and Draft

While Bäckér (2005) aims in particular to balance the facts of a person (biographical data, education, etc.) with a draft of the respective person in relation to a certain function/position (for example concerning the potential of the interviewee for a management function) in management diagnostic interviews or assessment-centre, these aspects could not be taken into account in this form.

However, the 'facts' aspect provided suggestions to the effect that certain facts (such as the age cohort, professional position, possible backgrounds to the professional career) also provided information on possible influences on the perspectives of the respective IPs, which further enriched the later work with the data. This factual enquiry took place afterwards, although in most cases the relevant questions had already been answered during the warm-up and

familiarisation phase. With regard to the 'draft' dimension, Bäckers (2005) framework guided the inclusion of reflective and forward-looking questions in the interview guide, focusing on how IPs perceive their current personal and professional roles within municipal services organisations and how these roles may evolve over time.

To summarise, the aspects presented by Bäckers (2005) could not be transferred across the board for this work, but based on the model and by adapting the elements, it was possible to reflect on important partial aspects from a superordinate perspective in advance and to relate the insights gained to the design and preparation of the interviews and the guidelines, the implementation and the follow-up of the interviews.

These reflections – both before and during the interviews – increased the author's sensitivity to his IPs and to the process. This was particularly significant because the interviews also revealed potential weaknesses among the IPs (or what they regarded as weaknesses), for example, regarding knowledge of DT. It was therefore necessary to address these (self-)assessments appropriately as part of the interview process. For example, it was emphasised early on – particularly during the warm-up phase – that the aim was not to test knowledge but to gain the subjective perspectives of the IPs. Here, the various dimensions emphasised by Bäckers (2005) and applied to this work played an important role in the author's (developing) attitude.

On the 'structure' side, it was made clear where necessary that informed consent is a central feature of this work and that both the process could have been cancelled at any time, and the interview data could have been withdrawn by the IP afterwards. In this way, the structural transparency combined with a positive discussion dynamic and asymmetry in favour of the IPs (anyone could have refused consent afterwards) and in connection with mutuality (in the sense of interdependence) ensured that the basis of trust was constantly strengthened not only during the initiation phase, but also during and after the interviews.

3.9. Overview of the Interviews and Interview Partners

Table 9 provides an overview of the IP, taking into account applicable (ethical, data protection, etc.) regulations:

No.	Date Interview	Management-Level	Age-Cohort	Years in Top Management Context	Experience outside context
1	Feb 2023	CEO-1	50-59	>20	<5
2	Apr 2023	CEO-1	50-59	>20	<5
3	Apr 2023	CEO-1	50-59	<10	>25
4	Jun 2023	CEO-1	40-49	<5	>10
5	Jul 2023	CEO	50-49	<10	>20
6	Jul 2023	CEO	50-59	>10	<5
7	Aug 2023	CEO-1	40-49	<5	>10
8	Aug 2023	CEO-1	50-59	>10	>10
9	Nov 2023	CEO	50-59	>10	>15
10	Dec 2023	CEO-1	40-49	<5	>10
11	May 2024	CEO-1	50-59	<7	>15
12	Jul 2024	CEO-1	50-59	>10	<10
13	Aug 2024	CEO-1	50-59	>10	<10
14	Sep 2024	CEO-1	50-59	>10	<10
15	Dec 2024	CEO	50-59	>10	>10
16	Dec 2024	CEO	50-59	<10	>15

Table 9: Overview of interview partners
Source: Own illustration.

A total of 16 interviews were conducted from February 2023 to December 2024, 11 with the CEO-1 level (division heads) and five with the first management level (CEO). The age cohort is mainly between 50 and 59 years old, which is considered normal for this context and the corresponding positions. The background experience of the IPs is largely based on a long period of employment with the organisation or within the context. Experience gained outside of municipal services organisations tends to be underrepresented. A second reflection discussion was held with three of the IPs to enrich the results from the interview phase with critical reflection from the perspective of practitioners.

This research adopted a multiple-case study design within the German municipal services organisations context. Each case was defined at the organisational level, with embedded units of analysis at the individual level (top management). The study was geographically bounded to Germany and temporally bounded by the interview period (February 2023–December 2024). The unit of analysis comprised the perspectives of top managers (CEOs and CEO-1) across the selected organisations, with interview data constituting the empirical basis for the findings presented in this thesis.

3.10. Data Analysis

Before the data analysis process based on RTA is described, an additional consideration should first be made of how findings (can) arise at all within the framework of an 'analysis'. In the previous sections, reference was made to an inductive approach, which will now be subjected to further critical reflection in the following, as the interplay of data and the researcher's (existing) prior knowledge can play a decisive role in the development of codes or themes, as will be shown below.

3.10.1. Informed Research from Different Perspectives

An analysis grounded in the data and following an inductive approach raises the question of how the analytical relationship between the literature (or the prior knowledge of the corresponding literature) and the data is organised. According to the perspective chosen for this research, empiricism or observation cannot be free of theory or prior knowledge, not least because something familiar cannot be unlearned ad hoc or even simply ignored (Schreiber, 2001).

This view of an 'informed researcher' also implies that prior knowledge or understanding should not only be recognised, but that – through constant reflexivity – perspectives and privileges as well as any prejudices that might otherwise be unconsciously incorporated into research must always be critically questioned and explicated in terms of the quality of the research. In this context, Mills et al. (2006) make it clear that the lenses through which an analysis takes place are always linked to underlying assumptions that need to be considered in research. Thornberg (2012) also points out that researchers should always be aware of their assumptions and even use existing research and theories to become more theoretically sensitive, thereby avoiding the inclusion of relevant codes in their research work or data analysis in favour of cherished (but less relevant) theories, concepts, and assumptions. It is only through this perspective on an informed researcher that the researcher can contribute to expanding, refining, or challenging and revising existing knowledge with their results (Thornberg, 2012).

However, this perspective also abandons a purely inductive approach in which the researcher oscillates between the data obtained and their own knowledge or theories, aiming to uncover patterns and explanations. In this dialectical way, always oscillating between observation and ideas (Atkinson et al., 2003), however, critical thinking can be combined with creative thinking, which in turn

can lead to new (knowledge) connections (Patton, 2001). In this way, the researcher does not remain stuck in already known theories but creates new connections in an innovative way. From this perspective, knowledge can also be gained by modifying or further processing previous knowledge, and thus the concept of abduction coined by C.S. Peirce (Burch, 2024) can be understood as an essential source of scientific creativity (Anderson, 2009).

Thornberg (2012) summarises various possibilities of different authors, such as Kelle (2005) and Charmaz (2006) and presents how informed research grounded in the data can succeed from this perspective. Indeed, even if Thornhill refers most of his explanations to an informed GT, the following points were also recognised as useful for this research, as an excerpt from Thornhill's considerations shows:

- Theoretical agnosticism as the attitude of always considering already known theories and concepts as provisional proposals that are contestable and modifiable.
- Theoretical pluralism as an action that includes the use of different or even competing perspectives.
- Theoretical playfulness as a perspective through which theory development is not understood as mechanical, but as playful.

This research can therefore be understood as primarily inductive in nature but theoretically informed in the sense that prior knowledge contributed to raising awareness but was not used to form hypotheses. The analysis of the data followed an abductive logic, alternating between data and theory to construct patterns of meaning that are empirically grounded in the data and theoretically compatible.

3.10.2. Content Analysis vs. (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data can be analysed using two main approaches: content analysis and thematic analysis, each of which is associated with distinct analytical strategies. These two superordinate strategies are briefly described below, differentiated from each other and the form of RTA chosen for this research is described in more detail.

Content Analysis

Although in earlier decades there was little differentiation between TA and content analysis, and these terms were even used interchangeably, a distinction has become clearer, especially in the last two decades (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), content analysis operates at a deeper or more concrete level of detail; for example, by analysing the frequency of certain statements, right down to counting words. The analysis of patterns in texts is primarily carried out statistically, so that one can speak of a quantitative research technique in qualitative research, which aims to work as objectively and systematically as possible in order to arrive at quantitative descriptions of (obvious) content (Saunders et al., 2019). Although codes or categories are also used here, the content analysis endeavours to take account of systematics and objectivity via quantitative evidence; for example, via evaluation and evaluation keys for categories (which in turn can be calculated via, for example, the frequency and/or accuracy of a mention), as Theil (2018) did in her study on the effectiveness of modular systems of leadership development by offsetting values from a quantitative content analysis in the sense of a hypothesis test.

In this context, Uhl (2018) notes that content analysis generally involves collecting and analysing data that originates from the surface of the text, and that this must always mean that context-intensive features, such as irony, can hardly, or not at all, be taken into account. Bortz and Döring (2006) point out that the frequency of individual elements in texts does not allow conclusions to be drawn about an author's logic, intentions, or expertise, and that the (pragmatic) context can be neglected as a result.

This is one of the reasons why Uhl (2018) recommends not only analysing content in research, but also combining qualitative and quantitative methods. However, for this research project, based on the above statements on the objectives and the ontological, epistemological, and axiological positioning, it was decided that contextuality and individuality are central, leading to a choice against a content-analytic approach and in favour of RTA.

(Reflexive) Thematic Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews over almost two years at various organisations in municipal services organisations in Germany were

evaluated using RTA. As already described above, RTA is suitable because patterns can be identified in a broad qualitative database (Braun et al., 2016) and it also offers the opportunity to combine literature analyses with interview data and – in contrast to the GT approaches described above, for example, where there should at best be little or no contact with previous theories – existing theoretical frameworks can be made usable for one's own research (Braun & Clarke, 2006a).

The six steps of TA described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2016; 2019) were applied in the context of this research to fulfil the requirements for rigour of the research – as described above – through the systematic approach described there. In this context, it was equally important to consider the revised aspects in the application of TA, which also led to the (new) term 'RTA', emphasising in particular a stronger reflection on one's own (philosophical) positioning (Braun & Clarke, 2019), as undertaken in this section.

A brief description of the six phases of RTA based on the book 'Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide' (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) concludes this section:

- 1) Familiarising with the dataset: Immersion in the data via reading and rereading, including making notes on individual items and the whole dataset.
- 2) Coding: Systematically work through the data while identifying potentially interesting segments, including creating primarily latent (and where appropriate, semantic) code labels.
- 3) Generating initial themes: Generating initial themes through compiling a cluster of codes, always constructed by the researcher along the research questions, the data, knowledge and insights.
- 4) Developing and reviewing themes: Looking for a central organising concept while checking the developed themes for sensemaking with the central question concerning whether each theme tells a compelling and convincing story about relevant patterns in the data.
- 5) Refining, defining and naming themes: Fine-tuning to ensure that every theme tells a clear story, including writing a brief synopsis for each theme.
- 6) Writing up: After starting informal writing already in phase 3, here comes the part of weaving together the narrative and compelling, coherent and

persuasive story from the data set against the background of the research questions.

The analysis therefore followed a reflexive, latent-focused form of RTA, theory-informed and primarily abductive (iterative oscillation between data and literature). Coding followed the principles of RTA, which does not treat data saturation as a theoretical or procedural endpoint. MAXQDA was employed as a practical aid for data management rather than as an autonomous analyser of meaning. The analysis was conducted in German, and all quotations in Chapter 4 and 5 were translated faithfully to preserve meaning and contextual nuance.

3.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are a fundamental consideration before, during and after the conduct of research, requiring ongoing reflection on the project, the researcher's role and the implications of the findings. This study was carried out in accordance with recognised methodological and ethical standards (Appendix H). The responsible and transparent handling of participants and data formed the foundation of the research process.

Voluntariness and Consent

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. All IPs received detailed information about the study, data use and withdrawal rights. Written consent was obtained prior to the interviews.

Professional Distance and Power Relations

As an external researcher, no organisational dependency or power imbalance existed. A clear professional distance was maintained throughout, while transparency about the researcher's background helped build trust without compromising critical independence.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured at all times. Personal data were anonymised and stored securely in line with applicable data protection regulations. Access was limited to the researcher, and data were securely deleted after completion.

Authenticity of Interview Data

The transcripts were not returned to participants for approval in order to preserve authenticity and avoid retrospective alterations that could compromise depth or meaning.

Protection of Participants and Researcher

No risks emerged for participants or the researcher. In case of uncertainty, consultation with supervisors or the university's ethics committee was planned.

In summary, the research was conducted ethically, responsibly and transparently, ensuring that participants' rights and data security were protected throughout. The following sub-chapter addresses reflexivity as a further essential dimension of this thesis.

3.12. The Role of Reflexivity in the Research Process

The topic of reflexivity is particularly important in qualitative research in general and for RTA in particular. Central to this is the critical examination of one's own role as a researcher throughout the entire research process, which begins with the development of the initial research ideas, continues with the central research question, formulating the objectives and choosing the paradigm, to the interpretation and preparation of the data, because this process is always shaped by preconceptions about the interaction between the researcher on the one hand and the context in which one operates or in which one conducts the research on the other. Through continuous examination of one's own subjectivity within the research process, it is important to be aware of as many aspects of this subjectivity as possible and ideally make them transparent. Before presenting the findings of this research in the following Chapter 4, this concluding sub-chapter will highlight how the author has taken this reflexivity into account.

During the taught phase at the beginning of the DBA, the author critically reflected on his essential assumptions, values, principles, and perspectives, for example, in relation to adopting a philosophical position. Already in this phase, it became clear that the author's personal view of leadership and transformation – for example – had fundamentally changed in the course of his academic, professional and personal development: While the researcher was still initially influenced by a strongly causal-logical understanding with a focus on stability and controllability during his business studies, this perspective has increasingly changed, particularly as a result of private

experiences and his studies in psychology. The loss of the 'illusion of control' marked a turning point in his philosophical perspective, which also changed the researcher's life, as the development towards an attitude that accepts uncertainty and unpredictability led to a profound examination of the tension between control and letting go.

This change was accompanied by intensive reflection processes (for example, in six different coaching training courses (systemic coaching, client-centred coaching, agile coaching)) and exchanges with academic mentors and culminated in a growing interest in qualitative social research, which also led to a focus on this area in his master's degree in work and organisational psychology. The research process itself was understood as an emergent, dynamic and not fully controllable process that not only provided insights into the experiences of third parties but also contributed to the researcher's self-reflection and reflexivity.

This attitude, in turn, reflects today's understanding of transformation and leadership as contingent, non-deterministic processes that unfold continuously in interaction with the environment. This view can also be applied to the researcher's concept of knowledge, which the author has increasingly come to understand as something that is only in the process of emerging, and can therefore never be considered 'final' but rather 'infinite'. This also gave rise to an epistemological approach that does not strive for objective truth but rather for subjective patterns of interpretation. The assumption that every conviction is only temporarily valid and can be understood as the next higher stage of the next misapprehension (Frei, 2013) then opens up both a feeling of uncertainty and a feeling of epistemological freedom.

Throughout the entire research process, there were many moments of disillusionment, amazement, despair and beyond. These were reflected upon in particular with the supervisor of this thesis and the resulting tasks were documented in abbreviated form in the log file of this thesis. In addition, extensive notes were made on various media (iPad, loose sheets of paper, etc.), which served as a basis for reflection. It was also considered essential to continuously observe the interaction between the researcher and the interview or reflection partner through interactive reflexivity. For example, topics such as asymmetry and dynamics were analysed based on the model presented above by Bäckér (2006). The results of these reflections can be found in the postscripts to the interviews, which analyse each interview in terms of specific characteristics. In addition, this list was expanded with

each new interview to include the latest and most important learnings and to-dos for the next interview. The following excerpt (Table 10) from the postscripts shows the results of the first reflection of Interview 1:

No. Interview	Outcome of the reflection
Interview 1	(1) Background gives IP control: Give more background information on qualitative research before starting the interview (control-experience for/ of the IP). (1) Don't take understanding for granted: Even if 'we' are sure we understand the same thing, keep asking for an explanation of the 'common understanding' between IP and me in terms of the interview data. → Do not presuppose understanding, but also explore the supposedly obvious. (1) Focus? IP!: Put down the interview guide more often and turn to the IP. Signal openness, interest and strengthen the trust that <i>everything that is happening is exactly right as it is happening</i>. (1) Rephrase calmly: Do not react with counter-pressure if the 'pressure' from the IP (perceived) increases. Stay calm and give the feeling that everything that is happening (and being said) is exactly right. If the question does not resonate with the IP, rephrase the question afterwards in order to get back to the intention of the question. (1) Reflexivity is ongoing: Afterwards, reflect again calmly (but promptly after the interview) on what was going on 'inside you' in terms of asymmetry or similar. ("What did the situation do to you? How did you feel during the process? What could be the background of these feelings?")

Table 10: Excerpt of postscript reflection
Source: Own illustration.

During the coding process and the development of the themes – and thus also the selection of interview excerpts in the next chapter – care was taken to approach the interviews with as much openness as possible and to carry out the coding and subsequent selection of themes and quotations in the best possible way in accordance with RTA. However, it is also inherent in RTA – as explained above – that it does not aim for objectivity or generalisability, but rather that subjectivity should always be understood as part of the research process. Collegial reflection was dispensed with in this context, as the researcher was not concerned with finding the one correct interpretation but accepted that the research process, and thus also the codes, themes, etc., are significantly influenced by the researcher himself.

This section has established the interpretative, qualitative research strategy and demonstrated, e.g., how data collection and analysis were carried out to ensure transparency. The following section presents the empirical results from the interviews with municipal services organisations top managers and structures them according to the central themes.

4. Findings, Reflections and Consolidation

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study and consolidates them into a coherent analytical narrative. Building on the methodological foundations outlined in the previous chapter, including the interpretivist research paradigm, the qualitative case study design, and the use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), it reports the results derived from 16 semi-structured interviews with top managers in municipal services organisations, complemented by three follow-up reflection discussions. In doing so, the chapter provides a structured account of how leadership, digital transformation, and inspirational motivation are experienced and interpreted within this specific organisational context.

The chapter is organised into three main sections. Sub-Chapter 4.1 presents the five central themes generated from the interview data, two of which directly contribute to answering research objectives 1 and 2. Sub-Chapter 4.2 introduces the findings from the reflection discussions, exploring how these themes are interpreted and translated into leadership practice. Sub-Chapter 4.3 consolidates the insights from both data sources, systematically linking them to the research question and thereby forming the basis for addressing the remaining research objectives.

The empirical material underpinning this chapter comprises 16 in-person, semi-structured interviews conducted between February 2023 and December 2024, with a cumulative duration of approximately 20 hours, which were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and analysed using RTA. The analysis progressed from semantic to predominantly latent coding, with themes developed inductively and reflexively rather than through frequency-based approaches. To enrich the interpretation, three additional reflection discussions were conducted between May and June 2025; these were not used for validation, but to further explore and deepen the meaning of the findings within their practical leadership context.

4.1. The Role of Digital Transformation and of Inspirational Motivation in Municipal Services Organisations

The following section describes the five themes that emerged from the data: Theme 1 outlines what is special about leadership in the context of municipal services organisations, while Theme 2 illustrates the challenges for leadership in times of change in this context. Theme 3 highlights the meaning and role of digital transformation for top management in the context of municipal services organisations (research objective 1), and which (coping) strategies top managers employ in this

regard (Theme 4). Theme 5 describes the role and meaning of inspirational motivation in municipal services organisations, thereby answering Research objective 2 of this study. The sequence of themes has been deliberately structured to enhance conceptual clarity. It begins by outlining the purpose of both the context and leadership within municipal services organisations, before examining the tension in which leadership operates, between stability and change, intensified by digital transformation. It then explores the coping strategies that emerge from this tension and, finally, considers the role and meaning of a coherent vision in addressing these challenges.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Purpose-Driven Leadership in Municipal Services Organisations

Municipal Services Organisations (MSOs) hold a distinctive position in Germany. A key factor in motivating individuals to work within such organisations appears to be the opportunity to make a reliable, long-term contribution to the community (e.g., municipality or city), with a focus on societal benefit rather than purely economic interests. At the same time, it seems that the services provided by these organisations are increasingly taken for granted by recipients, namely the citizens. The first theme – “*Leading in MSOs is meaning-driven*” – illustrates how leadership within these contexts is influenced not only by economic considerations but also by the emphasis on ensuring a reliable contribution and the individual sense of meaning that employees derive from their work. Figure 13 provides an overview of this concept.

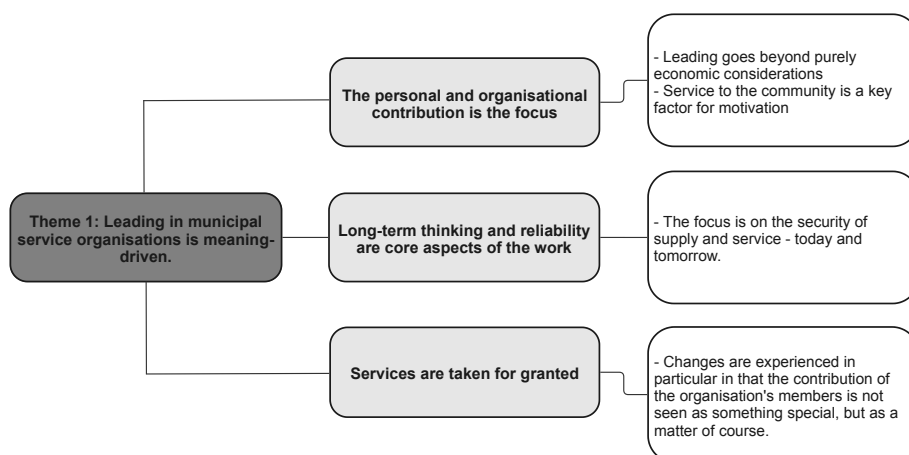


Figure 13: Theme 1 - ‘Leading in MSOs is meaning-driven’
Source: Own illustration.

4.1.1.1. The Personal and Organisational Contribution Is the Focus

The meaning that the top managers associate with their work in municipal services organisations is clearly emphasised in the data. For example, IP-16 points out that this was not clear at the beginning of one's own career, but only became apparent over time:

IP-16: "And the questions that are now arising in our society – be it heavy rain precautions or security of supply or even the consideration of how to integrate renewables – all of this is taking place here in our small organisation. And this importance, that's what I've gradually come to realise." (16-Lb27t: 13)

For IP-2, it was similar that the meaning of work became increasingly clear over time:

IP-2: "And, from a personal perspective, I just think it's exciting and interesting (...) that was certainly not the motivation 25 years ago when I started, but nowadays it's growing more and more, actually doing things for the environment and being able to make a contribution." (2-7sAZ: 11)

IP-15 also embeds their own work in a larger context and connects their own position with the following meaning:

IP-15: "The opportunity to [...] have a position in society that not only serves an individual's own benefit, but also a greater good." (15-919mU: 85)

In response to the question about the meaning of work as a top manager in the context of municipal services organisations, IP-4 replies:

IP-4: "That I have a high degree of responsibility. Not only to the employees of this company or this organisation, the group, but also to the citizens of this city." (4-asD9f: 74-75)

IP-13 describes it in comparison to companies in the private sector:

IP-13: "Well, the biggest difference compared to a private company, for example, would be, in my opinion, that you take responsibility for the region and for the people and ultimately also for your city, that is your municipal role." (13-y4p91: 5)

A difference is also seen for IP-11 in comparison to private companies:

IP-11: "This tension between, on the one hand, a social orientation and, on the other, an economic orientation, that is what makes it special, yes, in both a negative and a positive sense, yes." (11-x6ToA: 7)

Likewise, IP-1 draws a comparison between the services provided by private companies and municipal services organisations:

IP-1: "What is special about this is that if we define it as a municipal services, it is needed to fulfil the state's mission to ensure a dignified life. When I order a book from

Amazon, it may not be absolutely necessary. Or the new Xbox or PlayStation – I would find it difficult to reconcile it with human dignity.” (1-Ns9u: 9)

IP-3 draws an even broader arc, connecting the meaning of work with the topic of democracy:

IP-3: “(...) that certain parts are at least guaranteed to the extent that they are included in the basic services provided to citizens. That is the simple formula. In other words, to ensure that which makes a country and its population worth living in, which also protects democracy, and perhaps many other facets as well, to ensure the basic services.” (3-77vdu: 15)

IP-9 provides a similar perspective, but also looks further into the future:

IP-9: “For me personally, it is important because there is a higher goal to fulfil in the end, namely, to achieve a turnaround in climate change.” (9-BfK2U: 13)

4.1.1.2. Long-Term Thinking and Reliability Are Core Aspects of Work
Security of supply and stability play a central role in the work within organisations, which demand that a high degree of reliability is reflected in core aspects of top managers' work. IP-14 summarises in one sentence what the work as a top manager in the chosen context means:

IP-14: “Providing security for people in a community.” (14-72zFK: 88-89)

IP-3 describes it as follows:

IP-3: “To lead the organisation in such a way, to manage it strategically, (...) that the municipal service can be or remains ensured.” (3-77vdu: 141)

IP-5 adds the aspect of occupational safety to the aspect of supply:

IP-5: “We serve our customers quickly and reliably. We ensure a high level of supply reliability. We ensure job safety.” (5-2z17D: 181)

IP-10 also sees responsibility for the people within the organisation as a central, long-term task:

IP-10: “I always remind myself that I am responsible for 1,600 people and 1,600 families. And if we manage to keep these people healthy for a long time, then the different tasks will help them through the demographic process so that they can go into retirement healthy and motivated.” (10-ick27: 13)

This strong desire for stability and security also has consequences; for example, in the formality that characterises the organisations. IP-1 expresses it as follows:

IP-1: “If I want to guarantee this to my citizens, I have to think much more about security than a purely economic view would require. And that means that I also have

to do a lot more loops, processes, formalisms and safeguards than I might have to if I can also fail with the project.” (1-Ns9u: 11)

IP-14 also recognises advantages in this, but also disadvantages associated with it:

IP-14: “(...) is all the thinking in this organisation, in this group, geared towards sustainability and the long term! And not towards maximising short-term profits! And that makes both weal and woe.” (14-72zFK: 55)

This way of thinking is therefore primarily long-term-oriented, although dynamic developments are currently progressing. IP-13 relates this to energy and water supply:

IP-13: “That means you have a much bigger brain to think about what we will need in 50 years. What must the (power) grid look like in 50 years? What will a generation look like in 50 years or, I don’t know, now water supply, a very big issue.” (13-y4p91: 7)

IP-16 shares this perspective and links it to the system-inherent challenges in relation to change:

IP-16: “This may also be due to the fact that we are, of course, laying infrastructure that will last 50 years or more. In this respect, some things cannot be changed so quickly.” (16-Lb27t: 58)

4.1.1.3. Services Are Taken for Granted

The tasks of municipal services organisations are carried out in various areas, such as water supply, electricity supply, waste disposal, etc., and – as described above – serve to enable the citizens of a city or municipality to live together in dignity. IP-15 puts it as follows:

IP-15: “So, from my perspective, municipal services are a collection of very different topics and tasks that enable society, enable citizens in society, to lead a life that is as self-determined as possible and not have to worry about the basic things.” (15-919mU: 4)

These are therefore tasks that citizens do not have to worry about and that often take place in the background. However, this can in turn lead to these tasks being taken for granted as part of everyday life. IP-14 describes this as follows:

IP-14: “(...) I’ll say, just to have a social, economic, a very personal environment, which we take for granted, yes?” (14-72zFK: 5)

At the same time, it is precisely this matter-of-factness of the services that is increasingly leading to challenges for top managers. When asked what is

perceived as challenging or difficult in the context of municipal services organisations, IP-6 replies:

IP-6: "What makes it difficult? Well, of course, to some extent it is taken for granted. (...) And if it is taken for granted, no, that, yes, there are people who are paid to clean behind me, is a point that, yes, I don't think is right that way. Because I think that a different attitude could be developed in society." (6-21op9: 12-13)

Furthermore, IP-5 recognises a major challenge in particular in the ever-increasing expectations of municipal services organisations:

IP-5: "Above all, I have an unspoken expectation of the customer. What is said is: it has to work and should cost as little as possible, but there is a lot more that should be left unsaid. It should work well, be clean and safe. It should still work tomorrow. (...) But I think that's how I feel as a utility company, utility infrastructure, just like certain other elements. I think nursing professionals feel the same way at the end of the chain as we do." (5-2z17D: 7)

IP-5 also anticipates continually rising expectations due to developments in digital transformation:

IP-5: "I have a point that I think they expect the same from us as they do from Amazon (...). I understand the customers... and I don't act any differently myself." (5-2z17D: 17)

IP-2 combines this with an experience that puts this matter of course in a different light:

IP-2: "At the beginning of the year, I (...) went on a safari in Tanzania, where you can see how people live there. Where we are on the road here? Taking for granted the services we need to survive (...)." (2-7sAZ: 9)

IP-7 also describes from experience:

IP-7: "(...) because I know it differently from other countries. And in particular, I know it differently from developing countries. That there are always private areas there and they are expensive, and only if you are really rich can you afford a decent education or decent transport or information or electricity, waste disposal and so on. And in my view, that tends to lead to social injustice (...). But that's why, from my point of view, it's an important quality that we have here in Germany. One that we perhaps sometimes fail to appreciate." (7-1bu3D: 9)

4.1.1.4. Summary of Theme 1: Leading in Municipal Services is Meaning-Driven

The top managers of municipal services organisations perceive their work as a contribution to the common good, with a strong focus on long-term reliability and social responsibility. Their motivation is largely driven by the sense of purpose they attach to their work, such as ensuring the provision of essential services. However, citizens often take services such as water or energy supply for granted, while expectations regarding reliability, efficiency, and

quality continue to rise. Such dynamics create a specific leadership paradox: although the public highly values stability and reliability, this very taken-for-grantedness can constrain the perceived need for innovation and change, as will be shown in the next theme. Consequently, (inspirational) leadership in the digital age could help navigate this tension, e.g., by fostering meaning and engagement within the organisation, particularly where external recognition is limited. By connecting the work with the public mandate and the opportunities of digital transformation, leaders could frame change not as an end in itself, but as a means to sustain the organisation's societal purpose in the long term. Despite these challenges, executives continue to emphasise the importance of long-term planning, especially in relation to infrastructure designed to last for decades. While leadership in this context is strongly purpose-driven, the data reveal ongoing tensions between stability and transformation, which will be further elaborated in the next theme.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Leadership Between Stability and Change

Within municipal services organisations – as in many other public sector organisations and private sector companies – leadership takes place in the area of tension between stability and change.

The stability side plays a significant role in the context of municipal services organisations, because – as mentioned above – these organisations must guarantee a high degree of security, stability, and reliability in supplying the population of a city or municipality, for example, with electricity or water. The characteristics that define municipal services organisations can therefore be considered quite specific, especially given the tasks they must perform for citizens. When it comes to change, these organisations face similar – if not the same – challenges as other companies and organisations in terms of digital transformation.

Figure 14 presents the theme '*Leading is balancing the conflict between change & conservation*', and the first sub-theme addresses the fact that the pressure for change is experienced as increasing and takes a closer look at which aspects play a role in this from the IP's point of view. The second sub-theme looks at the forces that limit this change.

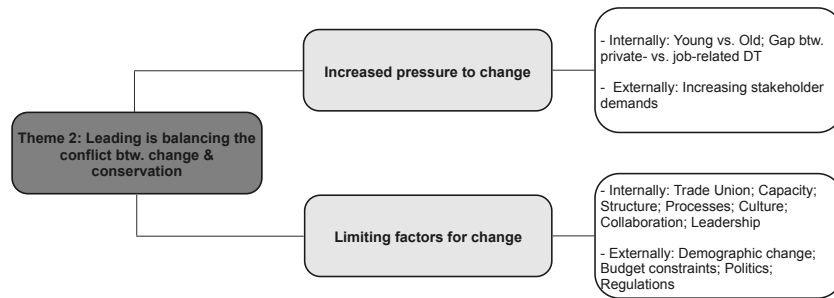


Figure 14: Theme 2 - 'Leading is balancing the conflict between change and conservation'
Source: Own illustration.

4.1.2.1. Increased Pressure to Change

The pressure related to digital transformation and the associated changes is perceived as increasing due to a variety of factors affecting organisations, both internally and externally. Among other things, IP-3 recognises a challenge: younger people are gradually entering organisations that have been socialised differently (especially digitally) and who then also have different expectations of work in this regard. This can subsequently also have an impact on leadership:

IP-3: "Because of [...] the personnel changes in our organisation, in my organisation, where I work, in many other companies too, keyword demographic change, personnel changes have, quite inevitably, brought new people into the company who have just got to know different work, different ways of dealing with people, different forms of cooperation. Sometimes also through school-based training or training via a degree programme. They may also come from completely different industries. And the professional development of people today, of the younger generation, also has different ideas about work." (3-77vdu: 79)

IP-6 also recognises this as a major challenge:

IP-6: "Well, I think, on the one hand, we still have the fact that we have a division between people who have grown up digitally and who have never known anything different with the media." (6-21op9: 21)

According to IP-8, this can be a challenge for managers:

IP-8: "So, if we manage to hire young people for whom this is a matter of course, who don't even think about how digital transformation... we have to be digital, that's for sure! And who then increasingly demand it from their managers, then at some point it will be flushed up, along the lines of, we have to do something about it now." (8-8F4os: 70-71)

IP-1 also relates the topic of digital transformation to the attractiveness of the organisations as employers:

IP-1: "But these are all topics that have to be addressed at some point. And if we now look at the applicants, we will have to take certain digital steps. Because the applicants expect them, too." (1-Ns9u: 25)

Another challenge is that digital technology is already highly prevalent in the private lives of municipal services organisations' employees, although this penetration is not as pronounced in the professional context. This asynchrony between private and professional life is increasingly giving rise to questions and contradictions, as IP-11 describes:

IP-11: "What I see most of all here is that people believe they can somehow separate it from the work environment, yes. Yes, now between us, (laughs) so here it's often also about me having to somehow release software with the works council, yes, interestingly software that they themselves already use at home, yes." (11-x6ToA: 17)

However, for IP-6, this internal pressure also represents an opportunity if the asynchrony is gradually reduced:

IP-6: "It is really easy to integrate into your normal work routine, into the normal rhythm of your life, and simply to transform the things that you may have learned privately on other, yes, levels into your professional life." (6-21op9: 33)

In the context of increasing pressure, developments in the demands the environment places on municipal services organisations are seen as a central aspect. IP-2 describes these shifts in stakeholders' expectations of the service as follows:

IP-2: "And customer expectations continue to grow, including with regard to digital topics. (...) If you break that down for us, at some point it becomes the expectation that we can be reached digitally on all channels. That they can also, if necessary, access their products and services digitally, or order from us digitally, and that we then deliver at the desired time if possible. I would say that customer expectations are relatively high in this regard. Because it is now common practice in many other industries and in many other areas." (2-7sAZ: 37)

IP-16 also recognises this trend:

IP-16: "I'll say, this Amazon-society..., that these feedbacks are provided promptly and you can actually always see where your process is, where it is being processed. And we are doing exactly the opposite." (16-Lb27t: 19)

The increasing complexity of infrastructure issues, which is also driven by new developments at customers, is putting increasing pressure on organisations to meet core tasks in the future. IP-16 illustrates this:

IP-16: "We have changed in terms of energy supply and power supply. We now have significantly more decentralised feeders, decentralised consumers, when I think of heat pumps or e-charging stations. And this whole system will reach its limits if we do not manage to automate or digitalise the control system to a certain extent." (16-Lb27t: 17)

IP-10 also recognises the need for action both internally and externally:

IP-10: "I think it has actually picked up speed. Well, anyone who is forward-thinking today has of course already recognised the opportunities for themselves a few years ago. Nevertheless, I believe that the pressure to make progress in these areas is much higher today than in the past." (10-ick27: 31)

IP-4 summarises the consequences of digital transformation:

IP-4: "(...) this digital transformation as an absolute necessity from which there is no escape." (4-asD9f: 62-63)

4.1.2.2. Limiting Factors for Change

While the pressure on digital transformation is increasing from multiple directions, there are also forces working against change, both from within and from outside the organisations. In particular, strong trade union organisation within municipal services organisations is seen as a limiting factor within the organisations. Furthermore, capacity bottlenecks and prevailing structures have a limiting effect. Ultimately, culture is also perceived as a limiting factor, significantly influenced by leadership and the way people work together. IP-12 initially describes the situation as follows:

IP-12: "Except that a private sector company may develop faster and is sometimes also better organised than a municipal organisation providing public services. But that is simply due to history. It also has something to do with the age structure, collective agreements and so on. So, it is also a bit unwieldy." (12-21Tav: 39)

Concerning the strong co-determination due to the works council, IP-1 makes it clear:

IP-1: "Works councils play a role; you have to coordinate a lot. All these topics that are digital are automatically subject to co-determination (with the works council, Author's note). So, you always have to enter into a dialogue with the works councils with the familiar discussions." (1-Ns9u: 15)

IP-11 experiences the cooperation with works councils as a hindrance, especially in relation to the need for coordination on the one hand and dynamic developments on the other:

IP-11: "Well, I do find co-determination (Author's note: with the works council) a hindrance, I have to say that quite clearly, yes. And we also have a tendency not to decide. (...) So I do have massive problems with the works councils – I just have to say that, yes. Because then there are endless rounds of discussions, yes. So, I would expect them to either think about being more open themselves, yes, or just to communicate that openly (...)." (11-x6ToA: 51 & 95)

Other important aspects that counteract change are evident in particular capacities. As a result of these bottlenecks, projects fail before they have even gotten off the ground. IP-1 summarises it as follows:

IP-1: "I think, however, that there are still a lot of topics that are being planned to failure in our organisation – with the best of intentions. Because there are not the necessary resources, not the necessary power." (1-Ns9u: 29)

IP-2 also recognises an essential feature in the structures that makes change difficult:

IP-2: "But also because our structures are not yet aligned to it. Yes, ultimately that is what is holding us back." (2-7sAZ: 79)

IP-9 sees a major challenge in the diversity of topics and the available resources:

IP-9: "So, I don't need to explain to anyone here that the topic is right and that you have to be digitally savvy to move forward and make an effort. So, we have more of a problem here that we have a jungle of topics that we are all working on at the same time." (9-BfK2U: 67)

IP-14 puts it a little more bluntly:

IP-14: "So hindering is... hindering is... resource allocation – in the sense of controlling the madness (...)." (14-72zFK: 49)

Thus, both the strong influence of employee representatives and the issue of structures and resources appear to be major obstacles. In this context, the people working in the organisations, the 'human resources', could also be considered a resource. The issue of the age structure in organisations appears crucial here. In response to the question of what would be necessary in the organisation for the status quo to be challenged at all, IP-5 answers:

IP-5: "For that, other people are necessary. I'm sorry, I have a lot of unpleasant situations wherever change is involved." (5-2z17D: 134-135)

IP-7 describes this challenge within the organisation as follows:

IP-7: "These are people who have been here for a long time, who just don't have the right mindset and who generally find it very difficult to deal with changes and change processes. And that is, "My Excel spreadsheet is sacred", so! And I'm always fiddling with my Excel spreadsheet, preferably for hours, preferably secretly in my little room, I also like to lock myself in, even for six weeks. But then I have the best result." So, that's one thing that's a hindrance for me." (7-1bu3D: 43)

IP-5 also sees this challenge as central:

IP-5: "(...) most of them have already achieved 25 years of professional experience here. We have relatively little fluctuation. It's a little difficult to get these people to say, 'But I have to rebuild it, otherwise I won't get the task solved tomorrow'." (5-2z17D: 11)

IP-12 points out that there are too few employees who are willing or able to actively support the change:

IP-12: "But it is very complex, and you only have a limited number of employees who will go down this path with you all the way. So, I'm back to the topic of age structure, right?" (12-21Tav: 33)

In addition to considering the age cohort, cultural aspects, and the associated leadership and cooperation within organisations, the organisations themselves also play a role. Regarding culture, IP-9 suggests:

IP-9: "Well, we come from a management culture that, historically, I think you would call patriarchal. Well, let me put it this way, from a silo culture." (9-BfK2U: 57)

The issue of silo thinking is also emphasised by IP-16, which – from this perspective – no longer meets the requirements of digital transformation:

IP-16: "The employees should work independently, think in networks, also in terms of the organisation, solve problems or questions. And I think that this is also our biggest problem, to break down this silo mentality. It used to be relatively simple. The processes were clearly regulated. Now we have many new topics where the departments also have to network with each other." (16-Lb27t: 62)

Regarding culture, IP-8 makes it clear that a very special culture prevails:

IP-8: "Those who make mistakes will be hanged. Figuratively speaking. (...) Yes, but then preferably in public." (8-8F4os: 77-79)

Concerning leadership, the pattern emerges that the IPs see themselves as significantly restricted in their leadership role when it comes to rewarding and sanctioning behaviour, as IP-1 describes it:

IP-1: "In the municipal world, you have no way of sanctioning as a manager." (1-Ns9u: 45)

From this perspective, a decisive lever for change lies with the employees, albeit who – not least due to the strong labour laws – can also block this change, as IP-7 puts it:

IP-7: "And of course it is, it is just more difficult here in the municipal organisation to persuade someone to change. Because they wouldn't have to. Nothing would actually happen to them. So why should I change now? I can put up as much resistance as I like." (7-1bu3D: 45-47)

On this point, IP-16 draws a comparison with the private sector:

IP-16: "I think that in the private sector, you can part with people more quickly. And the pressure to change (...) – well, it always depends on the industry, of course, but the pressure to change and the willingness to change is, I think, greater in the private sector." (16-Lb27t: 58)

IP-1 summarises the limiting factors that prevail within municipal services organisations:

IP-1: "(...) that's why we haven't pushed for something like that, for example, because we don't have the capacity, the money – and we are not in the mood." (1-Ns9u: 25)

In addition to hindering factors within organisations, external factors also inhibit change. One aspect is that the organisations compete with all other employers – whether private or public – for skilled workers. IP-6 puts it as follows:

IP-6: "This means that people who can really do it, who can operate it, who can drive it forward, who can also create the necessary conditions in a company, are extremely sought-after, but they are also in short supply, right? And in this respect, it is very difficult for a company, even one like ours, to compete with others and get exactly the specialists it needs to provide a correspondingly adequate and good service, right? That's a clear competitive situation." (6-21op9: 33)

IP-5 also recognises this as a major challenge, as does IP-9:

IP-5: "(...) these days (...) it's often the case that you're lucky to find people (...) when you find people at all who are willing to work with you at all." (5-2z17D: 173)

IP-9: "(...) We would employ many more people if there were many more of them." (9-BfK2U: 29)

Concerning digital transformation, investments in hardware and software, for example, are just as necessary as investments in those who can use and operate them. However, these necessary investments are opposed by an empty public budget, as described by IP-7:

IP-7: "So, of course, the financial aspect is a big issue at first. Because achieving digital transformation means a large financial investment in software and in systems that can deliver, and in systems that are secure. And municipal budgets are rather empty. And that's the challenge." (7-1bu3D: 31)

Furthermore, political influences play a decisive role in digital transformation. IP-12 describes this aspect and demarcates the context of municipal services organisations from the private sector:

IP-12: "And many things that are now easier to achieve in the private sector are now somewhat more complex and difficult in the context of municipal services. (...) Yes, it also depends a bit, for example, if you open up areas of development in the (power) grid sector, there are also certain political forces, for example, in an election year, that say it's better not to do something like that." (12-21Tav: 11)

IP-4 comes to a similar conclusion and makes it clear that – in addition to changing political influences – there are also very different requirements from one municipality or federal state, etc.:

IP-4: "(...) You always have to get in touch with certain regulatory authorities or the administrative district in which you are operating. You don't have the same conditions everywhere either. So, as I said, municipal regulations in Berlin are quite different from those here, the corresponding regulation or in other federal states (...). So, it is a very democratic process, because of course you always have different majorities. Some coalitions, for example in federal states, have a greater heart for municipal services." (4-asD9f: 12-13)

These political influences are also to be seen in a larger context, including geopolitical developments, such as the changes in energy policy due to the Ukraine conflict, albeit at the expense of other developments, such as digital transformation. IP-5 describes it as follows:

IP-5: "Since August last year, we have also had an enormous amount of work to do in terms of what continues and is more administrative. We are still months behind due to the energy price brake. And that is quite understandable (...)." (5-2z17D: 127)

Furthermore, regulatory requirements are increasingly coming at the expense of change-related initiatives. Although the industry appears to be in a state of constant change, it is also accompanied by increasing regulatory requirements. IP-8 puts it as follows:

IP-8: "And what makes it so special for me is that all these areas have been in a constant state of change since the liberalisation of the energy sector in 1999. So, in the beginning there was an Energy Industry Act with 20 paragraphs, meanwhile it has about 150 and what feels like 2,500 implementing ordinances and regulations." (8-8F4os: 9)

IP-9 also sees this as a major challenge that can have a negative impact on organisational change:

IP-9: "In the end, it becomes more and more complex, also due to regulatory requirements, bureaucratic guidelines, etc." (9-BfK2U: 29)

These (increasingly strict) regulatory requirements are particularly noticeable in the area of data protection. As a result, data protection is also perceived as another major stumbling block for digital transformation by IP-15:

IP-15: "So, when certain things don't work in Germany that are in principle related to this transformation, then it is very often data protection that is either used as a pretext or actually makes one thing or another more difficult. I think we have to find a new perspective on this without completely dismissing it." (15-919mU: 12)

IP-16 determines this using an example from its own organisation with ChatGPT:

IP-16: "I'll use the example of ChatGPT to illustrate what I mean. I see a lot of opportunities here. And we have it in the company, so I said, 'Use it.' Then I got a ten-page document explaining the conditions under which ChatGPT can be used at all, with all the risks. So, I said, 'We're not going to give this thing out now because it just fuels fear again.'" (16-Lb27t: 28)

4.1.2.3. Summary of Theme 2: Leading Is Balancing Change and Conservation

The pressure for digital transformation in municipal services organisations is growing due to internal and external factors. For example, demographic change is bringing younger, digitally-savvy employees with different expectations into organisations, resulting in new demands on managers. Higher customer expectations, which – among other things – demand digital accessibility and service quality, further intensify this pressure. The increasing complexity of infrastructure requirements, such as decentralised energy supply, also demands digital solutions. In addition, a form of asynchrony between private and professional digital use creates tensions. Internally, strong co-determination, capacity bottlenecks and structural obstacles hinder the implementation of change projects. In addition, a corporate culture that seems not very flexible – characterised by silo thinking, for example – makes change more difficult. External factors such as a shortage of skilled workers, financial constraints and regulatory influences also slow down digital transformation.

As shown, leadership is confronted with developments that are common to many companies and organisations; however, some challenges appear to be specific to municipal services organisations. The challenges associated with digital transformation therefore arise in a context with special characteristics. The following theme shows how this situation is perceived.

4.1.3. Theme 3: The Role and Meaning of Digital Transformation: Sprinting Across an Opaque Terrain Without a Map

The data reveal patterns in how the IPs perceive digital transformation and what associations they link with this phenomenon. It becomes clear that the IPs understand digital transformation as an elusive concept that seems to combine various, sometimes blurred or general terms, and thus acts like a ‘container’ for a variety of aspects.

The term digital transformation remains primarily at a rather abstract-descriptive level, to the detriment of concrete or concise descriptions. Furthermore, digital transformation is often associated with a form of uncertainty that, while also evoking positive emotions such as joy in some, predominantly triggers fears or anticipated concerns in others. Overall, this highlights a frustration in connection

with digital transformation, which is fed by the perception of being left behind despite numerous digital transformation-related initiatives. On the other hand, this frustration is fed by the perception that the topic of digital transformation is being approached too hastily and without the necessary calm.

These different perspectives – i.e. both the difficulties in defining the term and the uncertainties associated with the phenomenon, combined with the associated frustrations – share the fact that digital transformation appears to be an opaque phenomenon or terrain that is traversed without a clear plan and without clear orientation, albeit with increasing acceleration. The following theme brings these aspects together and provides a potential answer to the question of the role and meaning of digital transformation (DT) from the perspective of top management in the context of municipal services organisations (research objective 1): *‘DT is like sprinting across an opaque terrain without a map’*.

Before the sub-themes are described in more detail below, Figure 15 summarises the theme and the sub-themes:

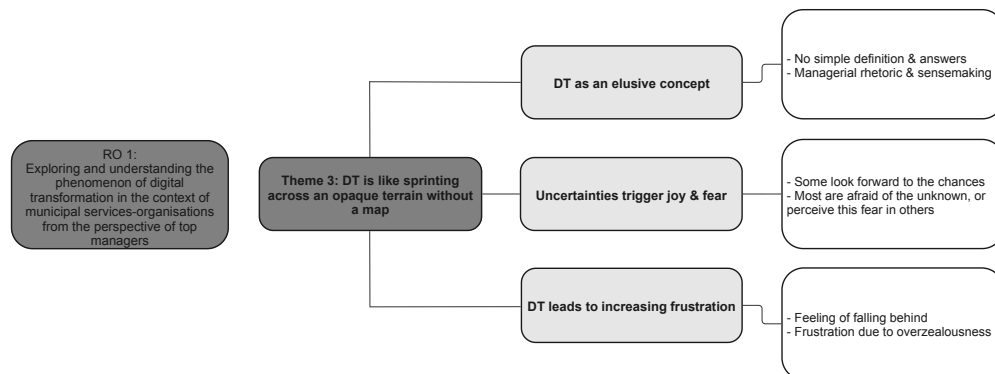


Figure 15: Theme 3 - ‘DT is like sprinting across an opaque terrain without a map’
Source: Own illustration.

4.1.3.1. Digital Transformation as an Elusive Concept

The phenomenon of digital transformation seems difficult to grasp, and a definition or a clear classification seems hardly possible as a result. For example, IP-5 answers the question about the role of digital transformation in municipal services organisation as follows:

IP-5: “I would say that it is very large – and that we have not yet fully exploited it – we cannot even see it properly.” (5-2z17D: 192-193)

It is also clear from IP-2's comments that digital transformation appears to be an elusive concept. Furthermore, it becomes obvious that no distinction is made between digital transformation and digitisation:

IP-2: "I think the topic of digital transformation is certainly necessary. Although I always ask myself: what exactly is digitalisation? We also discuss this internally time and again." (2-7sAZ: 17)

IP-6 tries to make the topic digital transformation tangible:

IP-6: "I would say, very casually, that digital transformation means: things that still somehow happen in a personal dialogue today, that happen on paper, will somehow become technical, no?" (6-21op9: 19)

IP-13 summarises the difficulty of classification as follows, with a laugh:

IP-13: "Because the term digitalisation is actually gigantic (laughs)." (13-y4p91: 63)

However, the interview data also show attempts to link digital transformation with aspects of the IP's own work in the organisation. The arguments or positions are communicated in a way that initially appears clear and convincing. This managerial rhetoric seems to enable the IPs to ascribe a specific meaning to the complexity of the topics and to keep the reality interpretable to themselves. However, it also tends to remain with general terms or descriptions such as efficiency, simplification, etc. For example, IP-1 associates the following with digital transformation:

IP-1: "Free association, starting with process simplification, workflow optimisation." (1-Ns9u: 15)

IP-2 takes this a step further, incorporating new business areas into the considerations and expanding the concept of efficiency to include effectiveness:

IP-2: "Depending on the company, there is always the opportunity to develop new business areas and to organise yourself more efficiently. And not only to become more efficient, but also more effective." (2-7sAZ: 27)

IP-10 also recognises efficiency as an essential feature, while drawing a connection to existing IT systems within the organisation and the associated advantages. This (inner) sense of meaning is rhetorically constructed through a logical chain:

IP-10: "Well (...), I want to make things easier for employees by introducing RP systems, CRM systems, other digital solutions. And as a result, optimise processes to create more efficiency." (10-ick27: 21)

The following example of IP-9 makes it clear that digital transformation is associated with many different aspects and that an attempt is being made to make the phenomenon more tangible by using a form of (managerial) rhetoric, in this example by using a quote:

IP-9: "In very abstract terms, and this is not my quote, I believe it is from E.ON, from the former CEO Thyssen: Everything that can be digitised will be digitised. So, ...and now you can build a bridge from simple 'I don't print anything anymore' to human-like robots that do something with AI. So now everything is included." (9-BfK2U: 25)

4.1.3.2. Uncertainties Trigger Joy and Fear

The topic of digital transformation leads to a kind of joy among the IP, since the phenomenon is associated with opportunities and positive future developments. On the other hand, however, a multitude of worries, concerns and fears are associated with digital transformation. IP-1 describes what is generally associated with digital transformation:

IP-1: "Depending on your own point of view, yes, fears. You can also categorise hopes under this heading, in fact, any human emotion." (1-Ns9u: 17)

Among other things, the opportunities arising from digital transformation are seen as offering possibilities for addressing the shortage of skilled workers, as IP-10 puts it:

IP-10: "Well, I personally think that this is one way of dealing with demographic change and the resulting shortage of skilled workers. It's an opportunity for us. With the introduction of the right technology, only the right systems will eventually be able to compensate for these deficits." (10-ick27: 25)

IP-8 also emphasises this view:

IP-8: "And overall, I believe that this will actually lead to a decrease in the shortage of skilled workers, because you will simply need fewer people." (8-8F4os: 25)

Beyond the topic of the shortage of skilled workers, further – but still unspecified – opportunities are associated with ChatGPT by IP-16:

IP-16: "I'll use the example of ChatGPT. I see a lot of opportunities there. And we have it in the company, so I said: use it." (16-Lb27t: 28)

However, a kind of fear or anxiety in relation to digital transformation is clear from the interviews, either felt by the IP or perceived in others. When asked what people inside or outside the MSOs associate with digital transformation or what digital transformation triggers in people, IP-4 answers succinctly:

IP-4: "Fear. It causes fear." (4-asD9f: 18-19)

For IP-14, this relates to a fear that is fundamentally linked to change:

IP-14: "For me, it is a fact – and I am not even excluding myself here – that change processes (...) are initially associated with uncertainty. And depending on the initial situation, they can also fuel fears, yes?" (14-72zFK: 21)

IP-5 addresses the question of what is associated with digital transformation as follows:

IP-5: "AI. I really believe that they think that – and I am noticing more and more fears regarding AI." (5-2z17D: 18-19)

These fears range from the fear of losing control as a 'transparent person' to fears about the effects of digital transformation on data protection or the fear of being left behind by rapid developments, etc. For example, in relation to the fears associated with digital transformation, IP-6 refers to a perceived loss of control:

IP-6: "(...) When we look at AI, chatbots, robotics, automation processing and many other digital applications today, we can't help but wonder whether we are still in control of what is happening." (6-21op9: 16-17)

IP-2 also recognises the fear of losing control as significant and sees the reason for these fears – among other things – in the transparency created by DT:

IP-2: "I think a lot about the topic 'People are becoming more transparent.' And the fear of becoming more transparent. Because a lot more information is being stored in places that people no longer have control over. Then, to a certain extent, the loss of control over a wide range of topics." (2-7sAZ: 21)

IP-7 also expresses concerns about transparency and the 'transparent person':

IP-7: "Of course, you have to keep an eye on it so that you don't become a yes, a transparent person or completely transparent. That's the first thought." (7-1bu3D: 15)

IP-13 links this fear to a fundamental fear of change, combined with concerns about the growing challenges in data protection.

IP-13: "And I can also imagine that you really have a lot of people who are afraid of change or for whom this is also an obstacle or who are concerned about data protection." (13-y4p91: 19)

In this context, IP-1 perceives a fear of being overwhelmed, which – from the IP's point of view – also relates to the people who work in the context of municipal services organisations:

IP-1: "So to start with, one or other of the employees has a certain inhibition about these things. In the sense of being afraid of being overwhelmed, that's something

new, I don't want that. In the municipal world, it's usually not the people at home who say: "Well, changing working conditions and doing that every day, that's exactly what I'm here for." Rather, they want a certain amount of continuous, steady development, but not so fast." (1-Ns9u: 33)

IP-12 also relates this to themselves and expresses the risk of being left behind:

IP-12: "(...) and now, in my late 40s, I've realised that I'm no longer one of the young ones and that I might miss out on one development or another if I don't consciously experience it and take a keen interest in it, even more than usual." (12-21Tav: 35)

IP-3 also experiences first-hand the consequences that current developments can have for a manager at the highest levels of an organisation:

IP-3: "From my own personal experience, I can say that for the last ten years, I was able to keep up well until a certain point when it comes to communication, applications, and tools that you have to use to manage a company, determine figures, and ensure proper control. Now, I'm being left behind because I can't necessarily keep up with the speed of communication." (3-77vdu: 63)

Ultimately, the fear of the potentially negative consequences of digital transformation also appears to be significant, as IP-8 shows:

IP-8: "It also worries me in many ways, because I think that if only a chatbot or a ChatGPT is doing something here, then writing customer letters and answering them, and there is no longer any regulation because you then start to fire people, then I find that very difficult." (8-8F4os: 19)

IP-10 also anticipates the fears of others:

IP-10: "Then there are those who are afraid they won't be able to keep their jobs if they go digital. Because then they won't be dragging paper from right to left all day, right? And of course, they always try to defend their field, too." (10-ick27: 73)

IP-9 expresses these concerns beyond the context of municipal services organisations, and recognises risks to society:

IP-9: "If they now digitise everything across the board and really get to the point where they also have robot-like or human-like robots that then also have an AI. Then they no longer need a cashier, they no longer need cleaning ladies. They need, I don't know what anymore. Maybe they no longer need their own wife. You don't know. Yes, who knows where it's going? I don't know, and of course... it naturally has a high potential to actually divide society." (9-BfK2U: 31)

The way in which the (German) media deals with the topic of digital transformation is perceived as a reinforcing element for these insecurities or fears, as IP-4 and IP-16 describe:

IP-4: "But to do that, you need education, you need to address the issue. And I see that as being at risk alongside this media bombardment, which instils fear rather than spreading optimism." (4-asD9f: 21)

IP-16: "ChatGPT alone has made AI a hot topic; you can see it now in the popular media, where there are always discussions about it. A lot of fear is being stirred up. My impression is that we Germans are good at always seeing the risks and less the opportunities." (16-Lb27t: 23)

4.1.3.3. Digital Transformation Leads to Increasing Frustration

If one looks at the digital transformation and the developments associated with it, dealing with this phenomenon seems to lead to a kind of frustration. This frustration arises from the fact that the IPs know that they should be doing something different or more to keep pace with current developments. When asked about the role or meaning of digital transformation for their own organisation, IP-4 answers:

IP-4: "Do we still have a lot of catching up to." (4-asD9f: 80-81)

IP-8 also answers this question about the role and meaning of digital transformation for one's own company:

IP-8: "I am frustrated." (8-8F4os: 108-109)

However, a certain frustration also becomes apparent, whereby an overly strong focus on digital transformation is at the expense of other important topics. For example, IP-2 sees it as a hype:

IP-2: "Because I now also have the feeling that when it comes to the topic of digitalisation and digital transformation, it is simply being exaggerated in some cases. That people always think they have to chase after every hype at this point and do everything they can to implement it." (2-7sAZ: 17)

In this 'rushed' approach to digital transformation, IP-9 also recognises a problem:

IP-9: "And now comes the problematic aspect. It's always a tightrope walk where things get out of hand. Because they're just trying to implement way too much, way too fast right now. That might actually be a problem." (9-BfK2U: 37)

IP-5 also shares this impression, but also makes it clear how this has a subjective effect:

IP-5: "Otherwise, I realise that I am actually rather rushed and lagging behind." (5-2z17D: 103)

In this context, IP-3 recommends that the pace in the organisations should be significantly reduced:

IP-3: "In every company, there will be people who are passionate about digitalisation. And then, yes, I don't want to say that they are going about establishing it in the company in vain – but (it) is just a hot topic at the moment. (...) you have to have people who, perhaps, raise awareness of it, step on the brakes a bit. Because a lot of money is being burned there, a lot of money is being burned." (3-77vdu: 25-27)

4.1.3.4. Summary of Theme 3: Digital Transformation Is Like Sprinting Across an Opaque Terrain Without a Map

The theme '*DT is like sprinting across an opaque terrain without a map*' illustrates that digital transformation is perceived as an elusive concept that combines a multitude of fuzzy or general terms and acts as a 'container' for various aspects. The term also often remains at an abstract, descriptive level, resulting in a lack of precision. Digital transformation is associated with uncertainties, which trigger positive emotions such as joy in some IP but also fears or concerns in most. A common frustration stems from both the perception of being left behind by numerous digital transformation initiatives and the view that digital transformation is being addressed too hastily and without sufficient critical reflection. While digital transformation is perceived as an opaque terrain through which one rushes without a map – as described above – the data revealed that top managers have developed coping strategies to meet these challenges, as shown below.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Leadership's Coping Strategies for Digital Transformation

While the challenges associated with digital transformation (DT) are increasing, the IP have developed their own strategies for dealing with them. Three patterns emerged from the data: In an active variant, initiatives are launched as unnoticed as possible (Sub-Theme 1). In a second variant, the organisation waits for an external impulse to legitimise initiatives (Sub-Theme 2). The third variant shows that digital transformation is not given any special significance and/or that other topics are considered more important (Sub-Theme 3). The theme is titled '*Leadership's DT coping strategies*' (Figure 16):

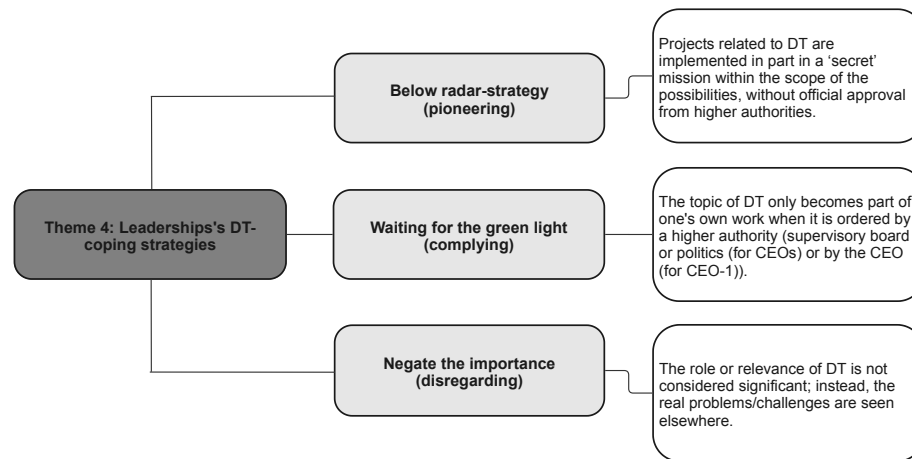


Figure 16: Theme 4 – ‘Leadership’s DT coping strategies’
Source: Own illustration.

4.1.4.1. Below-Radar Strategy (Pioneering)

In this sub-theme, a ‘just-do-it’-mentality becomes clear: some IPs are actively involved in designing the digital transformation to gradually make the topic tangible in the organisations. For example, IP-2 strives to implement digital transformation-related topics through project groups:

IP-2: “Yes, beneficial behaviour is actually, I think, simply what we try to do in parts. To bring people who have an interest and also an affinity for certain topics into the project groups, in order to implement such topics. To let them think freely and consider things. Of course, there are always certain limits somewhere. But to let them get started on a topic anyway.” (2-7sAZ: 75)

It is also apparent from the data that the limits of one’s own creative leeway can be interpreted in very strict or very flexible ways. IP-8 sees this leeway for interpretation as an important aspect of the work. However, it also becomes clear that ‘testing’ boundaries is only possible under certain conditions – namely, ‘under the radar’, as IP-8 puts it:

IP-8: “I find it helpful that you can try out a lot under the radar.” (8-8F4os: 64-65)

In this sense, IP-5 deliberately exploits formal gaps to advance topics, but not without risk:

IP-5: “(...) We try out a lot of things on a small scale. This is one part that, in the interview, please don’t play for my shareholders. You do the evaluation anonymously anyway. We have one person who customises software so much that you could almost call it an in-house development. That’s good. Actually, I don’t like that kind of thing at all, because if he were gone, I would never get it cleaned up (...).” (5-2z17D: 143)

IP-11 also sees opportunities for change, particularly in a somewhat more flexible interpretation of the (communication) rules. In response to the

question of how new ideas can be successfully introduced into the organisation, IP-11 answers:

IP-11: "Yes, it's not that easy. (...) So I think you just have to do it in many places. Yes. Of course, a little communication is also part of it. But I think in the end it's just a matter of doing it and then informing people." (11-x6ToA: 82-83)

During the conversation, IP-11 illustrates this attitude of 'doing' with a concrete example:

IP-11: "(...) we want to switch to Teams telephony now, yes, and I haven't waited around for the official "go" from above anymore, either. And to be honest, a works council is also still standing in the way. But now I just went over there, or we went over there, no, and then I said, 'Okay, now people are being migrated (...). And then I tell the works council: 'Okay, it's changed. Now you can decide.'" (11-x6ToA: 87)

4.1.4.2. Waiting-for-the-Green-Light Strategy (Complying)

Another pattern that emerged is that the impetus for designing digital transformation must come from outside and/or above. When asked what would have to happen to enthusiastically advance digital transformation, IP-13 answers:

IP-13: "Well, I would actually need a bit more direction (...)." (13-y4p91: 76-77)

For others, this external impulse is also necessary, as IP-1 and 14 describe:

IP-14: "You just need an impulse from the outside, you say, you're now going to do a process recording." (14-72zFK: 85)

IP-1: "So, there would have to be someone who says: "okay, in the next ten years you have to get there." (...). But that's not really a variant that leads to anything. (...) pressure (has) to be built up on whichever side. Whether it's the management boards, the supervisory boards, the social situation (...)." (1-Ns9u: 57)

The top management level (CEO) appears to be particularly important for providing impetus and direction. In response to the question of where the trigger for change should come from, IP-11 answers:

IP-11: "Yes, well, I think that should come from the board, yes, also because of the constellation." (11-x6ToA: 96-97)

IP-8 also makes it clear that the impetus for such a change would have to come from the top:

IP-8: "(...) If you can then manage to get them to say, "Yes, okay, well, that actually sounds quite interesting now" and then the engine starts to say, "Okay, I'll take this to my team now." I think it only works from the top." (8-8F4os: 69)

IP-7 illustrates this from its own experience, because it was only with the arrival of a new CEO that the issue became relevant for the organisation:

IP-7: "So the digital transformation here in particular, for me, I started here in (YEAR). And somehow since then, that is also when our new CEO came. So, he came in the same year or a little before me. And for me, when I now also hear from my colleagues who have been here longer, that's when the digital transformation began." (7-1bu3D: 41)

4.1.4.3. Negate the Importance-Strategy (Disregarding)

While some organisations are actively addressing the topic and others are waiting for a starting signal/impulse, for others the topic of digital transformation seems either less relevant, or they are simply pretending it is relevant. IP-3 does not consider digital transformation to hold strong importance for their own organisation:

IP-3: "And there are also industries, yes, where you actually only work digitally at relatively short notice. But not in the organisation I work for." (3-77vdu: 41)

In response to the question regarding the role of digital transformation, IP-3 emphasises:

IP-3: "Is the possibility of digitisation limited to a few fields, areas of work in the organisation." (3-77vdu: 150-151)

However, in some organisations, the topic of digital transformation is addressed in particular because it is important for the organisation's image or appears important for stakeholders in its external presentation, but without actually working on it in any substantial way. IP-8 compares it to initiatives of the past, such as the women's quota, which was 'only' addressed for the sake of appearances in the organisation, but not out of conviction:

IP-8: "And then it may either be that then, yes, then we do something like a cowardly attempt at a women's quota (...)." (8-8F4os: 71)

IP-10 also recognises a similar development:

IP-10: "(...) So, we dealt with topics that are sometimes nice to have in our public image. But they don't really help the company move forward." (10-ick27: 35)

IP-8 has also experienced that the topic of digital transformation is not given special importance and sees a danger in this:

IP-8 "(...) There is no discussion about it. Actually, I tried to bring up the topic of AI at a strategy meeting recently, but it is not wanted. And I think that's dangerous too (...)." (8-8F4os: 65)

IP-14 takes a rather relaxed view of the development and sees no pressure to act, because the developments appear foreseeable:

IP-14: "Well, I don't think it's revolutionary in the sense of: 'Hey, now there's a kink and it's going to break.' Maybe if you look closely, you can predict a lot of things that are going to happen now." (14-72zFK: 33)

IP-11 also takes a rather relaxed view of the developments:

IP-11: "Yes, so I think now ...I come from a technical background, yes. And many concepts have been around for a long time, and then you try to implement them, and they fail. Then it's taken up again, after a few years, then maybe they fail again. And at some point, it goes on like that. So, for example, at some point you say good – or you disappear." (11-x6ToA: 22-25)

4.1.4.4. Summary of Theme 4: Leadership's Coping Strategies

Top managers in municipal services organisations address digital transformation in different ways, whereby three main strategies were identified. First, managers initiate digital transformation-related changes gradually and unobtrusively to avoid resistance. For example, they rely on project groups that work independently and utilise formal gaps in the organisation to test innovative solutions. On the other hand, leaders wait for impetus from above or from external sources to drive change. The impetus for digital transformation appears to depend particularly on top management, with the board level seen as key to legitimising these initiatives. Ultimately, in some organisations, digital transformation is either considered less relevant or implemented only superficially to maintain the organisation's external appearance without achieving more profound change. In these cases, digital transformation is often more about image than actual transformation. The particular challenges of digital transformation arise in a context with specific characteristics, to which leadership responds with certain coping strategies. The role and meaning of inspirational motivation in this context became clear from the data and is presented in the final theme below.

4.1.5. Theme 5: A Coherent Vision Is Crucial

The fifth theme addresses the role and meaning of inspirational motivation in leadership practice in the selected context, from a top management perspective (research objective 2). The data indicate that the term inspirational motivation barely resonated with IP and was not associated with transformational leadership in general or with the development of an (attractive) vision in particular. IP-6 answers the question of how leadership can motivate in an inspiring way:

IP-6: “The one that motivates in an inspiring way? I’m having a hard time finding an answer somehow.” (6-21op9: 68-69)

Alternatively, IP-3 describes:

IP-3: “Can’t think of anything at the moment. Inspiring? (...) So, to motivate people? (...) Yes, if that’s meant (is), yes, no, can’t think of anything.” (3-77vdu: 116-121)

The connection between the role and meaning of inspirational motivation and the participants’ perspectives only became visible after actively offering ‘vision’ as an anchor term in the second half of several interviews. Following this introduction, the vision was perceived as crucial for a successful digital transformation. However, for a vision to be effective, it must be made as tangible as possible for various stakeholders both internal and external to the organisation and must be grounded in individuals’ concrete experiences.

The advantages associated with digital transformation also play a critical role in this process. Moreover, effective communication is essential to ensure the vision is comprehensible to all stakeholders, thereby facilitating the presentation of a clear, concrete vision of the future to a broad audience. The title of this theme is ‘*A coherent and perceptible vision is crucial*’. Before the theme and sub-themes are discussed in more detail below, Figure 17 provides an overview.

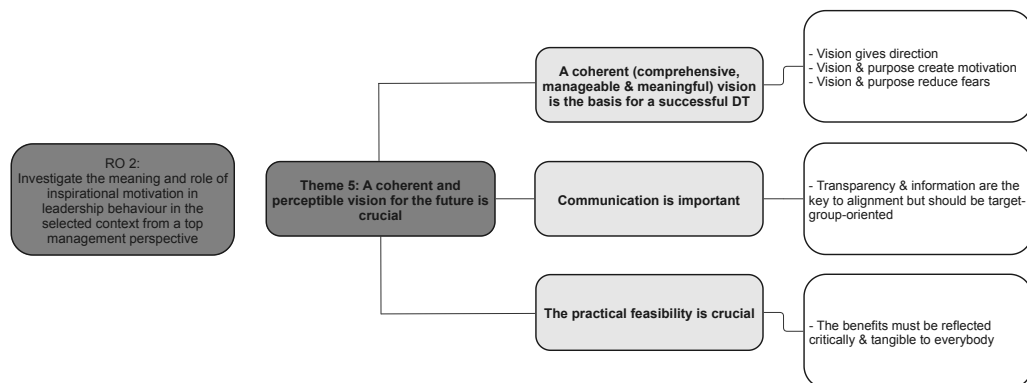


Figure 17: Theme 5 – ‘A coherent and perceptible vision is crucial’
Source: Own illustration.

4.1.5.1. A Coherent Vision Is the Basis for a Successful Digital Transformation

The definition of digital transformation as an objective in itself appears to have limited applicability; conceptualising digital transformation as a means to an end presents a more effective alternative. Furthermore, emphasising the purpose behind the objective is considered essential, as highlighted by IP-1:

IP-1: "So it doesn't just need a goal in the sense of 'we want to go digital'; but... yes, why? Why are you running along with them? And that, I think, is what could, should, should be strengthened." (1-Ns9u: 68)

IP-13 points out that an inspiring vision can make a significant contribution to motivation and describes it from its own experience:

IP-13: "I actually had a boss like that. I was always hooked when I saw the big picture. If I have the feeling that I can work on a vision of something big, then it's totally inspiring for me." (13-y4p91: 83)

According to IP-7, an inspiring vision is what makes people want to commit themselves to an uncertain future in the first place:

IP-7: "(...) But if I don't have a vision or an idea of what the future might look like, then I wouldn't know where the motivation to move in that direction comes from." (7-1bu3D: 105)

IP-3 also perceives the role of a vision as crucial:

IP-3: "So if I don't take people with me, in the context of a vision, to try something out or achieve a specific goal, to implement something, and I can't inspire them, then I shouldn't even start." (3-77vdu: 122-125)

IP-11 clarifies the role and meaning of visions for management:

IP-11: "(...) to give a bit of a perspective. Yes, where do we want to go as a company, where do we want to go as a department?" (11-x6ToA: 63)

The meaningfulness of a vision or an image of the future in relation to digital transformation is not only important for municipal services organisations, but, for IP-4, it is relevant for society:

IP-4: "We will need to talk about what it also means for a society when it sets out on the path of digital transformation. And I believe these discussions can only be held if I have a picture. (...) In what direction are we developing as a society and in what direction am I perhaps developing personally when I set out on the path and also use things, perhaps change my work?" (4-asD9f: 21)

With a vision, the associated steps should always be linked to a 'why', i.e. the purpose of the change. IP-10 puts it as follows:

IP-10: "People only act if they can somehow recognise a corresponding meaning in it. If you don't do it, it will fail anyway." (10-ick27: 89)

When communicated appropriately, a vision can allay fears, as IP-9 points out:

IP-9: "(...) And I think you can use it to create an abstract vision. And then perhaps you have a chance of allaying fears by seeing and understanding the big picture." (9-BfK2U: 82-83)

In this context, IP-1 recognises communication with and about a vision as crucial, which in turn can reduce fears:

IP-1: "So communication, employee involvement. Making it clear to the people at the top: what does that even mean? So, what are we actually planning to do? To openly address the pros and cons, to allay fears." (1-Ns9u: 51)

4.1.5.2. Communication Is Important

Communication plays a decisive role in the context of a vision and the implementation of digital transformation. For IP-2, appropriate communication is the very basis for development:

IP-2: "I think that first of all, people need to know what is happening. I think that is the basic principle. They need to be informed in a transparent way, to say: What are we actually planning?" (2-7sAZ: 127)

Among other things, IP-4 adds that it is also important that these communications include all stakeholders and that this be made clear using the example of different age cohorts in companies:

IP-4: "I think it is also a question of age, of course. I think that you have to address the older colleagues who are in positions of responsibility more directly and take them with you on the way. You also have to suggest to them that it is worth getting involved in this process because it offers enormous added value." (4-asD9f: 43)

IP-5 follows on from this and makes it clear that the purpose of digital transformation must first be understood and then always be visible:

IP-5: "That means it has to be categorisable in terms of purpose – and that means the purpose has to be visible and understandable. It has to be understood first, and then it has to be visible so that it remains present." (5-2z17D: 179)

IP-10 points out that leadership is a crucial factor in the success of change in general, and of digital transformation, and the leadership communication associated with it in particular:

IP-10: "You can only manage the transformation process if you have good managers who recognise the advantages of digital transformation. If they are convinced of this and then communicate it to the workforce and implement it accordingly." (10-ick27: 67)

IP-6 also combines the role of leadership with the meaning of a vision and communication:

IP-6: "So the main task of the manager is, first and foremost, to communicate clearly the strategies, the goals, the purpose of the company. That is to say: What is our actual job? What do we do and what do we want to achieve? Right. And then to provide the framework needed for this – and then simply to ensure good communication among people." (6-21op9: 41)

IP-2 summarises the role and importance of both development and communication of a convincing vision as follows:

IP-2: "Yes, in the end, a big one. That's clear. (...) how do I ultimately get the topics across? With what conviction do I do it? With what self-understanding do I do it? I think that's the key point. If, in the end, employees don't know what is actually happening, why it is happening and how it should happen, I can't expect people to be motivated and enthusiastic about implementing it, or to use such topics. Rather, I shouldn't be surprised if they walk around with big question marks and are somewhat reserved about it." (2-7sAZ: 124-125)

4.1.5.3. The Practical Feasibility Is Crucial

Translating a vision into the (operational) daily routine of everyone is a decisive factor for the acceptance of the vision and the associated developments. IP-1 sees a vision as fundamentally important, as does communication. However, it also becomes clear that reflecting the benefits is essential:

IP-1: "So, this discussion I experience in the rounds where I am often (...) is then at: 'we have to become more digital'. Yes, that's it. And just this why? How? Where exactly? What do we really get out of it? What does the individual get out of it? Pros and cons. And that, I believe, is the more important role than setting a goal." (1-Ns9u: 68)

IP-2 also emphasises the translation of the vision into the everyday lives of those involved as a prerequisite for people being willing to follow it in the end:

IP-2: "When it comes to the translation, I can only get it if I define specific measures. In my view, that is always [...] the way I get it translated. The measures have to be specific and broken down. The individual aspects of this overarching topic and goal can then be addressed afterwards. That's the only way for employees to grasp it." (2-7sAZ: 134-135)

It is therefore insufficient to communicate a vision at the organisational level; rather, this vision must be reflected in the individual areas, and the benefits of digital transformation must be experienced (individually), or as IP-9 puts it:

IP-9: "(...) the overall strategy, of course, highlights all the issues that need to be addressed. But the strategy itself is not an end in itself. Rather, it is about going into the individual areas and saying that if we do this, this is the benefit." (9-BfK2U: 84-85)

IP-10 – who sees oneself as having an operational perspective – responded to the question of what role a convincing vision plays in relation to digital transformation, the following becomes clear:

IP-10: "Yes, it's always so difficult, isn't it? Well, I always think of science fiction somehow, don't I? (...) Well, I think you should never lose your grip on reality, don't you? Not be too visionary either. I have the problem that I am very much influenced by the operational level. And that means I'm very down-to-earth there, too." (10-ick27: 96-99)

Concerning the concerns associated with digital transformation, IP-4 recognises an important aspect that counteracts the 'fears' – particularly when the advantages of digital transformation can be experienced in the individual workplaces:

IP-4: "(...) I think it's very, very important to ensure that the advantages of digital transformation can be experienced at certain points in the implementation process. That the work simplifications can be experienced. That the productivity increases can be experienced. That my own benefit, which I feel as an employee, so to speak, is somehow present. Then I see no reason why I should pessimistically close myself off from this story or face it with fear." (4-asD9f: 71)

4.1.5.4. Summary of Theme 5: A Coherent and Perceptible Vision Is Key
The data show that the term inspirational motivation has hardly resonated with the IPs. In contrast, a vision was identified as a key factor for the success of digital transformation. However, this vision must be tangible for various stakeholders within and outside the organisation and must be anchored in the concrete experiences of the actors involved. In this context, communicating the benefits of digital transformation is central to conveying a clear, understandable vision of future developments and their (especially positive) effects.

4.1.6. Theme Map: Consolidated Overview of the Five Main Themes

The interviews revealed the five themes presented above and related sub-themes, providing rich insights both in relation to the research objectives and at the intersections among the three core topics of this thesis: leadership, municipal services, and digital transformation. Figure 18 shows the themes again in an overview that also reveals initial connections between the individual elements:

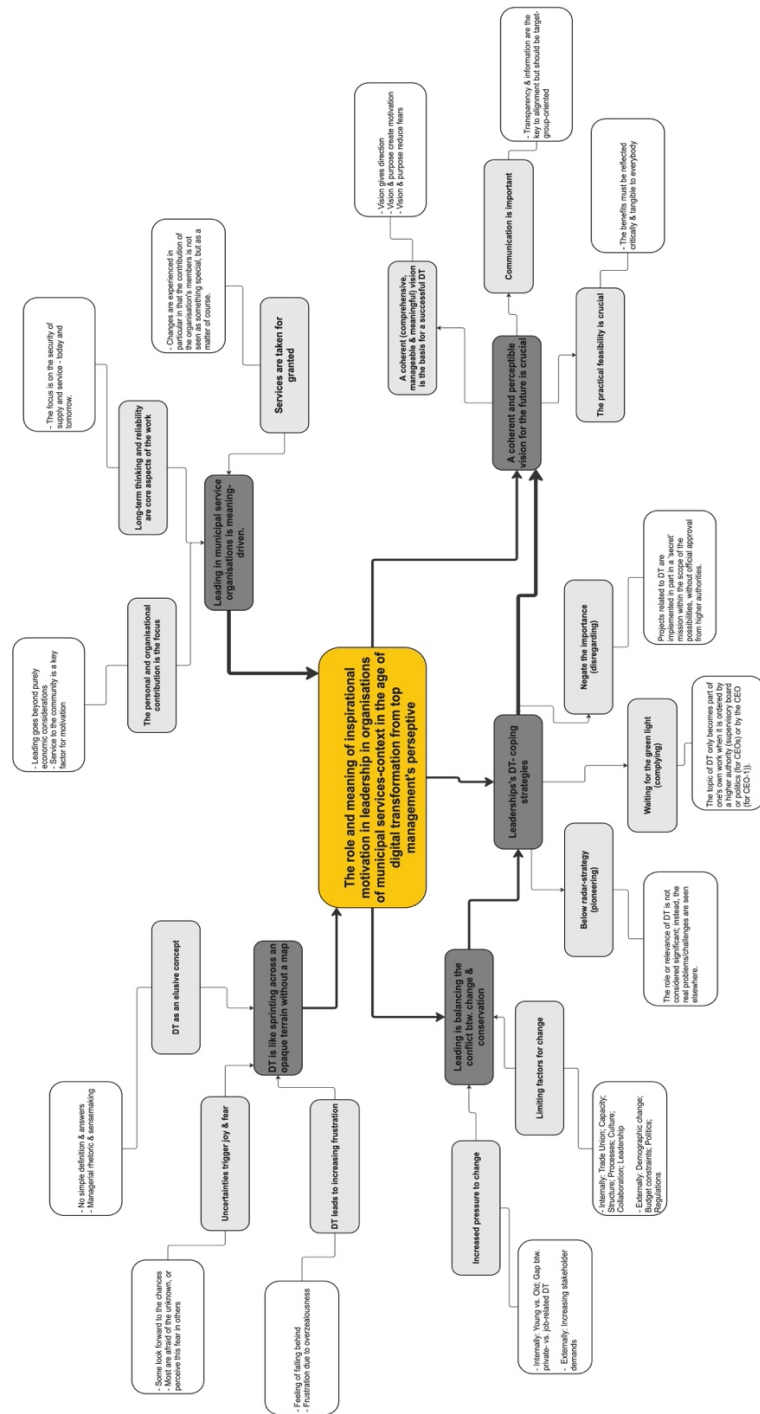


Figure 18: Conceptual map
Source: Own illustration.

4.2. Reflection on Preliminary Results With Top Managers and Exploration of Transferability

The previous Sub-Chapter 4.1 presented the results of the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) based on 16 interviews with top managers from the selected context. The next step was to explore and reflect on leadership development steps towards inspirational motivation (IM) in the age of digital transformation (DT) with top managers. For this purpose, three top managers from the selected context were recruited for the next step, who agreed to reflect on this question based on the themes developed. This reflection was not used as a form of validation of the findings, but as a (member) reflection and a process of sensemaking with three top managers who had already made it clear in the first interview that they were very interested in the results and willing to be available for further discussion. The aim was to explore how the results could be translated and made usable for leadership. First, Table 11 provides an overview of the reflection partners (RP):

No.	Date Interview	Management-Level	Age-Cohort	Years in Top Management Context	Experience outside context
1	May 2025	CEO	50-59	>20	<5
2	Jun 2025	CEO-1	50-59	>20	<5
3	Jun 2025	CEO	50-59	>10	>25

Table 11: Overview of reflection partners
Source: Own illustration.

Figure 19 presents the structure of the reflection sessions.

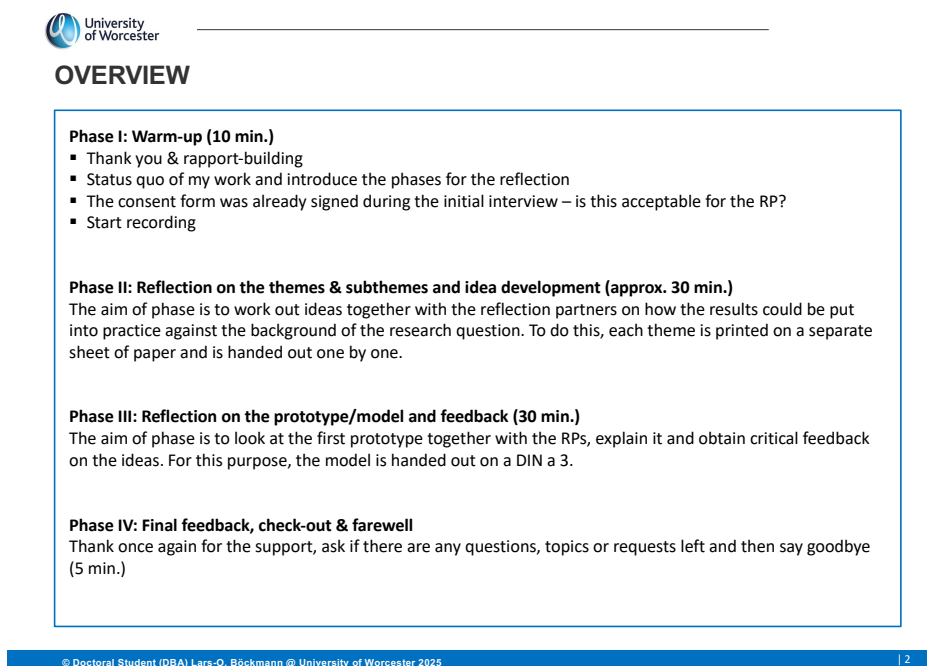


Figure 19: Structure of reflection sessions
Source: Own illustration.

It quickly became clear during the discussions that the RPs wanted to reflect much more on the themes and sub-themes (Phase II) than initially planned, so that – due to the time constraints of the discussions – relatively little time remained for Phase III. This had the disadvantage that research objective 3 – reflecting on the development steps toward leadership that demonstrates inspirational motivation – was only partially achieved in this step. However, it seemed not only necessary but also sensible to give the RPs (significantly) more time to immerse themselves in and intensively engage with the results. In addition, the preliminary results – in the form of themes and sub-themes – could be examined in greater depth and reflected upon, making them more tangible for the leadership practice of top managers. The discussions thus followed the developed, partially structured agenda (Figure 19), but with a different focus. The following sub-chapters present the key findings from the three reflections, which were also transcribed and analysed in accordance with the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA).

4.2.1. The Term “Vision”: The Challenge of Defining It

During the interview phase, particular reference was made to the term ‘inspirational motivation’, but it was not explicitly clarified that this refers to leading with a vision. The challenges surrounding the term inspirational motivation were already outlined in the previous section. In the reflections, explicit reference was made to the role and meaning of a vision in leadership, and it became clear that there is some ambiguity about how – for example – vision, target image, strategy, etc., can be classified or brought into a coherent context. RP001 combines the terms vision, purpose, goals, and strategy as follows:

RP001: “(...) Strategy comes first because it provides the vision. The vision is broken down into goals - and goals should be achievable and feasible. (...) And the vision is what gives the company its meaning.” (RP001: 41)

For RP003, the vision is comparable to a core message that is sent out to the company without the RP explaining this core message in more detail:

RP003: “I think it’s really important, I always say, to formulate a core message and the... That is, I believe, your vision.” (RP003: 13)

Later in the conversation, RP003 makes it clear that further reflection is needed on the terms “core message” and “vision”:

RP003: “Well, I’ll... I’ll think about it some more. As I said, we have... I don’t know if you would call it a target image. We have formulated some core messages.” (RP003: 159)

4.2.2. Translating Findings into Everyday Organisational Practice

During the reflection, ideas emerged on how the findings from the themes and sub-themes could be successfully translated into everyday leadership in the organisation, along with what needs to be taken into account in doing so, as shown below.

4.2.2.1. Vision and Strategy

Regarding the development of a strategy, there is a challenge in determining how it should be developed. RP003 explains:

RP003: "So, my greatest wish would be for it to come from the bottom up. (...) But there are also managers who say: 'Come on, NAME, you have to set out a strategy, how else is it supposed to work?' And: 'Otherwise, it'll be complete chaos.' This approach isn't entirely wrong either. In this respect, I think both approaches have to work. (...) That's why I would like to see a combination of the two." (RP003: 35-57)

Regarding the benefits of a vision in connection with a strategy, RP001 indicated that it is essential to use a vision and strategy to align the organisation so that everyone is working toward the same goal, although here too the terms "goals," "vision," and "strategy" are used inconsistently:

RP001: "Everyone should work towards the common goal. And this strategy for how to achieve that has a vision, a mission and a set of objectives. And then, of course, there is the question of where we want to be. We have called it 2030 plus, so where do we want to be in 2030 plus? The plus sign indicates that the world will not come to an end in 2030, but that many issues will remain unresolved." (RP001: 11)

RP002 adds that the various strategic issues must also be coordinated within an organisation, particularly in a group or holding with different areas of focus (water supply, energy supply, network operation, etc.):

RP002: "And above all, integration is crucial. It is essential to avoid a situation where one person is working on one thing and another on something else. Otherwise, you end up with excellent hydrogen pipelines but no product to go with them. And, of course, we cannot produce hydrogen because we thought it would be preferable to focus on wind energy." (RP002: 13)

RP003 makes it clear that municipal services organisations have a different role to play than companies in the private sector, and that the role of citizens must also be reflected in the strategy. When asked to what extent the topic of strategy must always be considered in a "municipal" context, RP002 responds:

RP002: "Exactly, at least as a municipal company, right? If I were at RWE or EON, for example, the approach would certainly be different. They have to think more globally." (RP002: 18-20)

4.2.2.2. Vision, Organisation, Processes and Structures

At the time of the second interview, RP003 in particular has been intensively examining the organisation itself, its structures and processes, and cooperation within the organisation:

RP003: "And that's why I'm coming back to the organisational structure. Perhaps this hierarchical structure of management, division managers, department managers and then the employees is no longer the most effective way to organise things in the future. Well, I could imagine that we no longer need division managers at all, because I am firmly convinced that... As it may have been in the past, when the managing director said, 'I want to know everything and I make the decisions and I'm also the smartest,' that no longer works. (...) Yes, and I believe that we need more decentralised management responsibility." (RP003: 129)

At the same time, the topic of digital transformation is now also reflected more or less directly in the target agreement systems of organisations, and is thus finding its way into everyday management practice:

RP003: "We have a target system. Ideally, the division managers are given targets in four quadrants. These are profitability, customer market, processes, which also includes IT, and human resources. And the colleagues who I thought might have the most potential have been given individual objectives to implement projects as part of digitalisation." (RP003: 39-41)

4.2.2.3. Vision and Communication

Communication remains a crucial issue, even though the definition of a vision is not uniform, as explained above. RP003 focuses on ensuring that a core message relating to digitalisation is repeatedly communicated within the organisation:

RP003: "(...) so that now, my colleague and I have decided to address the same core messages over and over again. At every staff meeting, at every management meeting, at every works council meeting. I think some people are already sick of hearing it. But it's important to keep reminding ourselves that these are our core messages, that they are the most important thing for ensuring consistent communication within the company." (RP003: 21)

At the same time, it is important to communicate as specifically as possible in the language of the recipients and less in management jargon:

RP003: "I always say, 'We need to make the processes more efficient.' And now my manager says to me, 'NAME, don't say "make the processes more efficient" again. No one in this shop can stand to hear that anymore.' (RP003: 19)

However, this communication must not only be established internally, but also externally to highlight the added value of digital opportunities for citizens:

RP003: "Where municipal utility customers can go to the outdoor pools more cheaply, where they can park more cheaply, but where it is made clear what kind of municipal network we have. To now also... Because ultimately, it's often about money. Creating added value and then showing that." (RP003: 93)

4.2.2.4. From Vision to Implementation

One component of approaching the topic of digital transformation is piloting or experimenting with digital applications. RP001 describes this as follows:

RP001: "For example, we currently have an AI in the pilot phase that checks whether there are any critical parts in the bunker when the garbage truck dumps its contents, as these could disrupt the incineration process. We often have problems with things like laughing gas cylinders, which explode or something similar, and the AI finds these or is designed to find them." (RP001: 29)

Introducing employees to the topics through general offerings and practical workshops in particular is also considered important, whereby RP002 considers offerings to be particularly important:

RP002: "(...) It is important to make the offer and say, 'This is the framework within which you are allowed to do this. Just give it a try.' If you feel like it, give it a try. And then those who don't take advantage of it will eventually, once it has become established and others are using it, realise that they are much slower and that the work is much more strenuous." (RP002: 37)

RP003 also reinforces this approach:

RP003: "And then we actually did some small workshops... We have a young colleague who is good at explaining things. He said, 'Look, this is how you can use ChatGPT.' And we just did it with three small examples." (RP003: 69)

RP002 adds that it is crucial for such an approach to be supported by management:

RP002: "(...) And then, of course, it's very important not to say, 'Oh, you have time for that?' It has to be supported with conviction, honesty and authenticity. And that means top-down." (RP002: 61)

4.2.2.5. Vision and Cooperation

The topic of cooperation in connection with a vision for the future can relate to a wide variety of subject areas. RP001 has taken the initiative in this regard and – in cooperation with a consulting firm – has launched a strategy development process. This process is not taking place solely with the consulting firm, but in close cooperation with the management team.:

RP001: "What we are currently doing, (...) was to develop a strategy together with an external consulting firm. Not every municipal company does this. (...) And I didn't develop this strategy by, for example, bringing in the consulting firm and saying, 'Let's spend three days working on strategy.' Instead, we did it in the form of a workshop over several sessions with the 30 top managers." (RP001: 11)

Cooperation does not only refer to managers, but – according to RP002 – ideally also involves the organisation's works council:

RP002: "But if the works council understands that – and I think that's only possible with a certain amount of enthusiasm and involvement, right? – So, if you say, 'Let's do a workshop together and see what works, what doesn't, and what your assessment is.' In other words, build trust that we don't want anything bad to happen." (RP002: 31)

For RP003, the issue goes even further: cooperation with other municipal services organisations is also being considered, particularly in light of limited financial resources – for example, in relation to digital transformation – which could then be shared by several organisations:

RP003: "(...) And now I ask myself, is this still the right tactic for the future? Or do we really need to talk about this issue in larger units, specifically in terms of cost blocks and digitalisation? And to think in the interests of citizens as well." (RP003: 105)

4.2.3. Practical Relevance from the Perspective of the Reflection Partners
During the conversations, many RPs expressed interest in the results and/or in further discussions to reflect on the content in more detail. While RP001 (only) issued an invitation to discuss the results again after the recording, RP002 and RP003 indicated that they would be interested in further reflections while recording:

RP002: "If you could provide me with that, I would appreciate it greatly." (RP002: 111)

RP003: "But actually, if you do get that far, I would be very interested, because those are questions, we ask ourselves too." (RP003: 155-157)

During the reflection on the themes, the RPs clearly emphasised that the topics are not only comprehensible but also provide important summaries of their previously vague thoughts and feelings. For example, RP002 makes the following point regarding Theme 3:

RP002: "Sprint through opaque terrain without a map. That's how it is at the moment, yes." (RP002: 41)

RP001 indicates the following in relation to the overall view:

RP001: "Yes. I share the strategic perspective; I have just reported extensively on the strategy process and can identify with it perfectly. From an operational perspective, I have not seen anything that I do not agree with." (RP001: 49)

RP003 summarises it as follows:

RP003: "That's great because it's been systematised a bit, which is basically what I talk about in everyday life." (RP003: 153)

At the same time, comments were made on a few points that reflect individual development over the past months/years. For example, RP001 makes it clear that developments have taken place in the meantime concerning Theme 1:

RP001: "(...) I agree with that, sprinting through opaque terrain, (but) in brackets without a map. So yes, I'll come back to that... So that's now a recurring theme in my strategy. (...) And that results in a digitalisation roadmap. (...) And I think that if you have a roadmap like that, at least you don't have to do it without a map." (RP001: 23)

The first interview took place more than 18 months ago, and during the conversation it became evident that a lot has changed, as can be seen in the roadmap the RP has developed, which did not exist at the time of the first interview. Essentially, the themes and sub-theme seem to capture the RP's current perspective (lifeworld) at that time and it became clear that, at least in the period between the two conversations (interview & reflection), developments have taken place – whether in the organisation or in relation to the RP's own perspective on the topic of digital transformation – which have influenced or changed the current perception compared to the first interview. This can be understood as an essential aspect of subjective or interpretative research. The research subject is not understood as something static, objective, or generalisable, but rather it is assumed that the research subject changes in the course of research, which can lead to new insights as long as the researcher is open to this, reflecting an essential premise of qualitative research (Kötter, 2008).

4.2.4. Summary of the Reflection on Preliminary Results With Top Management

The reflections with the three top managers reveal patterns that can be found in the area of tension between the theoretical concept of transformational leadership in general and inspirational motivation in particular, on the one hand, and the requirements of organisational practice on the other.

First, a semantic tension arises between the normative ideal and the pragmatic everyday practice due to the conceptual ambivalence in the understanding of vision as a core component of inspirational motivation. Terms such as vision, strategy, goals, and core messages are sometimes used synonymously, leading to a lack of clear distinction. In addition, a hybrid understanding of strategic management and thus another area of tension becomes apparent: while top-down processes are considered necessary for order and the ability to act, bottom-up participation is emphasised as a source of legitimacy and organisational learning. In this context, another area of tension between traditional forms of

hierarchy on the one hand and the need for decentralised responsibility on the other also becomes apparent.

The role of communication is also emphasised here, namely as a translation service: visions must not remain abstract but be translated into a language that employees and citizens can relate to through repeated core messages. Communication is closely related to the topic of cooperation: the vision must contribute to the legitimisation of change internally (management levels, works council, etc.), but it must also be compatible externally (for example, between municipal organisations or for politicians). Ultimately, the reflections also highlight the processual nature of this research: perceptions and interpretations are not static but evolve.

The patterns and areas of tension presented here will be used in the following to address the central research question, thereby making theoretical and practical starting points for the operationalisation of inspirational motivation as part of the transformational leadership approach apparent. Before the results are presented and discussed in Chapter 5, the next sub-chapter will first consolidate the data by tracing the findings developed in the form of themes, sub-themes and patterns in the two previous sections (interviews and reflections) and linking them to the initial objectives of this research on the development of inspirational motivation in municipal services organisations in the age of digital transformation.

4.3. Consolidation: Visionary Leadership in Municipal Services Organisations in the Digital Age

The findings presented in the previous section, all of which are based on the data, are linked below by re-examining the entire dataset (interviews and reflections) against the backdrop of the question of the extent to which concrete references to the central research question could be identified.

For this purpose, a question directly related to the research question was derived from each theme and sub-theme. For example, the question of *how a specific aspect (e.g., personal and organisational contribution) can contribute to the development of inspirational motivation (IM) in the context of municipal services organisations (MSOs) in the digital age* was derived from Sub-Theme 1 of Theme 1 ('The personal & organisational contribution is the focus'). The main reason for this approach is that the findings – grounded in the data – should not remain theoretically abstract but contribute to practical application.

The following synthesis is framed as ‘reflected inspirational motivation’ (RIM) and is based on the preceding analyses, supplemented by findings from the reflection sessions in 2025 and the researcher’s interpretation. To clarify this expanded perspective, the term ‘RIM’ is used here to refer to an empirically based, context-specific elaboration of inspirational motivation that integrates interviews, reflections, and the researcher’s reflexive approach in this research. In Chapter 5, the concept of RIM is revisited, further developed, and expanded upon as the central conceptual approach of this research.

4.3.1. Purpose-Driven Leadership and Reflected Inspirational Motivation

When reflecting on the first theme and the associated sub-themes, the first step was to establish the connection between inspirational motivation and Theme 1, plus the three sub-themes. Figure 20 provides an overview of Theme 1:

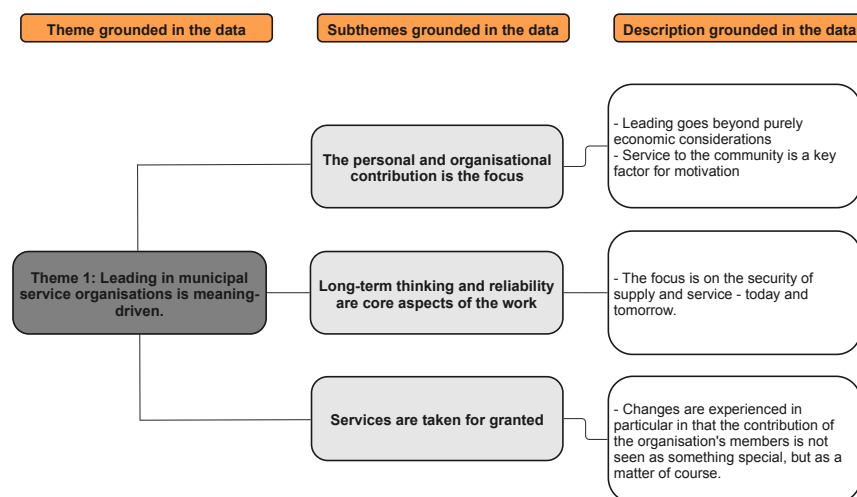


Figure 20: Theme 1 preparation for reflection sessions
Source: Own illustration.

The next step was to explore how the theme and sub-themes could be linked to inspirational motivation, and how the insights from the interviews and reflections could be connected to the central research question.

Against this background, questions were developed for each sub-theme that a framework/concept must answer (research objective 4). For Theme 1, the derived questions are:

- *How can the aspect of personal and organisational contribution help to develop an inspiring vision?*
- *How can the aspects of security of supply and service become an integral part of an inspiring vision?*

- *How can the fact that services are taken for granted be woven into an inspiring vision in such a way that it has a positive effect on how organisations are perceived?*

The questions identified from the sub-themes of Theme 1 could therefore represent requirements for developing an inspiring vision; rather, the vision should provide answers to the questions presented here regarding digital transformation within municipal services organisations.

The key question here is *how* such a vision should be developed, and the data clearly showed that several approaches are possible: for example, co-creation with the support of external consultants and various internal stakeholders (all managers, including the works council, etc.). Fundamentally, RP001 considers the joint development of a vision that can also be linked to the purpose of the organisation to be essential:

RP001: "That this contribution is developed jointly so that it is accepted – and thus, of course, passed on to the team. And, of course, the ultimate goal is what we are here for: providing public services or, to put it more nicely, serving the community. Because that must be our key motivating factor; that is what we are here for." (RP001: 11)

IP-2 also sees employee participation as an important aspect:

IP-2: "Yes, ultimately, for me, this is clearly a matter of employee participation. By saying: OK, we need to look at who the relevant employee groups are that I need for this. Both in terms of expertise and in terms of hierarchical levels or tiers. And basically, involve them in the process." (2-7sAZ: 133)

IP-5 sees it the same way:

IP-5: "If we want to make this a reality for everyone, then I believe it is almost essential that we develop it together. This is a process that takes a very long time for the people I have encountered in my experience so far, because they have been shaped by their experiences over a long period of time and in very different ways. Developing this together, committing to developing it together, creating it together – that will be the real art." (5-2z17D: 175)

IP-6 emphasises that it is important to allow sufficient time and space for this:

IP-6: "And I think that's precisely the challenge: consciously taking time and saying, "This is when I'm creative. This is when I think about where we want to go. But that's also when I engage in dialogue with others." Right? And then we simply withdraw from our everyday lives as managers and take the time and space to think about this development, to think about the added value. And then we translate that into, let's say, comprehensible." (6-21op9: 75)

IP-1 considers the overarching discussion to be important, while IP-3 makes it clear that external support may also be useful if it is not possible or difficult to achieve on its own:

IP-1: "So, let's call a meeting and have a serious discussion. Perhaps across departmental boundaries." (1-Ns9u: 70)

IP-3: "If I don't have people around me (...) then we're back to square one, and I need to find someone outside the company who can perhaps support us in this area." (3-77vdu: 127)

The next step was to combine the insights gained from the data – both from the interviews and from the reflections – and formulate appropriate answers to the above questions. Figure 21 provides an overview of the (sub-)themes, key questions, and possible answers that have been considered:

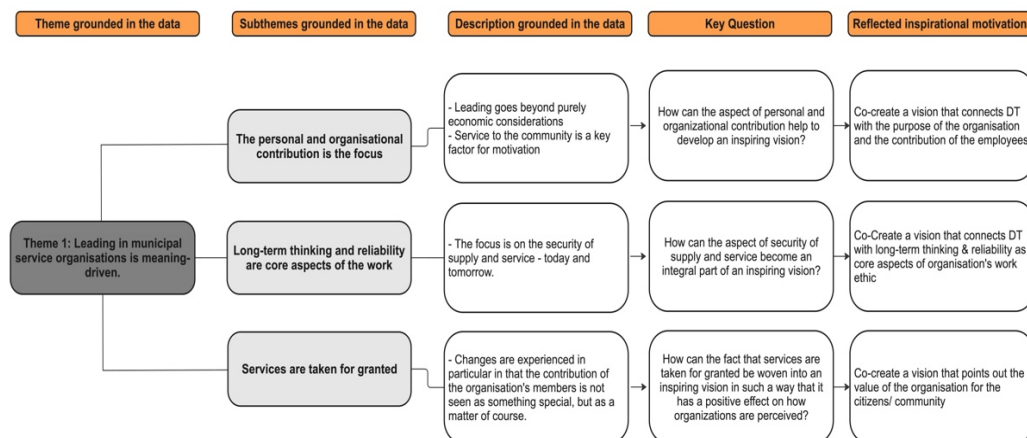


Figure 21: Theme 1 after re-examination
Source: Own illustration.

The primary goal could be to (co-)create a vision that connects digital transformation to the organisation's purpose and the contributions of its employees. It could also be important to incorporate long-term thinking and reliability as core values of the work in these organisations. Finally, it could be important to develop a vision that also highlights the meaning and value of the organisations for citizens and the community.

4.3.2. Leading: Balancing Change and Conservation and Reflected Inspirational Motivation

The increasing pressure on the one hand and the simultaneous limitations on the other, both internal and external, have already been described in detail in Sub-Chapter 4.1.2. Figure 22 provides a summary of Theme 2:

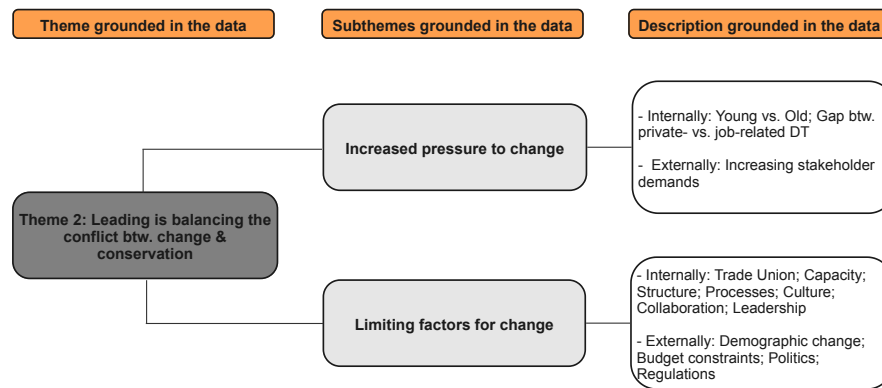


Figure 22: Theme 2 preparation for reflection sessions
Source: Own illustration.

For Theme 2, the questions derived are:

- *How can an inspiring vision help to cope with increasing pressure of DT (e.g., triggered by increasing customer expectations)?*
- *How can an inspiring vision help to deal with the prevailing limitations (trade unions, culture, structures, processes, politics, etc.) with regard to DT?*

The tension between these two sub-themes, i.e., between increasing pressure on the one hand and limiting factors on the other, certainly cannot be completely resolved by inspirational motivation. At the same time, a shared vision – incorporating different perspectives in its development – could lead to a reflected vision and thus to RIM, because it involves different perspectives. This could be achieved by a vision that highlights opportunities for digital transformation and creates a (limiting) framework for the specific organisation, so that it becomes clear where the journey is headed and thus creates predictability for future and long-term developments. As described by RP001:

RP001: “To ensure that the organisational contribution is actually made, the strategy provides us with a framework, right? (...) And once this strategy has been developed and agreed upon, we pass it on to our shareholders. It is then translated into a medium-term plan and reflected in the annual results. (...) And in this respect, yes, we are thinking long-term so that we can work reliably.” (RP001: 11)

RP002 considers it essential for the entire process that the need for change is explained, as are the opportunities that will arise from digital transformation:

RP002: “And I think it’s a lot about explaining things and fostering understanding. And the pressure to change, even when you explain it. You see, I’m a fan of explaining things, of explaining that there is pressure, that there is a need, but that we are now going down this path together.” (RP002: 80)

RP003 emphasises that communication and cooperation with external stakeholders such as politicians should be taken into account:

RP003: “(...) We have a young mayor. I don’t agree with everything he does... Well, there is definitely potential for conflict. But he has addressed the issue of digitalisation in a digitalisation task force, made it a top priority and is pushing it forward in the city. I think that’s good, because then you can say: ‘Yes, we have to get involved in that too.’” (RP003: 133)

This joint development of a vision reveals necessities and opportunities that can be directly linked to a larger context, e.g., the political landscape. In summary, the aim could be to face up to the necessity or pressure for change through the joint development and/or reflection of a vision, identify prevailing limiting factors, and actively shape these.

The next step was to link the insights gained from the data – both from the interviews and from the reflections – and formulate appropriate answers to the above questions, as shown in Figure 23 below:

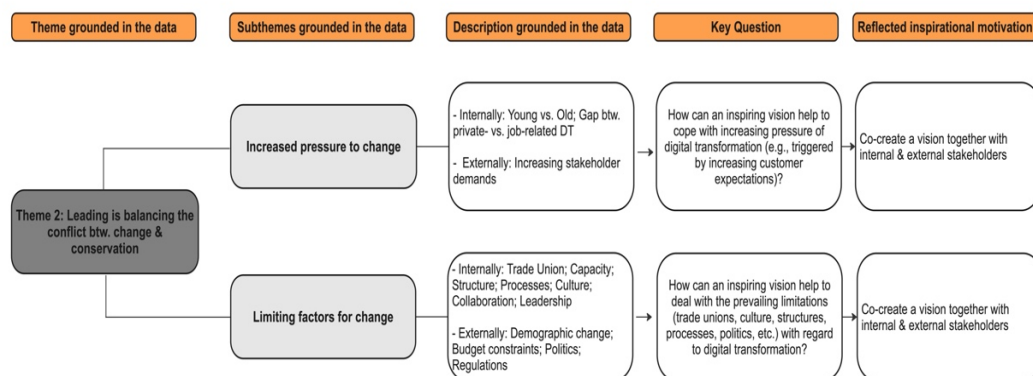


Figure 23: Theme 2 after re-examination
Source: Own illustration.

The focus could be particularly on involving external stakeholders in developing a vision alongside internal stakeholders, thereby winning over political parties, elected representatives, and citizens for digital transformation at an early stage. Recognising digital transformation as a transformation process that encompasses many areas of life and developing a vision that is capable of building bridges – for example, between generations, rising customer expectations and limitations (financial, regulatory, etc.) – is a central concern of this theme and the answers that arise from the questions shown in the sub-themes.

4.3.3. Digital Transformation: An Opaque Terrain Without a Map & Reflected Inspirational Motivation

The core of this theme is that the phenomenon of digital transformation is difficult for the top managers to grasp, and that it triggers feelings of joy and – above all – fears. In addition, dealing with digital transformation can lead to frustration stemming from various sources. Figure 24 provides an overview of Theme 3.

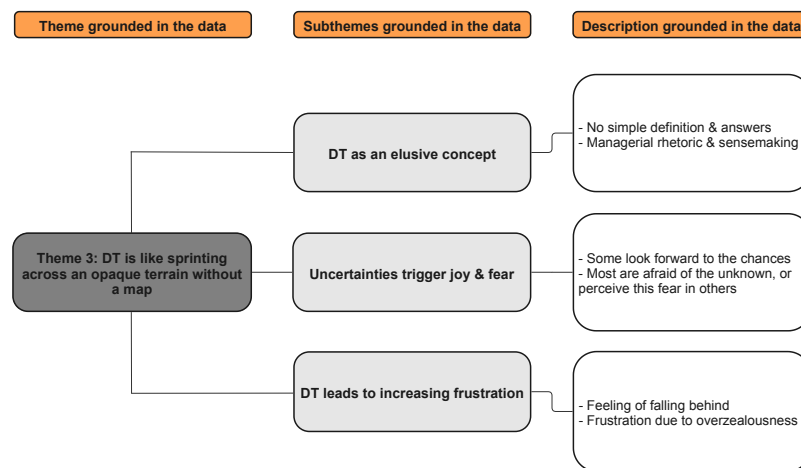


Figure 24: Theme 3 preparation for reflection sessions
Source: Own illustration.

For Theme 3, the derived questions are:

- *How can DT be transformed into a lucid concept in the organisation?*
- *How can fears be reduced and DT-confidence be strengthened?*
- *How can DT-related frustrations be overcome?*

The data show that ongoing engagement with the topic of digital transformation – e.g., through workshops – appears necessary to make it understandable to people and alleviate any associated fears. The sub-theme of frustration could be addressed, for example, through a roadmap that aligns with the vision and strategy. This would at least provide clarity on which priorities are chosen and why. In relation to the sub-theme, RP001 recognises the following value in a vision referred to here as a “target image”:

RP001: “The target image can convey a message. It can show that it has been accepted by management. It can demonstrate that there is a way forward. It can appease those who say, ‘It’s all too slow for me,’ at least to the extent that they can see that, well, things are moving forward, and nothing is being left behind. And it gives those who say, ‘It’s all too fast for us,’ the opportunity to see what the next steps are, which makes things a little more predictable (...).” RP001: 24-25)

In addition, measures must be put in place to make digital transformation tangible for everyone in the organisation and reduce uncertainty. RP001 recognises a

clear roadmap for digital transformation as a key factor in making the unknown more tangible for those around it:

RP001: “(...) So, of course, this is now a recurring theme in my strategy. One result of this is the question of where we want to go, what we need and whether we have enough staff. And if not, how can we solve this problem in another way? This results in a digitalisation roadmap.” (RP001: 23)

RP001 adds to the impact that a vision can have:

RP001: “And we don’t know what advantages all this offers. We just do it because everyone else does. And then we’re in the cloud and someone says, ‘Yeah, then Donald Trump shuts down the cloud, and I can’t work tomorrow.’ And that fuels fears. And with AI, we don’t know either, so we’d better not do it, because it could be bad and everything could turn out terrible. And to take that away, you need a vision.” (RP001: 41)

Beyond the overarching strategic level, it is particularly important to create specific moments for testing tools and procedures. RP002 describes it as follows:

RP002: “Really say: ‘Now let’s do a workshop.’ (...) And I believe that you can only take away fears by showing what something actually is. I think most people who are afraid have never used it before. They only hear about all the bad things it can do. Instead, invite them by saying: “Come on, let’s give it a try. (...) If someone says afterwards, ‘It still scares me,’ I think it’s still on a different level. And then at least you’re on the path to digitalisation(...).” (RP002: 57-59)

RP003 already reports on initial experiences in this regard:

RP003: “And then we actually held small workshops... We have a young colleague who is good at explaining things. He said, ‘Look, this is how you can use ChatGPT.’ And we simply demonstrated this using three small examples.” (RP003: 69)

The next step was to link the insights gained from the data – both from the interviews and from the reflections – and formulate appropriate answers to the above questions (Figure 25):

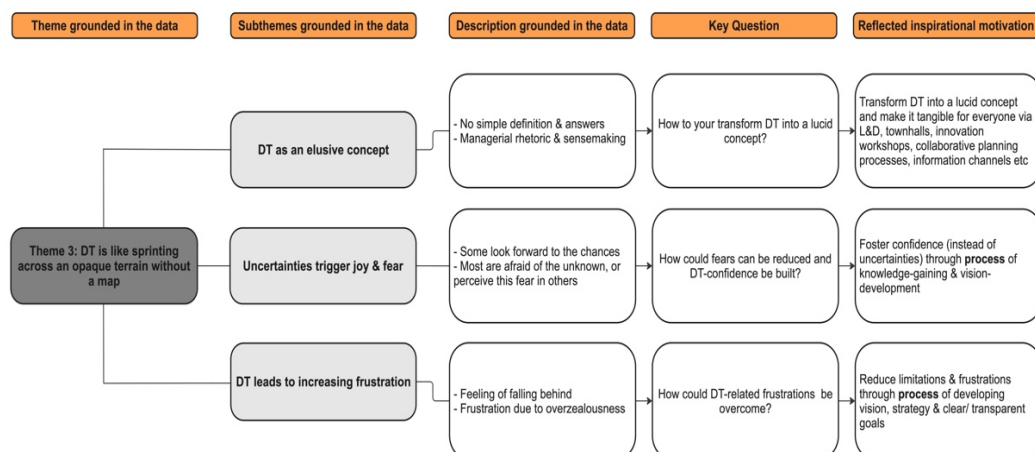


Figure 25: Theme 3 after re-examination
Source: Own illustration.

Transforming digital transformation into a lucid concept – for example, through workshops, learning and development initiatives or joint events (such as project planning) – could be an essential anchor point for successful transformation. This process of knowledge-gathering and trial-and-error could also offer an opportunity to reduce concerns about digital developments. Regarding frustrations, a vision and related strategy and roadmap could help alleviate them by creating predictability and planning and letting those affected know when to expect which development steps.

4.3.4. Coping Strategies and Reflected Inspirational Motivation

As already outlined in Sub-Chapter 4.1.4, three basic patterns emerged from the data regarding how top managers deal with the challenges of digital transformation and which challenges they recognise (pioneering, complying, disregarding). Figure 26 provides an overview of Theme 4:

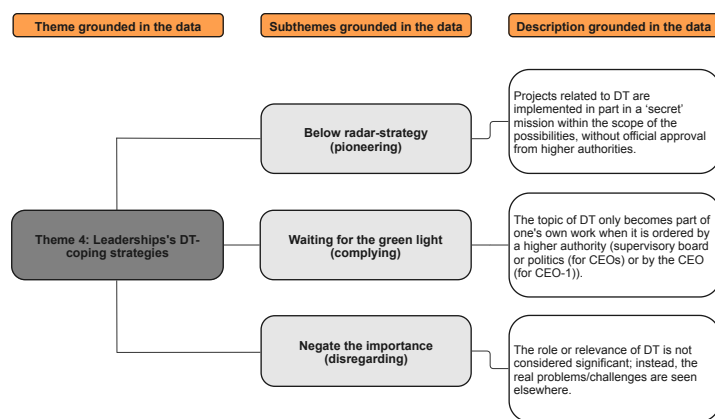


Figure 26: Theme 4 preparation for reflection sessions
Source: Own illustration.

This raised three fundamental questions about how these three coping mechanisms could be further developed or utilised so that – for example, through alternative coping mechanisms – the challenges could be overcome in the sense of inspirational motivation. For Theme 4, the derived questions are:

- *How could leaders use an inspiring vision to promote DT projects more effectively and 'officially' rather than 'under the radar'?*
- *How can managers use an inspiring vision to ensure that topics related to DT are planned proactively and independently and implemented in a self-organised manner?*
- *How can DT be given a lasting and appropriate significance?*

Here, again the data from the reflections provided information as to what answers to these questions might look like, starting with a clear positioning of top management on the topic of digital transformation, as summarised by RP002:

RP002: “So, it has to be supported with conviction, honesty and authenticity. And that means top-down.” (RP002: 61)

RP001 emphasises the importance of top management in this context:

RP001: “Otherwise, precisely because we would otherwise be navigating unfamiliar terrain without a map, AI is clearly a management task for the higher authority, as stated here. This is not supervisory board policy at our organisation; it is clearly the responsibility of the top management, which creates the framework for this within the strategy, which is then translated into a roadmap that everyone will hopefully support.” (RP001: 29)

A steering team can, for example, provide important impetus to move digital transformation forward in a sustainable manner, while project teams can develop digital transformation-related topics with a high degree of personal responsibility, as RP003 explains:

RP003: “We do lots of small projects. (...) So, we’ve also founded a group, or rather it founded itself, called the Innovation Team (...)” (RP003: 47-49)

The next step is to combine the insights gained from the data – both from the interviews and from the reflections – and formulate appropriate answers to the questions above (Figure 27):

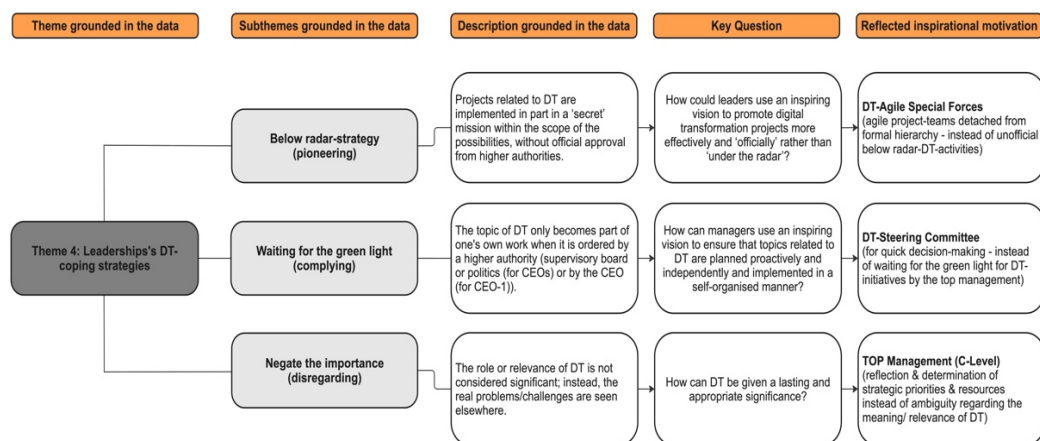


Figure 27: Theme 4 after re-examination
Source: Own illustration.

To provide answers to the coping mechanisms identified in the data and related questions, three organisational and structural elements were identified. First, digital transformation (agile) special forces/ project or innovations teams could be used to advance certain topics (agilely) without these activities having to take place under the radar. In this context, a steering committee could make a

significant contribution to ensuring that decisions are made more quickly, rather than always relying on extensive coordination processes at the top management level. For both aspects, it could be crucial that top management (C-level) takes an active role in shaping digital transformation, assuming responsibility for it, prioritising it entrepreneurially and making resources available. On the other hand, it could also be important to delegate responsibility for operational activities, which could be controlled by the steering committee and carried out in the (agile) project teams.

4.3.5. A Coherent Vision and Reflected Inspirational Motivation

When working with a vision that fulfils the characteristics discussed here, it could be essential that it also resonates within the organisation. The development of a vision should therefore not only fulfil the characteristics listed in Sub-Chapter 4.3.1 but also play a key role in communicating it, emphasising the added value of digital transformation in the daily (working) lives of people inside and outside the organisation. Figure 28 provides an overview of Theme 5:

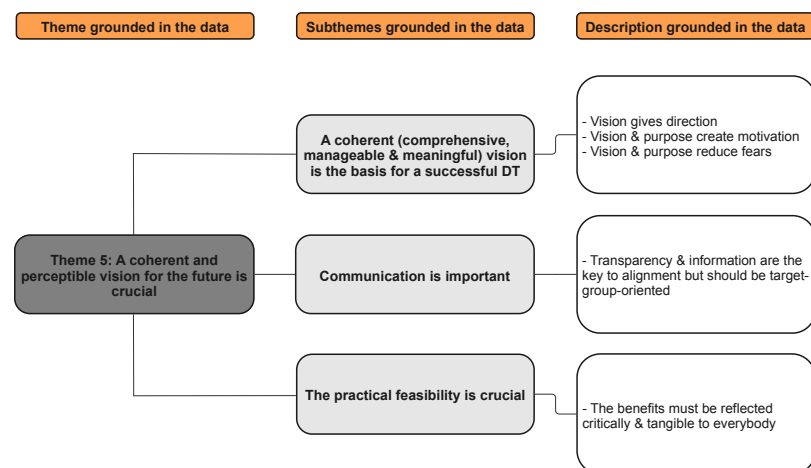


Figure 28: Theme 5 preparation for reflection sessions
Source: Own illustration.

For Theme 5, the derived questions are:

- *What could a coherent vision look and feel like?*
- *How can target group-oriented communication of the vision in terms of transparency best succeed in the specific organisation?*
- *How can the benefits of the vision in relation to DT be made tangible for the employees in the organisation?*

RP001 considers the benefits of a vision to include the fact that a group of companies gains direction under a shared vision:

RP001: “By showing the big picture, namely the overarching goal and how it adds value for the group. For example, if ... Well, we have eight subsidiaries, and if each had its own merchandise management system, its own ERP system, then we would have no idea how to produce consolidated annual financial statements.” (RP001: 31)

In this context, the importance of targeting specific groups is also emphasised, which must then also relate to different parts of the company:

RP001: “So yes, communication is extremely important, crucial even. Transparency is important. It needs to be targeted at specific groups, but also at the group as a whole, so that it can be managed. And practical feasibility is key.” (RP001: 41)

To bring the vision closer to the people in the organisation, this could be done through small interventions in everyday life, as RP001 further explains:

RP001: “You have to playfully show them the added value. And that’s what we’ve tried to do with this Office Hero, by explaining things, showing the advantages, picking out individual applications, creating a recognition factor and, of course, setting rules. But we also try to provide support and thereby alleviate fears. So, no one is left behind, and everyone understands why we are doing it.” (RP001: 41)

In conclusion, it seems clear that digital transformation is essential for ensuring that the organisation can continue to fulfil its core mission in the future. When asked what role digital transformation will play in the future of the municipal services organisations, RO002 replied:

“RP002: “It won’t work without digitalisation, no chance (...).” (RP002: 70-71)

The next step is to combine the insights gained from the data – both from the interviews and from the reflections – and formulate appropriate answers to the questions above (Figure 29):

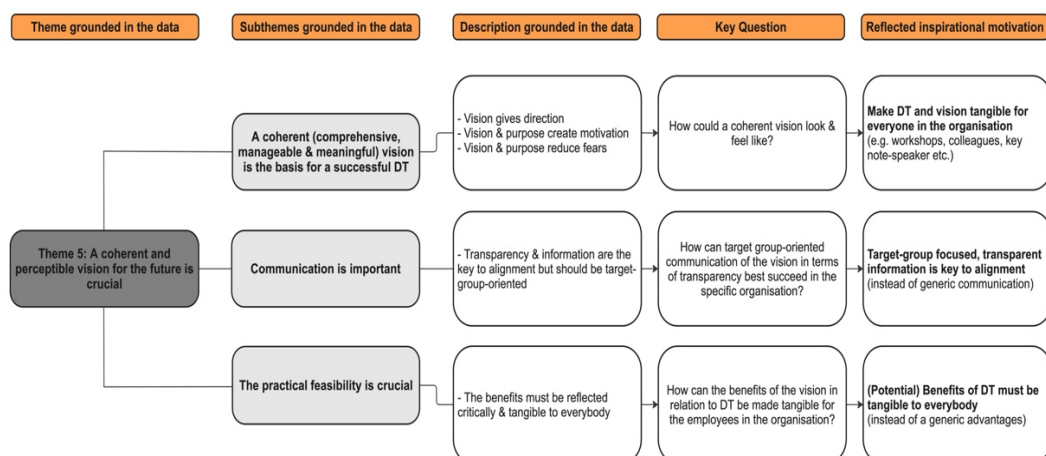


Figure 29: Theme 5 after re-examination
Source: Own illustration.

It seems crucial that, taking into account the conditions/requirements for a successful vision (Theme 1) and the aspects to consider when involving stakeholders (Theme 2), DT should be made tangible for people both within and outside the organisation. Starting with a well-thought-out communication strategy that considers different target groups, and the specific advantages digital transformation could bring to each organisation, the benefits should be made tangible for everyone. In this way, it could be possible to gradually transfer digital transformation into the organisation through a vision, strategy, roadmap, etc., and shape the organisation's future.

4.3.6. Consolidation and Link to Research Objectives 3 and 4

The preceding analysis and synthesis have demonstrated how the empirical findings contribute to answering the research questions of this thesis across five interrelated themes. While research objectives 1 and 2 were addressed in Chapter 4.1, the following section consolidates how the data relates to research objectives 3 and 4 by explicitly linking the empirical findings to leadership development and the operationalisation of a practice-oriented model.

With regard to research objective 3, the results suggest that the development of leadership towards inspirational motivation in the context of digital transformation in municipal services organisations goes beyond individual competencies and should be understood as a multidimensional and process-oriented phenomenon that follows iterative learning and adaptation loops. This development is supported in particular by experimental and safe spaces in which new perspectives and behaviours can be tested, as described by RP002:

"This is the framework within which you are allowed to do this. Just give it a try." (RP002: 37).

Across the various themes, it becomes clear that leadership development is closely linked to the ability to formulate a purpose-aligned vision, navigate tensions between stability and change, and deal with uncertainty in a reflective and adaptive manner. This encompasses, in particular, alignment with the public mandate, as IP13, amongst others, puts it succinctly:

IP13: "Well, the biggest difference compared to a private company, for example, would be, in my opinion, that you take responsibility for the region and for the people and ultimately also for your city, that is your municipal role." (13-y4p91: 5)

The data also suggest that inspirational motivation does not arise from isolated leadership behaviours or practices but is shaped by the continuous interplay of vision development, communication practices and organisational embedding. With regard to the communicative dimension, it is evident that the repeated and consistent communication of key messages plays a decisive role. As RP003 emphasises:

“We have decided to address the same core messages over and over again. (...) It’s important to keep reminding ourselves that these are our core messages.” (RP003: 21).

More specifically, the results show that leadership development encompasses strengthening narrative and communicative skills, facilitating participatory and co-creative processes, and translating abstract visions into concrete organisational practices. The central importance of this translation is illustrated by RP001:

“The vision is broken down into goals – and goals should be achievable and feasible. (...) And the vision is what gives the company its meaning.” (RP001: 41).

In this sense, leadership development is not limited to the expansion of individual skills but requires the targeted design of organisational frameworks that enable inspirational motivation to be generated and sustainably embedded. These include, for example, aligning strategic objectives with operational realities and creating spaces for interaction and reflection. With regard to research objective 4, the results provide a basis for the development of a practice-oriented model by demonstrating how inspirational motivation can be operationalised within the organisational context of municipal services organisations. The data illustrate that a coherent vision alone is insufficient unless it is systematically translated into structures, processes and everyday organisational life. Or as RP003 puts it:

“As it may have been in the past, when the managing director said, ‘I want to know everything and I make the decisions and I’m also the smartest,’ that no longer works. (...) Yes, and I believe that we need more decentralised management responsibility.” (RP003: 129)

This encompasses integrating the vision into strategic planning, establishing supportive organisational structures, and consistently communicating purpose across different levels and stakeholder groups. Furthermore, the findings make it clear that the operationalisation of inspirational motivation requires a multi-level perspective that links strategic direction, operational implementation and interaction with external stakeholders – particularly the public and the political sphere. Or as RP003 describes it from personal experience:

"We have a young mayor. I don't agree with everything he does... Well, there is definitely potential for conflict. But he has addressed the issue of digitalisation in a digitalisation task force, made it a top priority and is pushing it forward in the city."
(RP003: 69)

The empirical findings also suggest that these levels are interdependent and must be addressed in parallel to ensure both the effectiveness and legitimacy of transformation processes.

In summary, the data suggest that inspirational motivation in municipal services organisations can be understood as a dynamic and iterative process that combines vision development, organisational embedding and participatory communication. This process-oriented and collective approach to leadership is also supported by specific implementation formats, as RP001 describes:

"We did it in the form of a workshop over several sessions with the 30 top managers."
(RP001: 11).

Taken together, this forms the empirical basis for the model developed in Chapter 5, in which Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) is conceptualised as an organisational capability that integrates these elements across different levels and over time.

4.3.7. Summary of the Sub-Chapter

Sub-chapter 4.3 consolidates the data obtained in the interviews and reflections and systematically links it to the research question on the development of inspirational motivation in the context of municipal services organisations in the digital age. The data were analysed once again, based on the questions derived from the researcher's sub-themes. Therefore, while the questions were determined by the researcher, the answers remain grounded in the data.

This consolidation made it clear that inspirational motivation and an inspiring vision should be linked to municipal services organisations' overarching purpose. Its effectiveness could depend crucially on the extent to which it is developed in a participatory manner and involves not only employees but also works councils and, where appropriate, external expertise (Theme 1). In addition, there was tension between the considerable pressure for change exerted by digital transformation and the existing cultural, structural and political limitations. A well-considered vision could serve as a guide here by emphasising opportunities while also pointing out realistic limitations; for example, in connection with a strategy, road map or similar (Theme 2). Digital transformation is seen as an 'opaque

terrain' that creates joy, but especially uncertainty and fear. To meet these challenges, roadmaps, workshops and pilot projects could be suitable means of making digital transformation more tangible, reducing fears and promoting learning processes (Theme 3). Another key pattern concerns the different strategies for dealing with digital change (pioneering, complying, disregarding). These coping mechanisms could be productively reframed through clear assumption of responsibility by top management, the establishment of control mechanisms, and the formation of operational project teams (Theme 4). Finally, the importance of a coherent vision is emphasised, as it not only formulates strategic guidelines but also shapes the organisation through targeted communication. Transparency, target group orientation, and everyday interventions could be key success factors in making the added value of digital transformation visible and tangible for employees and citizens (Theme 5). Overall, this chapter illustrates that inspirational motivation as part of transformational leadership can be enabled above all by a reflected vision that is in line with the purpose of the organisation, combines meaning with practical feasibility, creates orientation despite uncertainty, and is sustainably anchored through participation and communication. The insights gained and developed in the previous section are grounded in the data and will be critically reflected upon and discussed in line with the literature in the next chapter. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the following discussion, in which they are systematically linked to existing literature and used to develop Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) as a conceptual contribution. Taken together, these findings indicate that inspirational motivation in municipal services organisations cannot be understood as an individual leadership behaviour or practice alone, but rather as an organisationally embedded and iterative process. Across all five themes, a consistent pattern emerges: effective leadership in the context of digital transformation requires the development of a purpose-driven vision, its translation into organisational structures and processes, and its continuous legitimisation through participatory communication across multiple levels. In this sense, inspirational motivation evolves into a collective and multi-level capability, which forms the empirical foundation for Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) as developed in the following chapter.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While Chapter 4 presented the empirical findings in detail, this chapter integrates these findings with the research objectives and the theoretical perspectives developed in Chapter 2. The aim is to deepen the understanding of how inspirational motivation supports and shapes digital transformation in municipal services organisations, and to advance this understanding through the development of Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) as a context-sensitive leadership capability.

Sub-Chapter 5.1 critically discusses the empirical findings by linking them to the research objectives and existing literature, leading to the development of Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) as a context-specific re-conceptualisation of inspirational motivation. Based on this, a multi-level, process-oriented framework for implementing Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) in practice is presented. Sub-Chapter 5.2 concludes the thesis by outlining the contributions to theory and practice, reflecting on the study's limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

5.1. Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate how inspirational motivation (IM) in leadership practice can effectively support and shape digital transformation (DT) in municipal services organisations (MSOs) in Germany from the perspective of top management. In addition, the study examined how this can be effectively developed through a comprehensive and understandable framework. The following research objectives were derived from the central research question:

- (1) Explore and understand the phenomenon of DT in the context of MSOs from the perspective of top managers.
- (2) Investigate the meaning and role of IM in leadership practice in the selected context from a top management perspective.
- (3) Explore and reflect leadership development steps towards IM in the context of MSOs in the age of DT.
- (4) Develop a model for effective implementation in practice and make it applicable.

In this chapter, the term Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) will be further specified and used to denote an empirically grounded, context-specific form of inspirational motivation that is institutionally anchored, integrating vision, strategy, structures/processes, and participatory communication across levels. The research objectives presented here are revisited and critically discussed in Sections 5.1.1.–

5.1.4. In this chapter, RIM is understood as a re-conceptualisation of inspirational motivation, extending it from an individual leadership behaviour to an organisational and institutionally embedded leadership capability.

5.1.1. Digital Transformation: Sprinting Across an Opaque Terrain Without a Map

The results of this study support current research findings that digital transformation (DT) is exerting considerable pressure on existing organisations both in Germany and internationally (Verhoef et al., 2021). At the same time, the observation that digital transformation appears to be an elusive, abstract-descriptive construct for which it is difficult to develop a uniform and clear understanding due to its conceptual vagueness (Wischnevsky & Damanpour, 2006) is also confirmed for municipal services organisations.

The results show that the term digital transformation often functions as a semantic ‘container’ in municipal services organisations, encompassing a variety of attributes, from efficiency gains and process optimisation to innovations, as described by Schallmo & Rusnjak (2017). This ‘container-like’ character increases the risk for municipal services organisations that, in the absence of clear conceptual differentiation, digital transformation becomes associated with inconsistent characteristics and objectives, which in turn may impede organisational change (Riasanow et al., 2022). Furthermore, it seems difficult for those involved to assess the extent of the changes expected from digital transformation, which could widen the gap between management rhetoric and reality, as described by Li (2020) in the municipal service sector as well. This research thus confirms a problem already discussed in the literature: digital transformation is often equated with technology or management, while novel organisational and cultural dimensions are ignored (Oludapo et al., 2024). In the area of municipal services organisations, this increases the risk that digital transformation's focus will be understood primarily as technical modernisation, while more profound questions of meaning, legitimacy, and acceptance receive less attention.

The inherent complexity of the terms ‘digital’ and ‘transformation’ (Capone et al., 2024) also leads to ambivalent interpretations in the context of municipal services organisations: while digital transformation is associated with modernisation, future viability and efficiency gains, uncertainties and fears are at least as

widespread (Reif et al., 2023). These concerns include loss of control, lack of transparency, data protection risks and the danger of individual and organisational overload. The study thus confirms the tension between ‘promise’ and ‘threat’ (rheingold Institut, 2018), which has also been described in studies on public organisations (Mergel et al., 2019).

Another contribution lies in the role of frustration as a further effect of digital transformation. This manifests itself in the form of ‘technostress’ (Rademaker et al., 2025) or as resistance to digital change (Valtonen, 2025). Previous studies also suggest that technological overload and unclear goals contribute significantly to the emergence of resistance (Tarafdar et al., 2019). The results of this research indicate how this frustration can be mitigated by developing, communicating and implementing a clear vision. Visions could have a positive impact on performance (Carton et al., 2014; Quinn & Thakor, 2019) and serve as a bridge for digital transformation by providing orientation, thereby bridging the gap between ‘lagging behind’ and ‘hasty actions’ and supporting acceptance processes.

The metaphorical condensation of digital transformation into a *‘sprint through opaque terrain without a map’* summarises the simultaneous acceleration, disorientation and ambivalence described by the top managers interviewed. In practice, this means that top managers must reduce semantic ambiguity by developing clear definitions, formulating a consistent vision, and operationalising it through transparent strategies and concrete roadmaps. This work therefore contributes to broadening the understanding of digital transformation by conceptualising it less as a purely technological process and more as a social phenomenon in a socio-symbolic field in which reflexive efforts are made to remain capable of acting within a social system (which also include organisations with their organisational practices) by forming meaningful and at the same time always contested patterns (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

Such a perspective highlights the tensions arising from the interplay of meanings, expectations, and fears, and brings leadership to the fore as a crucial factor: Through sense-making and sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and the strategic use of rhetoric and public narrative (Ganz, 2010; Green, 2004a), leadership can play a decisive role in shaping digital transformation successfully by constructing and legitimising shared interpretations of what digital

transformation means for municipal services organisations. Leadership is therefore not only necessary here as ‘leadership in technology implementation’ but above all as a ‘translator of meaning/sense’. This research indicates that top management in municipal services organisations should fulfil this role to shape digital transformation.

In the context municipal services organisations, inspirational motivation (IM) – as a central element of transformative leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006a) – plays a key role. However, as a central contribution of this work, a compelling vision must integrate both future orientation and the specific mission of municipal services organisations (service to the community, reliability, sustainability) to productively shape the ambivalences described above. Through continuous, target-group-oriented communication, digital transformation could then be transformed from a diffuse ‘collective term’ into a meaningful narrative that generates motivation, orientation, and acceptance (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Yousef Farhan, 2024), as will be shown in more detail below.

In summary, this research shows that digital transformation in municipal services organisations could be understood less as a technical project and more as a cultural-symbolic phenomenon. Research objective 1 was answered insofar as the perspectives of top managers from municipal services organisations show that digital transformation is primarily characterised by ambivalence between opportunities, risks, frustration and the search for meaning. Successful leadership involves actively shaping this area of tension by making digital transformation tangible and by articulating and embedding a purpose-coherent vision that translates into concrete perspectives for action.

5.1.2. Coherent Visionary Leadership Is Key for Digital Transformation

The topic of leadership is characterised by a multitude of perspectives and interpretations and – as has been shown – is also subject to the *Zeitgeist* (Grint, 2011). This notion is also evident in the context of this research, as the image of/about leadership in municipal services organisations appears diverse and inconsistent, while this context has also been little researched scientifically to date (Schäfer et al., 2024). This is precisely where this study contributes by examining the role and meaning of inspirational motivation in the leadership of top managers in the age of digital transformation. The findings confirm that leadership in municipal services organisations cannot be reduced to generic

leadership models but must be understood as public sector leadership that operates under conditions of bureaucracy, multi-stakeholder expectations and public accountability (George et al., 2019; Vogel & Masal, 2012).

Leadership can have very different forms and effects depending on the context, organisational culture, target group, etc. Different age structures, nationalities, educational backgrounds, etc. of those being led also require specific leadership and leadership practices, behaviours and communication (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010). Nevertheless, successful leadership requires more than just communication: it requires a clear definition of what success means in the respective context. In the area of municipal services organisations in particular, the concept of success extends beyond efficiency or business indicators. Rather, aspects such as orientation towards the common good and reliability are central here (Vogel, 2022), as this research illustrates.

This historically explainable work ethic in the context of municipal services organisations – which emphasises services to the community – appears stable despite current challenges like tight budgets, increasing demands from politics and society (Gottschall et al., 2015) or conflicts of recognition due to the taken-for-granted nature of services (Vogel, 2022; Voswinkel, 2012). A key contribution of this research is the insight that this focus on the common good extends not only to the level of employees but is also firmly anchored at the highest management level. In this context, work is thus assigned a special role that goes beyond monetary aspects: although it can be associated with duty and effort, performance and value, social structuring or personal development (Hacker & Raum, 1980; Popitz, 1995; Schmale, 1983), in the context of municipal services organisations in particular, it is primarily understood as a contribution to the community (Sennett, 2006), which serves as a central source of meaning and motivation for the people working in this context.

This insight is also crucial for understanding inspirational motivation in municipal services organisations: leadership can only create inspirational motivation if its vision (or that of the organisation) reflects these values and is thus aligned with the organisation's purpose. Conversely, in this environment, a purely future-oriented vision is not enough to create acceptance. Only when it is demonstrably purpose-congruent (providing reliable services to the community) can a motivating overall picture be created. This confirms what current work on

purpose-driven leadership emphasises: a vision can be effective only if it is consistent with an organisation's identity and self-image (Craig & Snook, 2014; Quinn & Thakor, 2019). For municipal services organisations, this means that aspects such as long-term thinking, focus on the common good and reliability must be integrated into the vision. This ensures that a future-oriented transformation is not perceived as a break with the past, but as a further development of existing values.

The results of this study also point to another important finding: while inspirational motivation is regarded in academic literature as one of the four core components of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), both terms found little resonance in the context examined. This discrepancy illustrates that (abstract) concepts from leadership research are not automatically integrated into the leadership practice of top managers. The interview-partner did not explicitly classify inspirational motivation as part of their own leadership practice; only with the introduction of the term “vision” – or similar terms such as target image or future image – did the relevance of a comparable construct become clear. This finding points to the need to translate theoretical concepts from research into everyday organisational language so that their relevance becomes apparent in everyday organisational life.

The study also shows that top managers consider an inspiring vision a key factor in the successful implementation of digital transformation. This is consistent with previous studies that highlight the influence of visions on employer attractiveness, employee motivation (Slatten et al., 2021) and overcoming obstacles in transformation processes (Su et al., 2023). Visions then serve not only as abstract images of the future, but also as action-guiding reference points that can create meaning and unleash collective energy (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996).

The results show that digital transformation should not be viewed as an end in itself; rather, it is seen as a means of achieving overarching strategic goals such as improving service quality, efficiency or citizen-friendliness. However, for a vision to be motivating, it must also be translated into concrete measures that employees can experience. A purely ‘top-down’ formulation is insufficient, as it requires co-creation, implementation that delivers tangible benefits for

employees' daily work, and continuous communication appropriate to the target group.

The results also show that a vision and its communication can fulfil several important functions in the context examined by creating a shared vision of the future through transparent communication and the involvement of various stakeholders, such as management, employees, citizens, and political decision-makers. This vision – which provides orientation – can then also help to overcome organisational departmental and hierarchical boundaries. In addition, it helps to mitigate the consequences of uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) that characterise today's world (Oschinsky, 2022) and also the public service-sector (Mangan & Lawrence-Pietroni, 2019). A clearly communicated vision can then help to reduce fears and resistance to transformation processes. By connecting the organisation's purpose to its future, a vision can also help employees find or maintain meaning in their work, a crucial factor for motivation and commitment in an even more complex and uncertain world (Edmondson, 2018; Rosso et al., 2011).

This research extends prior work on inspirational motivation by showing that it is less about the use of a specific term or a (leadership/theoretical) concept, and more about the ability to develop credible visions, communicate them consistently and make them emotionally tangible. Another significant contribution of this research is that it adds an important contextual dimension to transformational leadership in general and inspirational motivation in particular: in the field of municipal services organisations, the connection between vision on the one hand and organisational purpose on the other plays a prominent role. This suggests that transformational leadership should not be understood as a universal model but rather interpreted and applied in a context-sensitive, reflected manner.

Several conclusions can also be drawn for leadership practice: top managers should not only formulate visions, but above all bring them to life through concrete measures, because visions only have a motivating effect if they – as in the case of municipal services organisations – connect or integrate both the future perspective and the core identity of the organisation. Communication plays a crucial role in this, as it is not just an accompanying element but a central

component of the management task of fostering trust, acceptance, and participation in a vision.

In summary, this study views inspirational motivation less as an abstract leadership construct and more as the ability of top managers to develop visions rooted in the mission of public service and organisational identity. Their role is to provide orientation, reduce uncertainty and transform digital transformation into a meaningful, motivating narrative. This is how inspirational motivation arises in municipal services organisations as purpose-oriented vision work that connects the future with the common good. This reflected vision should be understood as a (public) narrative to be jointly developed, structured, and disseminated, which can provide orientation, meaning, and motivation by linking organisational values and emotions to collective action (Ganz, 2010; Lawrence-Pietroni & Needham, 2019). It can have a motivating effect by supporting organisational-level strategic goals and promoting psychological well-being and security at the individual level (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004).

A vision could then play an important role in the successful digital transformation of municipal services organisations, especially if it is implemented coherently. Based on Antonovsky's (1987) concept of sense of coherence (SOC), this requires that the vision is comprehensible, manageable and meaningful to those involved. Under these conditions, inspirational motivation does not arise from abstract or theoretical ideas, but from a lived and experienced vision that is reinforced by continuous communication of meaning and continuously supported by the structures and processes around it.

5.1.3. Leadership Development Towards Inspirational Motivation

The third objective of this research was to identify and reflect on steps in leadership development that promote inspirational motivation in the age of digital transformation in municipal services organisations.

Bass (1990) and Bass and Riggio (2006b) describe visions as a core source of motivational effect. However, as shown above, in practice, the clear distinction between vision and related terms such as strategy, mission or target image often remains blurred, so that a precise definition and joint negotiations are fundamental prerequisites for establishing the vision as an effective orientation tool.

A substantial contribution of this research is that the answer to the research objective goes beyond considerations of a leadership approach and descriptions of the behaviour or practices of individual (top-)managers; rather, this study shows that structural, procedural and organisational dimensions must also be taken into account, as these enable inspirational leadership to emerge, develop and be effective. Transformational leadership only unfolds its inspiring effect if the vision does not remain at a symbolic level, but is anchored in structures, processes, and, e.g., target systems. Visions are therefore not merely rhetorical constructs but must be translated into everyday organisational practice in ways that guide action.

Another premise is communicative institutionalisation: as shown, repeated, consistent, and target-group-oriented communication is necessary to anchor a vision in organisational discourse (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This is not just about passing on information, but about sense-making and sense-giving, which strengthen emotional commitment. At the same time, the results emphasise the need for collectivisation: inspirational leadership should not be tied (solely) to charismatic personalities, as is often criticised in the literature (Kühl & Muster, 2025), but rather becomes sustainable through participation, co-creation and stakeholder involvement.

This bridges the gap – which is often unbridgeable in (at least German) literature – between the organisational sociological perspective, which primarily looks at conditions (Matthiesen et al., 2022) and a psychological perspective, which primarily focuses on the individual (Schermyly, 2024) and makes it clear that these two sides of the same coin must be taken into account to be effective; for example, in terms of shaping digital transformation in a business management sense. Finally, inspirational motivation must be understood as an iterative process: visions provide orientation, but must be adaptable to the dynamic requirements of digital transformation (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The reflections and interview data, as well as the patterns identified, reveal several areas of development in line with research objective 3:

- Developing visionary competence: Managers must be empowered to formulate clear, attractive, and realistic visions for digital transformation in municipal services organisations, and as shown, these visions must be connected to the purpose of the organisations. These visions must not be

an end in themselves (“we want to go digital”), but must create recognisable benefits for the organisation, employees, and society.

- Strengthening communication and narrative skills: visions only unfold their impact through target-group-oriented communication. Transparent, repeated, and understandable communication reduces fears and promotes trust (Edmondson, 2019).
- Promote cooperation and participation: leadership must create space for collaboration – across hierarchical levels, with works councils, political committees, and other stakeholders.
- Enable translation into everyday practice: visions only become credible when they are translated into concrete measures, pilot projects, and feedback loops – within a safe environment.

In line with recent work on leadership in public services, this points to the need for leadership development that goes beyond adding new tools or competencies and instead cultivates the capacity to navigate complexity, work relationally and mobilise others through narrative and emotional engagement (Mangan & Lawrence-Pietroni, 2019; Needham & Mangan, 2014). Vertical development – understood as the transformation of underlying thinking structures rather than the accumulation of knowledge – becomes central here (Petrie, 2013a), as it enables leaders to tolerate ambiguity, integrate competing demands and engage in reflected meaning-making in digital transformation processes.

These areas of development illustrate that inspirational motivation does not arise from abstract concepts, but from a lived vision that is integrated into structures and processes, communication, and everyday actions. The research also indicates that leadership should not be viewed in isolation, but must be anchored at the organisational levels of strategy, structure, and interaction (Jöns et al., 2005; Schein, 1995) as shown in Figure 30 below:

- Vision and strategy: develop a vision connected to the purpose of the organisation and derive a clear roadmap that translates the vision into strategy and realistic goals and measures.
- Structure and processes: anchor the vision in structure and processes; for example, by adapting organisational structures, processes, and target systems to the strategic orientation.

- Interaction (leadership and cooperation): promote participatory, trusting, and communicative leadership and cooperation styles that provide orientation and security and foster a shared narrative across all levels.

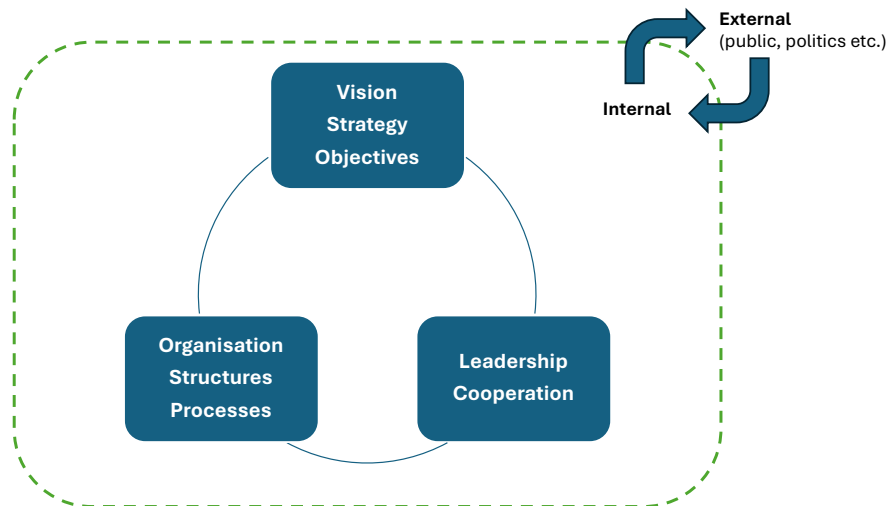


Figure 30: Three-level interplay
Source: Own illustration.

This interplay shows that inspirational motivation should be understood as a dynamic development process: developing a vision, deriving a strategy, adapting structures, shaping interaction, and continuously reflecting on and adjusting all of this.

This research contributes to the understanding that the development of leadership practice with inspirational motivation in municipal services organisations in the age of digital transformation could be more effectively shaped if it extends beyond individual practice. What is crucial is an integrated understanding of leadership development that brings together vision, strategy, structures, and interactions (leadership and cooperation). Inspirational motivation therefore arises less from heroic leadership rhetoric and more from credibly linking the company's purpose with an inspiring vision, a strategic orientation tailored to this, coordinated structures and processes, and inspiring interaction in practice.

This research also demonstrates that leadership development towards inspirational motivation in the age of digital transformation requires an integrated, multidimensional approach. Inspirational leadership does not emerge from individual charisma or abstract rhetoric, but from the systematic combination of interrelated steps: the formulation of a clear and context-sensitive vision which is

connected with the purpose of the organisation, the institutionalisation of communicative (narrative) practices that provide meaning and orientation, the anchoring of this vision in organisational structures and processes, and the co-creative involvement of employees and stakeholders in shaping and adapting the transformation.

This also answers research objective 3: explore and reflect leadership development steps towards inspirational motivation in the age of digital transformation with municipal services organisations' top managers. The contribution of this research to leadership development lies in showing that inspirational motivation can be cultivated not as a personal trait, but as a developmental process embedded in organisational practice. This perspective also bridges psychological and organisational sociological approaches and offers a process-oriented model that can guide municipal services organisations' top managers in building sustainable leadership capacities for the digital age. Accordingly, this work contributes to leadership research by showing how inspirational motivation in the top management of municipal services organisations can not only be conceived but also developed in practice, as illustrated in the next section.

Before presenting the practical framework, Table 12 contrasts the classical concept of inspirational motivation (IM) with reflected inspirational motivation (RIM) developed in this research. This comparison illustrates the conceptual shift from the individual perspective of inspirational motivation towards an organisational, context-sensitive and institutionalised form of leadership capability. The term RIM was chosen because '*reflected*' expresses the core of the conceptual shift – away from inspiration that stems from individual (charismatic) influence, but rather from a consciously reflected, context-sensitive and institutionally anchored practice towards an understanding that managers and the organisation jointly shape meaning, orientation and motivation. This thus represents a further development of classic inspirational motivation towards a reflected, collectively supported leadership ability.

Dimension	Classic Inspirational Motivation (IM)	Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM)
Conceptual Basis	One of the four dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985); focus on inspiration and vision as individual leadership performance.	Further development of IM into an organisational capability; vision, purpose and motivation are anchored structurally, communicatively and participatively.
Sponsor/ Actor	Individual leader (often referred to as a charismatic leader).	Organisation as a social system (top management, structures, processes, communication).
Mechanism	Emotional and rhetorical inspiration through vision.	Institutionalised communication of meaning through vision incl. purpose, structures, processes and participation.
Communication	Top-down, often dependent on rhetorical effect.	Dialogic, participatory, tailored to the target group and iterative.
Role of vision	Focus: Vision of the future, often detached from organisational identity.	Focus: Purpose-congruent vision. Combining future orientation with a mission to serve the common good.
Institutional anchoring	Weakly pronounced; dependent on the leadership person and personality.	Strongly pronounced: anchored in structures, processes and routines (e.g. target systems, communication, participation).
Legitimacy & contextual relevance	Focus: private sector context.	Focus: municipal services context (legitimacy, common good, acceptance).
Sustainability of impact	Depends on the individual; risk that sustainability will be jeopardised if the person leaves the organisation.	Institutionally stable; less dependent on individuals, capable of learning through feedback and reflection.
Understanding/ concept of leadership	Individual & transformative.	Collective & reflective as institutional capacity for sense-making.

Table 12: Comparison between IM and RIM
Source: Own illustration.

The comparison between classic inspirational motivation and RIM illustrates the central conceptual shift: While inspirational motivation – as one of the four dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) – focuses primarily on the (charismatic) influence of individual leaders and emotional inspiration, Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) understands leadership as an organisational capability. Inspiration is not primarily generated through individual rhetoric, but through institutionalised structures, processes and participatory forms of communication that collectively anchor meaning, orientation and motivation. RIM integrates vision, strategy, structures and communication into a coherent system that extends beyond purely personal influence. The vision is purpose-congruent because it combines future orientation with the public service mission of municipal services organisations. This shifts the focus from efficiency and charisma to legitimacy, transparency and the creation of shared meaning. Unlike traditional inspirational motivation, RIM is context-sensitive, reflected and designed for the long term because it remains effective even when there are changes in leadership because it is anchored in organisational routines and cultural practices. This transformation marks the transition from an individual understanding of leadership to a collective, reflected leadership practice that understands motivation as an institutional competence and thus shapes the conditions for sustainable digital transformation in municipal services organisations.

5.1.4. From Empirical Findings to Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM)

Before this chapter addresses research objective 4 by introducing a practice-oriented framework for effective implementation, the following section demonstrates how Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) emerges from the empirical findings and why such a conceptual development becomes necessary in light of the data. RIM is introduced here as emerging directly from participants' accounts rather than as an abstract theoretical overlay.

The development of Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) is grounded in the empirical findings of this study and emerges from the systematic interpretation of the five central themes identified in the data. Across these themes, a consistent pattern becomes visible: while inspirational motivation (IM) captures important aspects of leadership, its traditional conceptualisation does not fully account for the complexity observed in municipal services organisations undergoing digital transformation (DT). This points towards the need for a re-conceptualisation of inspirational motivation that reflects leadership as a relational, iterative, and institutionally embedded process.

Existing theoretical perspectives, particularly transformational leadership, as well as sensemaking and institutional approaches, are not applied deductively but are used to sensitise and interpret the empirical material. In this way, patterns in the data can be more precisely conceptualised, allowing the development of RIM to be both empirically grounded and theoretically informed. This derivation follows a structured, theme-by-theme analysis that links empirical insights with their conceptual implications, as systematically illustrated in Table 13:

Empirical Theme	Subtheme / Empirical Anchor	Key Empirical Insight	Contribution to RIM	Representation in Framework (Level / Phase / Element)
Theme 1: Leading in MSOs is meaning-driven	Subtheme 1: The personal and organisational contribution is the focus	Motivation in MSOs is strongly linked to service to the community rather than purely economic outcomes.	Public value orientation and collective meaning-making	Strategic level: reflecting & intervening-factors for DT + vision development around purpose and contribution (Awareness / Process phase)
	Subtheme 2: Long-term thinking and reliability are core aspects of the work	Leadership and organisational identity are shaped by continuity, reliability, and long-term responsibility.	Future-oriented sensemaking; stability-linked purpose construction	Strategic level: Create awareness & vision development. "(Co-)Create a vision that connects DT with long-term thinking & reliability." (Awareness & Process phase)
	Subtheme 3: Services are taken for granted	The value of the organisation's contribution is often not actively recognised by citizens and stakeholders.	Re-articulation of purpose and legitimacy; collective meaning-making	Strategic level: "Citizens take the services for granted" + create a vision that points out the value of the organisation. (Awareness & Process phase)
Theme 2: Leading is balancing the conflict between change and conservation	Subtheme 1: Increased pressure to change	Organisations face rising internal and external expectations to transform.	Reflexivity and prioritisation under pressure	Awareness of transformation pressure + iterative reflection on priorities (Awareness & Reflection phase)
	Subtheme 2: Limiting factors for change	DT is constrained by internal and external factors such as politics, regulations, culture, capacity, and collaboration.	Reflexive/ adaptive leadership; navigation of competing demands and constraints	Strategic level: "There are various factors that limit DT both internally and externally" + "reduce limitations & frustrations through vision, knowledge & strategy" (Awareness & Process phase)
Theme 3: DT is like sprinting across an opaque terrain without a map	Subtheme 1: DT as an elusive concept	DT is perceived as difficult to define and hard to grasp in practical terms.	Context-sensitive leadership and shared sensemaking	All levels: "Convey knowledge on DT for all (instead of an opaque terrain)" (Process phase)
	Subtheme 2: Uncertainties trigger joy and fear	DT evokes mixed emotions, especially insecurity, fear, and concern about the unknown.	Confidence-building and emotionally responsive leadership	All levels: "Foster confidence (instead of uncertainties)" (Process phase, headline)
	Subtheme 3: DT leads to increasing frustration	Ambiguity, delay, and overzealousness can create frustration and a sense of falling behind.	Need for adaptive support, knowledge, and strategic alignment through structured reflection and alignment processes	Process / reflection phases; reducing frustrations through vision, knowledge, and strategy (Process phase, headline)
Theme 4: Leadership's DT-coping strategies	Subtheme 1: Below-radar strategy (pioneering)	DT-related initiatives are sometimes pursued unofficially within available room for manoeuvre.	Adaptive and proactive leadership practice	Strategic level: agile special forces, detached project teams (Process phase)
	Subtheme 2: Waiting for the green light strategy (complying)	DT becomes actionable only after formal approval by higher authority.	Leadership shaped by hierarchical and institutional conditions	Strategic level: DT-steering committee / quick decision-making structures (Process phase)
	Subtheme 3: Negate the importance strategy (disregarding)	DT is deprioritised when other challenges are perceived as more urgent.	Context-dependent prioritisation and situated leadership	Strategic level: situational prioritisation of DT relevance at top management level (Process phase)
Theme 5: A coherent and perceptible vision for the future is crucial	Subtheme 1: A coherent vision is the basis for a successful DT	Vision provides direction, purpose, and orientation in a complex and uncertain environment.	Direction-setting and shared orientation as core of RIM	Strategic level: Premises for the development of vision; vision co-creation, articulation & reflection across levels
	Subtheme 2: Communication is important	Transparency, information, and target-group-oriented communication are essential for alignment.	Sensegiving, diffusion, and alignment across stakeholder groups	All levels: communicate a persuasive vision internally and externally; storytelling, town halls, public communication (Process phase)
	Subtheme 3: The practical feasibility is crucial	Vision must be tangible, manageable, and translated into everyday structures and practices.	Embedding inspiration institutionally and operationally	All levels: Transform DT into a lucid concept via knowledge sharing, information and participation (Process phase).

Table 13: Linking Empirical Themes to Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM)
Source: Own illustration.

The table makes explicit how each empirical theme contributes a distinct dimension to RIM while simultaneously revealing the limitations of traditional inspirational motivation. The findings indicate that leadership in this context cannot be understood as a unidirectional process of articulating vision. Rather, it unfolds as a context-dependent, relational, and institutionally embedded practice. While inspirational motivation provides an important starting point by emphasising purpose, vision, and inspiration, the findings suggest that its traditional, leader-centric perspective remains insufficient to fully capture the observed dynamics.

The first theme, purpose-driven leadership, highlights that leadership in municipal services organisations is fundamentally anchored in questions of meaning and

public value. Organisational action is closely linked to societal contribution rather than purely economic outcomes. While this aligns with inspirational motivation's focus on purpose and vision, the data further show that meaning is not simply communicated by leaders but co-constructed through interaction and shaped by institutional expectations. This shifts the understanding of inspiration from a primarily leader-driven act towards a collective process of meaning-making.

The second theme, leadership between stability and change, reveals a fundamental tension inherent in municipal services organisations. Leaders are required to balance the need for innovation with the responsibility to maintain reliable public services. This finding challenges the implicit linearity within inspirational motivation, which often assumes a clear direction towards change. Instead, leadership emerges as a reflexive process of continuously negotiating competing demands. This reflexivity becomes a central element of RIM, extending inspirational motivation beyond the articulation of vision towards the ongoing adjustment and alignment of organisational direction.

The third theme, digital transformation as an opaque terrain without a map, further reinforces this perspective. Participants described digital transformation as lacking clear pathways and characterised by ambiguity and unpredictability. This contrasts with the implicit assumption in inspirational motivation that leaders can provide clarity and direction through vision. The findings therefore indicate that leadership in such contexts requires not only inspiration but also the collective capability to navigate uncertainty. RIM incorporates this dimension by emphasising context-sensitivity and the need for adaptability in response to evolving conditions.

The fourth theme, leadership coping strategies, highlights the diversity of approaches leaders adopt in dealing with digital transformation. Strategies such as pioneering, waiting, or disregarding reflect different ways of engaging with uncertainty and organisational constraints. These patterns suggest that leadership cannot be reduced to a normative model of ideal inspirational behaviour but is shaped by situational factors and organisational realities. This contributes to RIM by emphasising leadership as a situated and adaptive practice rather than a fixed set of behaviours.

The fifth theme, the importance of a coherent vision, confirms the continued relevance of inspirational motivation's core idea. Participants consistently emphasised that a clear and coherent vision is crucial for navigating digital transformation. However, the findings also demonstrate that vision alone is insufficient if it is not translated into structures, processes, and everyday practices. This extends inspirational motivation by highlighting that inspiration must be embedded organisationally rather than remaining at the level of communication. RIM therefore integrates the alignment of vision with organisational structures and processes as a key dimension.

As illustrated in Table 13, each theme contributes a distinct yet interconnected dimension to RIM. Rather than representing isolated insights, the themes collectively reveal a coherent pattern in which leadership is understood as a relational, reflexive, and context-sensitive practice. Purpose-driven leadership highlights the collective construction of meaning, the tension between stability and change emphasises the importance of reflexivity, the experience of digital transformation as uncertain and opaque underlines the relevance of context-sensitive leadership, and the diversity of coping strategies points towards leadership as a situated practice. Finally, the emphasis on a coherent vision demonstrates that inspiration must be embedded within organisational structures and processes to become effective.

Against this background, RIM is best understood not merely as an extension of inspirational motivation but as a re-conceptualisation. It retains the central importance of purpose and vision but reframes these elements as emergent, relational, and context-dependent processes. In particular, RIM shifts the focus from individual leader behaviour or practice to organisational capability, from one-directional inspiration to iterative sensemaking and sensegiving, and from abstract vision to its practical and institutional embedding. In doing so, RIM reflects the empirical realities observed in this study and provides a theoretically grounded and practically relevant contribution to the further development of transformational leadership.

The following model is structured into three levels (top management, middle/lower management (including employees), and the public) and three phases (analysis, process, and reflection); the following three-level/three-phase framework operationalises how RIM can be developed and embedded in

practice. The three *levels* reflect the distinct but interconnected roles of strategic decision-making (top management), operational translation (middle/lower management and employees; Oess, 1991) and interaction with the public (citizens, political actors, etc.) who – as this research shows – play a crucial role for municipal services organisations.

The three *phases* follow a process logic: (1) an ‘initialisation/analysis phase’, in which top management reflects on the status quo and develops a sense of urgency (Hiatt, 2006; Kotter, 1996); (2) a ‘process/implementation phase’ in which measures are developed and executed (Appelbaum et al., 2012); and (3) a ‘reflection/adaptation phase’, which allows for iterative adjustment in line with the dynamic requirements of digital transformation (Plekhanov et al., 2023).

Although these steps follow a process sequence, levels and phases are closely interlinked and often need to be addressed in parallel. The framework is therefore conceived as a dynamic and iterative tool rather than a linear checklist.

Its central idea is to outline how RIM can be developed and embedded in municipal services organisations’ (leadership) practice. For clarity, the strategic level will be presented first, followed by the subsequent levels and their respective process steps.

Figure 31 presents an overview, before the following sub-chapters refer to the individual levels and explain them in more detail:

5.1.4.1. RIM in Municipal Services Organisations: Strategic Level

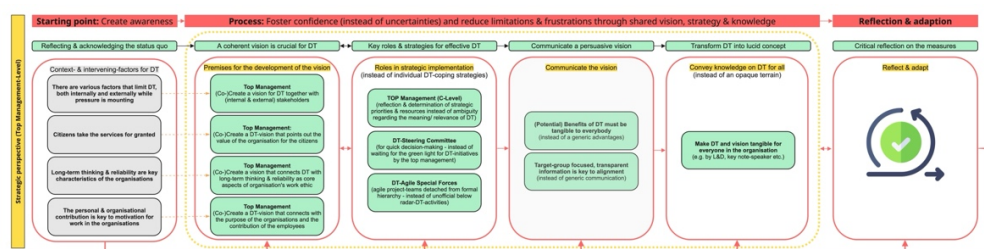


Figure 32: RIM strategic level
Source: Own illustration.

From a strategic perspective, implementing digital transformation begins with reflecting on the status quo. The aim is to raise awareness of the specific conditions within the organisation and to create a common understanding among top management. As the results for Themes 1 (Leading is purpose-driven) and 2 (Increased pressure to change and limiting factors for change) indicate, digital transformation is always context-dependent. Consciously addressing these factors aligns with Kotter's concept of sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996) and with awareness creation, as a prerequisite for substantial change (Hiatt, 2006).

Building on this, it is important to develop a coherent vision that serves as a guide for the organisation. Bass (1990) and Bass and Riggio (2006b) describe visions as the core of transformational leadership. It is crucial that this vision is based on the identified contextual factors and is negotiated jointly by top management, in a process that can be understood as sense-making in the sense of Weick (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

The next step focuses on clarifying roles and implementing strategy. The coping strategies identified in the study (disregarding, pioneering, complying) illustrate the range of possible leadership practices. Following Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), this could be interpreted as institutional work: through their actions, managers shape the meaning that digital transformation attains within the organisation – and, in this way, (consciously or unconsciously) support, question, or change it. This includes setting priorities, providing resources and visibly placing digital transformation on the agenda, for example, via a steering committee with fast decision-making processes or enabling 'special forces' that drive agile pilot projects independently of hierarchies.

Communicating the vision is of central importance. Communication is not merely the transmission of information but constitutes sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991): it interprets developments, links them to organisational benefits and provides orientation. This process also involves rhetorical work (Green, 2004a) in which top managers craft narratives that create resonance across different target groups and communication channels (e.g., town halls, videos, workshops). External partners such as consultancies may further support this process.

To ensure that digital transformation does not remain abstract, it should be made tangible for employees, for example, through training courses, practical lectures or best practice examples. This reduces uncertainty, strengthens trust and promotes psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018). At the same time, digital transformation is translated into everyday work, increasing motivation and meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2011).

Finally, continuous reflection and adaptation are required. In the spirit of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009), the vision must not remain static but must be continuously reviewed and adapted to dynamic developments. Transparency about vision, strategy and priorities, as well as established communication and decision-making structures, can reduce frustration and promote trust.

The steps described are not a linear sequence but are closely interlinked and must be worked on in parallel in some cases. Nevertheless, top management has a key role to play in setting the strategic direction and thus creating the basis for digital transformation to be effectively implemented at downstream levels, among employees, middle management and in interaction with the public.

5.1.4.2. RIM in Municipal Services Organisations: Operational Level

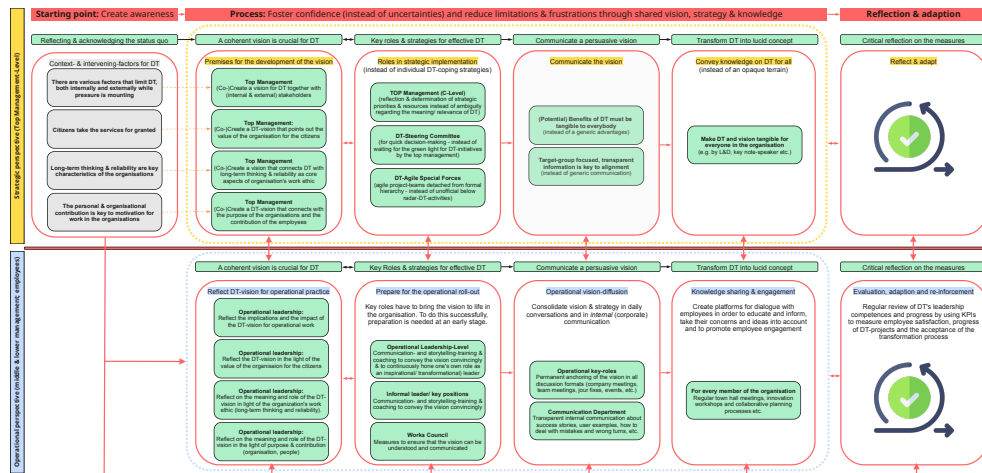


Figure 33: RIM strategic and operational level
Source: Own illustration

The fundamental decision on the strategic direction for digital transformation is made at the highest level, but middle and operational management must also reflect on the status quo to build awareness of the need for change. This awareness can then be communicated throughout the organisation using appropriate communication formats, such as town hall meetings or internal media. As Kotter (1996) emphasises, it is crucial to anchor urgency not only at the management level but throughout the entire company to promote acceptance and a willingness to change.

In addition, the (prototype) vision developed by top management must be made accessible and connectable for employees. This can be achieved through iterative development and collective reflection; for example, in workshops where the impact of the vision on operational processes is discussed. This enables a process of sense-making (Weick, 1995): employees interpret the vision in the context of their everyday work, which gradually makes it more tangible.

Managers at the operational level play a key role in this, as they must not only communicate the vision but also embody it. This requires targeted training in communication, storytelling, and coaching to continuously develop their own roles as inspiring and transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006b). Informal leaders – such as experienced colleagues with a high reputation – can also be involved to anchor the vision credibly. In this sense, narrative competence becomes a core element of operational leadership development, as stories and examples translate abstract visions into lived

experiences that can be shared across teams and hierarchies (Ganz, 2010; Lawrence-Pietroni & Needham, 2019). At this stage, at the latest, it is necessary to actively involve all relevant stakeholders to address questions and concerns raised by the workforce, overcome resistance, and secure support for the change (Dutton et al., 2001). Therefore, the active involvement of the works council is crucial.

Subsequent communication aims to embed the vision in everyday working life. This is achieved through roles such as change ambassadors and the communications department, which should be involved at an early stage and continuously support the process. Success stories and practical use cases contribute to the normalisation of the vision and reinforce its legitimacy (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

To ensure that digital transformation does not remain abstract, platforms and dialogue formats are needed that enable information, training and exchange, for example, workshops, town halls or joint planning meetings. Such settings not only support knowledge transfer but also collective participation, which promotes motivation and engagement (Edmondson, 2018).

Finally, systematic evaluation and adjustment are necessary. Feedback tools such as 180° or 360° procedures make it possible to regularly review the internal leadership skills. At the same time, they can be used to record how employees perceive the change process. This feedback helps to consolidate learning processes and strengthen confidence in change, in line with principles of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009).

5.1.4.3. RIM in Municipal Services Organisations: Public Level

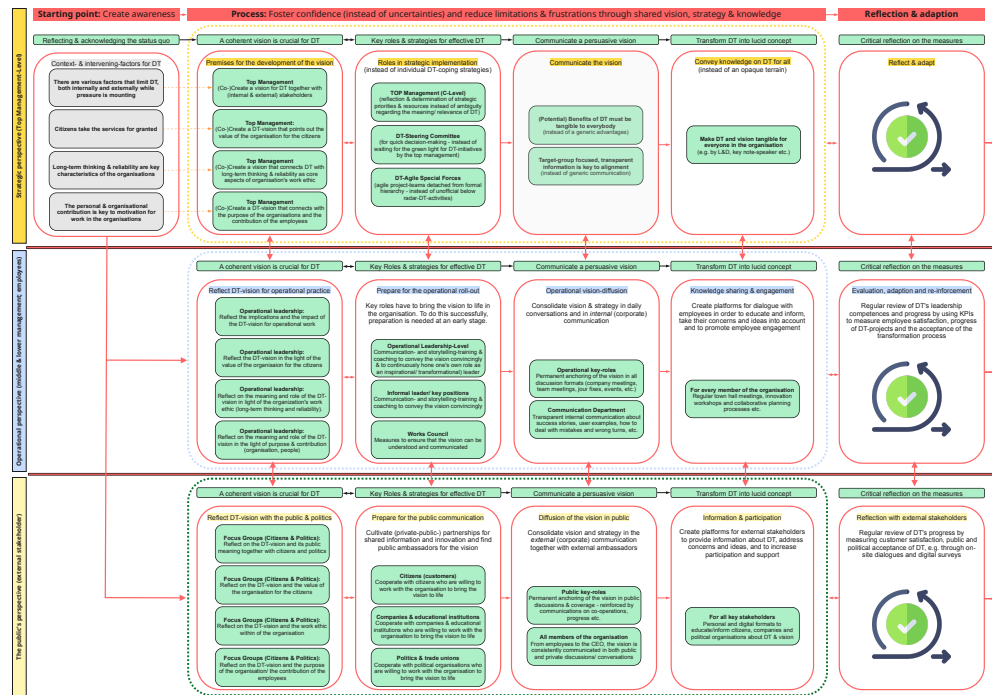


Figure 34: RIM all levels
Source: Own illustration.

In addition to employees and top management, external stakeholders, particularly citizens and political institutions within a municipality, also play a central role in shaping digital transformation in municipal services organisations.

These stakeholders operate in a political and social arena in which they must not only pursue efficiency and service goals, but also ensure democratic legitimacy (Osborne, 2006). Therefore, a digital transformation-related vision should always be developed and/or at least reflected upon in dialogue with these stakeholders in order to ensure its communicative connectivity.

A first step is to use the previously created sense of urgency to raise awareness among politicians and the public of the need for change. This can be achieved through participatory formats such as citizen dialogues or focus groups. Studies show that such dialogue-oriented participation formats not only increase transparency but can also strengthen trust in change processes (Fung, 2006; OECD, 2020). A practical example of this is regional citizen dialogues on the digitisation of public services (*Bürgerdialog erhält Auszeichnung als „Innovationsort des Jahres“*, 2024).

At the same time, intensive engagement with political actors is necessary, for example, in politically appointed supervisory bodies or specialist committees to which top management regularly reports. This makes it clear that digital transformation is not only a technical task or a change within the specific organisation, but also a political one, and that is why knowing and mobilising relevant stakeholders is important (Bruijn & Heuvelhof, 2018; Janssen & van der Voort, 2016). Political decision-makers influence not only the allocation of resources but also the general public's acceptance of the vision and strategy.

Other social institutions can also be involved in the development of a digital transformation vision. These include trade unions as representatives of collective employee interests (Frege & Kelly, 2003), which should be involved at an early stage to mitigate potential resistance. Educational and research institutions such as universities can also play an important role, for example, through cooperation projects or scientific support that underline the legitimacy and innovative power of the transformation, when 'small wins' are focused on, which deepen trust, commitment and especially a shared understanding (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Private companies can act as cooperation partners for technical expertise and as co-designers of service innovations.

When it comes to communicating with the public, citizens are not only political subjects, but also customers and service recipients of municipal services organisations. These stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes shape the institutional legitimacy of public organisations (Van De Walle & Bouckaert, 2007) and can significantly impact the legitimacy of transformation processes. Consistent involvement of regional media – such as local newspapers, radio stations or online portals – can help to keep the vision visible. At the same time, employees are citizens themselves and can reinforce the vision in their private roles by carrying the organisation's narrative into public discourse, thereby indirectly strengthening the transformation process.

Appropriate communication and participation platforms are necessary to ensure that the public is not only informed but also actively involved. Digital participation tools such as online surveys or participatory platforms can be

used to gather feedback on satisfaction, acceptance and perceived benefits of digital transformation. Such feedback mechanisms not only contribute to evaluation and critical reflection but also strengthen the public's shared responsibility for the transformation process through information and relationship building in which citizens and organisations become effective partners (Bryson et al., 2017).

Overall, it is clear that digital transformation in municipal services organisations is likely to be successful in the long term when the vision is not developed exclusively internally but is systematically embedded in political arenas and public discourse. Even if legitimacy is not an easy concept to grasp (Suchman, 1995), this research shows that only through close integration of strategic top management, operational implementation and broad social participation can the necessary legitimacy be created that is indispensable for the success of complex transformation processes.

5.1.5. Summary of the Sub-Chapter

This chapter discusses the results of the research in relation to the research objectives and the existing literature. The aim was to examine how inspirational motivation in leadership practice of top managers can shape digital transformation in municipal services organisations and how this can be used to develop a practice-oriented framework.

The results show that digital transformation in the municipal services context should not be understood primarily as technological implementation, but rather as a cultural-symbolic field in which leadership provides orientation and interpretation. The ambivalence between promises of modernisation and perceived uncertainties makes it clear that inspirational motivation is effective when it formulates visions that are both forward-looking and compatible with the purpose of these specific organisations.

At the same time, it is evident that the legitimacy required for complex change processes can only be achieved through the close coupling of strategic management, operational implementation and social participation. In this triad, strategic leadership ensures coherence and priority setting, operational levels ensure implementability and credibility, while participatory arenas create

transparency, procedural fairness and trust. Iterative feedback between these dimensions is crucial for minimising risks and increasing acceptance.

The chapter also makes it clear that inspirational motivation should not be reduced to individual charisma but rather becomes effective in the long term through participation, co-creation and iterative adaptation. This leads to the concept of Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM), which systematically combines vision, communication and participation and transfers them into shared responsibility via meta-governance mechanisms. RIM reframes leadership from individual charisma to an institutional capability: co-creating a purpose-anchored vision, embedding it in structures and processes, and sustaining legitimacy through targeted, iterative participation. Figure 35 presents RIM as the central concept of this study, synthesising the findings in response to the research question of how inspirational motivation can effectively support and shape digital transformation in German municipal services organisations from a top management perspective:



Figure 35: Core theme RIM
Source: Own illustration.

The final sub-chapter provides a concluding classification of the results of this research, presenting the contribution to practice and theory, the limitations that have become apparent, and an outlook for future research.

5.2. Conclusion

This sub-chapter concludes the research by highlighting the study's theoretical and practical contributions. It further offers a critical reflection on the study's limitations and identifies directions for future research.

5.2.1. Contribution to Theory

The findings of this research make several contributions to the theoretical advancement of leadership and digital transformation research in municipal services organisations. This thesis advances transformational leadership theory by reframing inspirational motivation as an organisational and institutional capability – 'Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM)' – rather than an individual leader attribute.

First, this research expands the theory of transformational leadership by introducing the concept of 'Reflected Inspirational Motivation'. Previous approaches to transformational leadership emphasise the '4 I's' (idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration), with inspirational motivation in particular being closely linked to leadership that uses vision – and is critically associated in the literature with, for example, charismatic behaviour or rhetorical brilliance (Diaz-Saenz, 2011).

The results of this study show that inspirational motivation can have an effect in complex organisations such as municipal services organisations if it is not (solely) tied to individual personalities but is institutionally anchored. This means that it only arises when visions are also reflected in structures, processes and communication routines. Reflected Inspirational Motivation thus describes a shift in perspective: away from an individualised, personalised view towards an institutional and procedural understanding of leadership, in which inspirational motivation is understood not only as an individual but, above all, as an organisational skill. Reflected Inspirational Motivation can therefore be understood and operationalised as an organisational capability that is used to formulate a purpose-congruent vision, embed it structurally and procedurally, create meaning and legitimacy through participatory communication, and iteratively reflect on and adapt it.

Second, this research contributes to the contextualisation of leadership models in the public sector. While transformational leadership has previously been

studied predominantly in private sector organisations, this research shows that the context of municipal services organisations is characterised by specific framework conditions, such as a focus on the common good, proximity to citizens, reliability, and the political legitimacy of public decisions. As a key finding of this work, these factors significantly determine how visions must be developed, formulated, communicated and implemented.

The results also illustrate that visions in this context only have a motivating effect if they fulfil a dual congruence, whereby they must be coherently oriented towards the future and also remain consistent with the public mandate and organisational values. The work thus adds a crucial context-specific dimension to the previously rather universalist literature and reinforces approaches that understand leadership as a context-dependent phenomenon.

Third, this research builds a bridge between business, psychological and organisational sociological perspectives. While the literature on these individual scientific disciplines tends to focus on individual (such as motivation in organisational psychology) or structural (such as conditions in organisational sociology) aspects, this research indicates that effective leadership in the age of digital transformation could be more successful if different perspectives and levels are considered together. In the sense of this thesis, leadership can thus be understood as a form of institutional work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006): top managers shape the significance that digital transformation has in organisations by setting (business) goals, considering structural elements, providing resources, setting priorities and clarifying roles, but also by engaging in rhetorical and narrative practices that construct, stabilise or disrupt institutional logics. By linking public narrative, sensemaking and institutional work, the thesis highlights leadership as an ongoing process of meaning-making under conditions of ambiguity rather than as a set of individual traits.

Fourth, this research contributes to the theoretical conceptualisation of digital transformation. Instead of understanding digital transformation primarily as a technical modernisation project, it is understood here as a social-symbolic phenomenon in which processes of meaning creation, negotiation and legitimation are just as central as technological innovations. This understanding brings to the fore the ambivalences triggered by digital transformation – between

promises of modernisation and perceptions of threat, between increased efficiency and technological stress, etc., and shows that these areas of tension should be addressed and shaped through leadership.

Fifth, the study adds to narrative and rhetorical perspectives on leadership by showing how visions in municipal services organisations function as public narratives that must be ethically grounded, collectively constructed and continuously renegotiated in order to mobilise support for digital transformation without silencing dissent (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Ganz, 2010; Tourish, 2013).

Building on this, this research develops a processual multi-level framework for Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) that is both theoretically explanatory and practically applicable. The framework describes three levels (strategic control by top management, operational translation by middle management and employees, and legitimacy assurance in the public and political sphere) and three phases (analysis/initiation, implementation/process, reflection/adaptation). This model could be used to develop a proposal that shows where and how RIM can be effective: through participatory co-creation, target-group-appropriate communication, structural anchoring, and iterative learning. At the same time, the model includes the micro, meso, and macro levels: the individual level is taken into account through a multidimensional anchoring of the model, as are the organisational and societal levels. It should be emphasised here that this research also indicates that top management and leadership in municipal services organisations must always contribute to social legitimacy.

In summary, this thesis shifts the theoretical debate in several respects, moving away from a purely individualised understanding of leadership, emphasising the context sensitivity of leadership in the context of municipal services organisations, combining different scientific perspectives, and broadening the discussion on digital transformation to include a social-symbolic understanding. The work thus contributes to the development of a meaning-centred, context-specific and institutional theory of leadership in digital transformation. It provides explanations for why digital transformation often proceeds ambivalently in municipal services organisations and formulates conditions under which inspirational motivation can become effective as a central leadership performance in the form of Reflected Inspirational Motivation. The proposed model explicitly embeds digital transformation in the specific context of municipal

services organisations. The framework integrates not only top management and employees, but also the public as a central actor, thus adding a dimension of legitimacy and public benefit that is often neglected in existing models. While established approaches often suggest a linear sequence of steps, this study proposes an iterative, multi-stage process that combines strategic reflection, operational implementation, and social participation. In this way, Reflected Inspirational Motivation is conceptualised not only as a leadership trait but also operationalised as an organisational development process grounded in expediency and legitimacy.

5.2.2. Contribution to Practice

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this research offers concrete guidance for municipal services organisations on how to address the challenges of digital transformation. The findings are not limited to abstract theories, but can be translated into actionable implications for executives, managers and practitioners within municipal services organisations who face the dual challenge of driving technological change while maintaining public legitimacy and trust.

An important first contribution to practice lies in the development of the three-level, three-phase model. By distinguishing between the strategic level (top management), the operational level (middle and lower management, including employees), and the public level (citizens, political actors, trade unions, and other interest groups), the model accounts for the complexity and multi-actor nature of municipal services organisations. Each of these levels has its own logic and challenges, but the framework makes it clear that they are interdependent.

At the same time, the process dimension of analysis, implementation and reflection provides a temporal structure that prevents digital transformation from being reduced to a single initiative or project; rather, it emphasises the iterative nature of transformation, in which phases of planning and analysis must alternate with phases of implementation and continuous adaptation. In practice, this model can serve as a roadmap for managers: it shows at which level and in which phase certain measures can be effective, and it makes it clear that parallel work across different areas is often necessary.

The practical value of this framework becomes clear in the context of the inspirational motivation concept. Previous studies have often left this construct at

an abstract level, making it difficult for managers to apply in practice. However, this thesis shows how inspirational motivation can be operationalised in concrete organisational contexts. The key finding is that visions must be embedded in the daily practices, structures and processes of an organisation to be effective, for example by setting up steering committees to ensure prioritisation and resource allocation, by introducing pilot projects that make the vision visible in daily operations, or by establishing communication routines and narratives that consistently link the vision to the core task of serving the community.

A second practical implication concerns how visions are developed and maintained. The results show that visions only have an impact if they are treated as living constructs. In practice, this means leaders cannot rely on a one-time top-down announcement of a vision; rather, they must create participatory processes in which visions are negotiated, adapted, and reaffirmed over time. This participatory anchoring is particularly relevant for municipal services organisations, given their strong focus on the common good and on democratic legitimacy. Employees, citizens and political actors will only accept and identify with a vision and narratives if they recognise their own concerns and values in it (Ganz, 2010). Managers must therefore set up regular dialogue forums, such as workshops, citizen forums, or internal discussion platforms, where the vision can be explained, discussed, refined, and adapted. This insight provides a concrete guideline for practice: inspirational motivation does not come from rhetorical brilliance, but from continuous co-creation and a visible focus on the values of service, reliability and the common good.

A third contribution to practice concerns leadership development. The research identifies several areas of competence crucial to leaders in municipal services organisations, which can be directly integrated into training and development programmes. These findings support a shift from programme-oriented, individual-heroic leadership development towards approaches that cultivate collective, system-oriented and vertically deeper capabilities in line with recent thinking on the 21st century public servant (Mangan & Lawrence-Pietroni, 2019; Needham & Mangan, 2014). In practical terms, this implies designing development pathways that combine horizontal skill-building with vertical development of managers' capacity to think in more complex, reflexive and narrative ways.

Among these, the ability to formulate a vision that is both attractive and realistic stands out. Managers must be trained to formulate visions that go beyond the abstract promise of 'digitalisation' and instead highlight concrete benefits for employees, the organisation and society as a whole. In addition, communication skills are essential: managers must be able to tailor their messages to different audiences, consistently repeat key messages, and use storytelling to link abstract goals to concrete experiences. Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of participatory leadership skills, such as creating spaces for interaction or collaboration, involving works councils and political bodies, and engaging in constructive dialogue with sceptical stakeholders. In summary, this research contributes to practice by providing a workable model for leadership in municipal services organisations, identifying specific areas for managers' development, and demonstrating how participatory processes can be used to effectively develop and embed visions and legitimise digital transformation processes.

5.2.3. Limitations and Future Directions

This concluding sub-chapter of the thesis outlines the limitations of this research and presents suggestions for future research.

5.2.3.1. Research Limitation

The limitations of this research concern the three focal points of this work (municipal services organisations, leadership/inspirational motivation and digital transformation), the chosen research design and the qualitative results themselves.

In the research context of municipal services organisations, it became evident that there are only a few scientific studies on leadership in public service in Germany, and almost none that explicitly include municipal services organisations. Although research interest in this topic has increased in the course of this doctoral project, the results of this study can only be compared and critically reflected upon or contrasted with other scientific studies, especially those focusing on leadership, to a limited extent. This underlines both the novelty of the research and its limited comparability.

The qualitative research design used in this work was based on constructivist assumptions and applied a case-centred approach using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Although this enabled the development of a socially embedded understanding of inspirational motivation in leadership in the context of municipal services organisations in the age of digital transformation, it inevitably introduces subjectivity in data collection, analysis and interpretation and thus, as with all qualitative studies, limits the generalisability of the results, which is exacerbated by the relatively small sample size. Furthermore, the limitation to top management's perspectives in the chosen context means that subjective views of employees and other stakeholders such as citizens, politics or trade union are not included. The interviews themselves also underscore the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research. Unlike standardised quantitative methods, interviews are influenced not only by the participants but also by the researcher. The researcher's communication style during the preparation and conduct of the interviews, as well as the subsequent interpretations, inevitably influenced the data, as did the researcher's experience in applying qualitative methods in general and RTA in particular.

Recruiting interview partners presented an additional challenge. Although the original goal was to conduct at least 20 interviews, evenly distributed across the top management levels, access to participants was more limited than expected and required a lengthy acquisition process. Nevertheless, the data's informative power suggested that further interviews would likely not yield any fundamentally new insights or change the topics presented. However, there is a possibility of bias in the selection of interview partners, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results, as only top managers with a certain attitude towards digital transformation and/or the research project may have shown interest.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) proved a suitable method of analysis, but its application is inevitably linked to the researcher's competence and interpretative decisions. From the formulation of the semi-structured interview guide to the coding and identification of themes, the researcher's professional and personal background, developments and experience inevitably influenced the results. The themes must therefore always be viewed to some extent as situational interpretations and as the result of the researcher's interaction with people, data and evolving perspectives in the researcher's life, rather than as neutral representations of top leadership perspectives and practices. Although this influence can be beneficial as it allows for deeper insights into processes of meaning formation, it also limits comparability with other studies. This is consistent with constructivist assumptions that reality is shaped by social interaction, but it also highlights the limits of neutrality in this study. For this reason, reflexivity was an important component of this research and was practised in particular through the use of postscripts to make the researcher's subjectivity explicit and transparent, while also documenting the researcher's development, especially during the interview phase.

Finally, the research is subject to contextual, conceptual and temporal limitations. The empirical work was limited to German organisations in the context of municipal services organisations, which limits the transferability of the results to other countries, cultures, or organisational contexts. Furthermore, the concept of inspirational motivation was not used directly in practice (in the interview phase) but was mainly made accessible through the concept of vision, which may limit the conceptual consistency between

academic theory and practitioners' discourse. Furthermore, this study does not capture long-term developments or changes in inspirational motivation and digital transformation, an aspect that must be taken into account when classifying this research, given the complex and highly dynamic nature of digital transformation.

In addition, the conceptual development from inspirational motivation (IM) to Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) is subject to specific limitations. While this study provides an empirically grounded re-conceptualisation of inspirational motivation, RIM has not been fully theorised or operationalised as an independent construct. Rather, it is generated through the systematic interpretation of empirical findings and their abstraction into a multi-level, processual conceptualisation of leadership, derived from recurring patterns across the five central themes, that integrate sensemaking and system-oriented leadership perspectives. In doing so, the study moves beyond existing formulations of inspirational motivation by conceptualising inspiration not primarily as an individual leadership behaviour or practice, but as an organisationally embedded and relational process that unfolds across multiple levels and is closely linked to meaning-making, legitimacy and institutional dynamics. As such, the extent to which RIM should be understood as an extension of inspirational motivation, a hybrid construct, or a distinct leadership concept remains only partially clarified within the scope of this study. More specifically, RIM can be interpreted as a context-sensitive re-conceptualisation of inspirational motivation that shifts the focus from individual leaders towards leadership as an organisational and relational capability. At the same time, it incorporates elements that go beyond classical transformational leadership, including systemic, institutional and processual dimensions of leadership. This dual character highlights both the conceptual potential of RIM and the limitations of the current study in fully delineating its theoretical boundaries.

Furthermore, the empirical basis of this study – focusing on top management perspectives – limits the extent to which RIM can be understood as a multi-level phenomenon. The perspectives of employees, citizens and other stakeholders, which are central to the notion of leadership as a collective and relational process, are not included. This constrains the ability to fully capture how RIM unfolds across organisational and institutional levels. Accordingly,

RIM should currently be understood as an empirically grounded and theoretically informed conceptual development that requires further validation and operationalisation.

5.2.3.2. Future Research Directions

This research opens up several directions for future research. A first starting point is the quantitative validation of the results. While the present study is exploratory and qualitative, future studies could empirically test the developed framework and the concept of Reflected Inspirational Motivation (RIM) using larger samples. Future research could broaden the participant base beyond top management to include employees and external stakeholders – particularly politicians and citizens – thereby capturing a wider range of perspectives on RIM in municipal services organisations. Another direction could be to examine how – in addition to RIM – the other three ‘I’s’ of transformational leadership (individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence) come into play here.

Future research could also empirically explore how narrative practices and vertical development interventions in public sector leadership programmes affect the emergence and sustainability of RIM in municipal services organisations. Beyond this, future research should more explicitly engage with the conceptual status of RIM. This includes examining whether RIM should be further developed as an extension of inspirational motivation, conceptualised as a hybrid construct integrating transformational, transactional and systemic elements, or established as a distinct leadership construct in its own right. Clarifying this positioning would contribute to a more precise theoretical grounding of RIM within the broader leadership literature.

A second starting point concerns the further development of the theoretical foundations in the sense of Lawrence and Phillips (2019). Future research could examine how self-work, organisational work, and institutional work interact in the context of digital transformation, and how managers navigate among these levels. This would enable an even more differentiated understanding of how meaning and interpretation processes are established and perpetuated in municipal services organisations. In addition, comparative studies beyond the context of municipal services organisations could be useful. Future studies in the public sector in Germany, in general, as well as

cross-country comparisons, could provide insights into whether the results obtained here are specific to the German municipal services organisations context or public services in Germany. Similarly, cross-sector studies could examine the extent to which the findings are transferable to private sector companies.

This research has only integrated different scientific perspectives to a limited extent (e.g., sociology or psychology), so future research could focus even more strongly on the intersection of these disciplines to develop less isolated and more common analysis and solution proposals for practice by combining different perspectives. Finally, future research should be more longitudinal in nature. Since digital transformation is a highly dynamic, complex and iterative phenomenon, only longitudinal studies can capture how, for example, leadership practice, organisational structures and employee motivation change and adapt over time. This would also allow drawing conclusions about the sustainability of measures and the long-term effect of RIM. In addition, future research should aim to further operationalise RIM by developing measurable dimensions and indicators that capture its multi-level and processual nature. This could include the development of survey instruments, mixed-method designs or experimental approaches that test the relationship between RIM and outcomes such as legitimacy, alignment, or organisational adaptability. Such efforts would be essential for validating RIM beyond its current interpretive and exploratory grounding.

This work makes a valuable contribution to leadership and digital transformation research in municipal services organisations. Inspiration is not a question of individual competence or even charisma, but rather an organisational capability. Reflected Inspirational Motivation describes how leadership can be effective in digital transformation processes in municipal services organisations when vision, purpose, strategy, structures and interaction/communication merge into a reflexive, collaboratively supported system. In this sense, Reflected Inspirational Motivation extends existing formulations of inspirational motivation by reframing inspiration as a distributed and organisationally embedded process rather than an individual leadership behaviour or practice.

This work thus shifts an aspect of transformational leadership away from the individual and towards an interplay between people and context (i.e., the organisation), positioning digital transformation as a negotiation process that creates meaning, orientation, and legitimacy. Reflected Inspirational Motivation therefore represents a distinct conceptual contribution that extends and repositions inspirational motivation within a systemic and institutional understanding of leadership. The developed three-level and three-phase framework makes this understanding practically applicable and offers municipal service leaders a set of tools for developing visions based on the organisation's purpose, anchoring them structurally, and implementing them in a participatory manner. This contributes to a new understanding of leadership towards collectively reflected effectiveness, as a basis for sustainable digital transformation within municipal services organisations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide incl. background information



Semi-structured interview by Lars-O. Böckmann

Background, general information, and explanation of the logic of the structure

Qualitative research is usually preceded by a general research question, which may evolve in the course of the research or from which new and/ or broader questions may arise (Bryman, 2016). This research on the role and meaning of inspirational and motivational leadership in supporting effective digital transformation in municipal services of general interests organisations in Germany is based on the following central research question:

"How can motivating and inspiring leadership behaviour effectively support digital transformation in organisations of municipal services of general interests organisations in Germany from a top-management perspective and how can this be effectively developed through a comprehensive and understandable framework?"

In the context of this work, it is important to look at the individual perspectives of the managers interviewed and to always keep in mind the relationship and interaction with the context (municipal services of general interests) on the one hand and the 'age' (Industry 4.0) on the other. The following research objectives were therefore derived from the research question presented:

- Exploring and understanding the phenomenon of digital transformation in the context of municipal services of general interests organisations from the perspective of top managers
- Investigate the meaning and role of inspirational and motivational leadership behaviour in the selected context from a top management perspective.
- Identify development steps to become a leader in the age of digital transformation in the selected context who develops and demonstrates motivating and inspiring leadership behaviour.
- Reflecting on the previously developed findings with top leaders in the selected context in order to develop a model for effective implementation in practice and make it applicable.

For this work, the qualitative interview is the instrument for collecting data, but the multitude of interview forms can appear confusing, which is why a classification of the method chosen for this research work, suggested by Helfferich (Helfferich, 2013), is used in the following. According to this, the so-called semi-structured interview can be regarded as an interview form of qualitative research. Since various topics are to be dealt with within one interview, the guided interview is an adequate instrument for this work. With an overview of open questions, it is possible to work towards the research goal in a meaningful way, so that, for example, a reconstruction of a social phenomenon (Gläser & Laudel, 2010) via themes can be made possible in this way.

Accordingly, the guideline serves to keep to a range of more or less detailed and, above all, manageable specifications. A combination of different question forms (open or derived from theory, etc.) is also used to approach the research object (Helfferich, 2013). A stronger standardisation, for example in comparison to a narrative interview, also offers the advantage of being able to better connect the data obtained. However, it is always important to ensure that the researcher does not choose to narrow a focus and thereby risk losing openness in the process (Lamnek & Krell, 2005).

According to Helfferich (2013), it makes sense to determine which aspects should have a narrative-generating effect, based on the research question. According to a principle described by her (collecting, checking, sorting, and subsuming), questions were therefore first collected in this work, which were then checked, sorted, and finally subsumed under the premises of prior knowledge and openness. The result is a guideline divided into five central blocks with a narrative question at the beginning of each block, followed by in-depth, open-ended individual questions.

The interview guide developed for this research thus follows a predefined sequence of question and topic blocks as well as sub-questions, so that one can speak of a tendency towards higher standardisation. On the other hand, sufficient openness is left for the interviewee to set his or her own accents during the interview. This makes it possible for the interview partners to express individual actions, assessments, interpretations, and processing - without too much guidance from the interviewer - and in this way subjective references to meaning can become clear, which according to (Witzel, 2000) would correspond to a more problem-centred interview. Thus, on the continuum of standardisation, the interview used in this research work is, in sum, more on the structured side, without, however, disregarding free narrative elements characterised by openness. In this way, it is possible for the interviewees to set their own (thematic) priorities and in this way to make subjective contexts of meaning explicit.

As can be seen in the following interview guide, each of the six chapters always starts with an introductory heading to give the interviewees a thematic framework. This is always followed by an open question on the respective section. The concretising questions that are then presented serve to ask more detailed questions - for example, if the interviewee does not elaborate much - and thus offer the researcher a 'guideline' for deepening the conversation during the interview.

The topic of municipal services of general interests is introduced in the first section, again starting with an open question posed at a high level of abstraction. This is followed by a transition to the topic of digital transformation and the corresponding understanding, role, and meanings. In the third section, the topic of leadership is dealt with in a similar logic (from the general to the concrete) and then related to Digital Transformation as well as the context chosen for this work. Building on this, the focus is drawn more narrowly on aspects of transformational leadership, first with three of the four I's mentioned by Bass (Hemsworth et al., 2013): intellectual stimulation, idealised influence, and individual consideration, before the topic of inspirational motivation, as the focus of this work, is addressed more concretely in a separate question chapter.

This whole approach follows the logic that the interviewee is introduced to the different topics step by step, a solid basis for conversation is built up and at the same time a comprehensive view of the different thematic complexes is possible, first thematically separately and then in connection and interaction with each other. In the last chapter, four sentences are mentioned to be completed by the interviewee to conclude the interview with a more general or 'keyword' approach. The interview is rounded off with the final question if the interviewee would like to add anything before the interview ends.

The structure of the interview

1. On the context of municipal services of general interests.....	4
2. The role and meaning of digital transformation (DT)	4
2.1. General/ social/ economic.....	4
2.2. Specific context: municipal services of general interest.....	4
3. On the role and meaning of leadership and leadership-behaviour in the age of DT.....	5
3.1. Leadership & DT in general.....	5
3.2. Intellectual stimulation	5
3.3. Individualized consideration & idealized influence	5
4. Inspirational motivation	6
5. Final questions	6
6. Last question	6

1. On the context of municipal services of general interests

As a first step, I would like to talk to you about what is special for you - generally speaking - about the context of municipal services of general interest.

Opening Question: → When you think of municipal services of general interest: what makes this context special for you?

- How is it that these points you mentioned are 'special' to you?
- What do you perhaps also consider difficult about this context?
- To what extent has this perspective developed or changed in the past years of your management activity?

2. The role and meaning of digital transformation (DT)

You have now described some central aspects and special features that you fundamentally recognise in municipal services of general interest. In the next step, I would like to focus on the role that DT plays from your point of view.

Opening Question: → What thoughts or associations come to mind when you think of the term DT in general?

2.1. General/ social/ economic

- What do you think people generally associate with DT?
- In your opinion, what is the importance/ significance of DT for the world of work and the economy in general?
- What opportunities, dangers or risks might result from it socially and/or economically?
- How do you think this has developed or changed in recent years - and how will it develop further in the future?

2.2. Specific context: municipal services of general interest

- What is the role of DT for municipal services of general interests-organisations in general?
- What does DT mean for your organisation?
- How has the role of DT in your organisation developed in recent years?
- Where do you see any conducive or equally obstructive aspects for successful DT in your organisation?
- When would you say DT has successfully arrived in your organisation and how would you recognise this?
- What influence does this have on your work as (top) manager in your organisation?

3. On the role and meaning of leadership and leadership-behaviour in the age of DT

We have now talked in general terms about the topic of DT in the context of organisations of municipal services of general interests and your organisation. In the following, I would like to talk more specifically about the role of leadership-behaviour in the context of DT in your organisation.

Opening Question: → From your perspective, what is the fundamental role of leadership in your company?

3.1. Leadership & DT in general

- To what extent would you say that leadership in the context of municipal services of general interests is similar or different from leadership in the private sector?
- How would you describe the way of leadership in your company in general?
- What connection do you see between successful DT on the one hand and leadership on the other?
- In your opinion, which specific leadership actions are important for successful DT in your company?
- What do you see or experience in your company as conducive or possibly also obstructive leadership action in relation to this topic?

3.2. Intellectual stimulation

- How do you think it is possible to set new impulses in your organisation and create a climate of change?
- What is necessary for challenging the status-quo (the 'tried and tested and established') in your organisation?
- What do you think is maybe also important in this context so that new ideas and alternatives are accepted and tried out?

3.3. Individualized consideration & idealized influence

- What do you think it would take for your managers to be determined and perhaps also enthusiastic about the topic of 'DT'?
- How do you think it could be possible in your organisation for managers to respond to the individual needs of their employees and thereby develop their skills and strengths in a focused way?

4. Inspirational motivation

In the last third of our interview, I would like to talk to you about inspirational motivation in the context of leadership as well as DT.

Opening Question: → When you think of leadership that motivates in an inspiring way: how can that look like from your point of view?

- What role does the development and communication of a 'compelling vision' related to DT play for you?
 - → How do you think it could be possible to develop a convincing DT-related goal image/vision and to communicate this primarily through concrete leadership behaviour in your organisation?
 - In your opinion, what role does it play that the meaning or purpose of goals and tasks - related to DT - is comprehensible to everyone in the company?
 - → If we assume that this would be important: What might it look like if this were part of the daily actions of your leaders in your organisation?
-

5. Final questions

In the last step, I would like to ask you to complete four sentences. I will give you the beginning of each sentence and you please finish the sentence as it comes to your mind:

- For me, working as a (top) manager in the context of municipal services of general interests means...
 - If I had to choose a metaphor or image that best describes my role in times of this transformation, then it would be...
 - For me, being perceived as a role model means....
 - If I *honestly* summarise the role or importance of digital transformation for my company in one sentence, then...
-

6. Last question

Closing question: → In your opinion, is there anything else that should be added to complete the interview?



Appendix 1: Initial recruitment text for potential participants

Recruitment of potential participants direct via business networks

Dear X,

my name is Lars-O. Böckmann. I am a doctoral student in business administration at the University of Worcester and would be very pleased if you would support me in my research on my topic.

My research interest focuses on how motivating and inspiring leadership behaviour can effectively support digital transformation in organisations of municipal services of general interests organisations in Germany from a top-management perspective.

The central aim of my study is to identify (leadership) behaviour for top-management in the context of municipal services of general interests organisations that has a motivating and inspiring effect to pro-actively shape the challenges of the digital transformation.

As part of the study, interviews will be conducted to collect data. Each interview will be conducted in German and face-to-face and will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. If it is not possible to conduct the interviews in person due to applicable corona-regulations/orders, they will be conducted via MS Teams. Already here I would like to make clear that all information about the participants will be kept strictly confidential and all names of persons or companies etc. will be anonymised. The requirements of data protection law will not only be followed, but also - according to the strict rules of the university - supplemented by strict regulations regarding adequate ethical research.

In the current phase of my research, I am looking for top managers (first and second management level (management board, CEO, area/centre managers)) from organisations in the context of municipal services of general interests - and I am writing to you today to ask for your support.

I would be grateful if you would support me in my study as part of my doctoral thesis and write to me via my university academic email address: BOCL1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk . Only I have access to this mailbox and would then be happy to send you all the necessary information, for example regarding data protection aspects, as well as more detailed information about my research. Alternatively, you are welcome to send me your e-mail address to which I should send the relevant research information.

I would be very pleased if you would support my research with your participation,

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards from Cologne,

Lars-O. Böckmann

Appendix C: Invitation after recommendation

Recruitment of potential participants via business networks or by e-mail through a provided contact of my wider personal/business network (changes to the text above are highlighted)

Dear X,

my name is Lars-O. Böckmann. I am a doctoral student in business administration at the University of Worcester and would be very pleased if you would support me in my research on my topic. I received your contact details from (person who made the recommendation) because (he/she) told me that you might be willing to support me and my research.

My research interest focuses on how motivating and inspiring leadership behaviour can effectively support digital transformation in organisations of municipal services of general interests organisations in Germany from a top-management perspective.

The central aim of my study is to identify (leadership) behaviour for top management in the context of municipal services of general interests organisations that has a motivating and inspiring effect to be able to effectively master the challenges of the digital transformation.

As part of the study, interviews will be conducted to collect data. Each interview will be conducted face-to-face and will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. If it is not possible to conduct the interviews in person due to applicable corona-regulations/orders, they will be conducted via MS Teams. Already here I would like to make clear that all information about the participants will be kept strictly confidential and all names of persons or companies etc. will be anonymised. The requirements of data protection law will not only be followed, but also - according to the strict rules of the university - supplemented by strict regulations regarding adequate ethical research.

In the current phase of my research, I am looking for top managers (first and second management level (management board, CEO, area/centre managers)) from organisations in the context of municipal services of general interests - and I am writing to you today to ask for your support.

I would be grateful if you would support me in my study as part of my doctoral thesis and write to me via my university academic email address: BOCL1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk . Only I have access to this mailbox and would then be happy to send you all the necessary information, for example regarding data protection aspects, as well as more detailed information about my research. Alternatively, you are welcome to send me your e-mail address to which I should send the relevant research information.

I would be very pleased if you would support my research with your participation,

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards from Cologne,

Lars-O. Böckmann

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

Final version following ethical approval (amendments highlighted):



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND PRIVACY NOTICE

TITLE OF PROJECT: *“The role of inspirational and motivational leadership behaviour to support effective digital transformation in organisations of municipal services of general interests in Germany.”*

Invitation

The University of Worcester conducts a wide range of research to better understand the world around us, improve people's health and wellbeing, and find answers to social, economic, and environmental problems.

We would like to invite you to take part in one of our research projects. Before you decide to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out, what this means for you, what information we will collect from you and what we will do with this information.

We will collect personal data as part of this project. The UK is bound by the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation, now called the 'UK GDPR'. Under the UK GDPR, we must provide a justification (called a "legal basis") for collecting such data. The legal basis for this project is 'task in the public interest'.

You can find out more about our approach to handling your personal data at <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/visitor-privacy-notice.html>. Guidelines on which this work is based are furthermore:

- University of Worcester - Institutional ethical guidelines:
<https://www.worcester.ac.uk/research/research-integrity-and-ethics.aspx>
- BPS Code of Conduct and Ethical Guidelines:
<https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/code-ethics-and-conduct>
- The German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) - main standard-setting body for public research in Germany:
https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/good_scientific_practice/index.html

Please take time to read this document carefully.

What is the purpose of the research?

The aim of the research is to identify (leadership) behaviour for top management in the context of municipal services of general interests that has a motivating and inspiring effects in order to proactively shape the challenges associated with the digital transformation. In the context of this research, top managers in municipal services are understood as the managers of the first two management levels in the organisations (CEO & CEO-1). Common terms for these positions are board member ("Vorstand"), managing director ("Geschäftsführer"), chief executive officer (CEO) and division- or centre-manager ("Bereichs- oder Center-Leiter").

Who is undertaking the research?

Name: Lars-O. Böckmann

Position / Role: Researcher in the "Doctor of Business Administration" (DBA) program

Who has oversight of the research?

The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Panel for the College of business, psychology, and sport (CBPS REP) in line with the University's Research Ethics Policy. The University of Worcester acts as the "Data Controller" for personal data collected through its research projects and is subject to the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. We are registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and our Data Protection Officer is Helen Johnstone (infoassurance@worc.ac.uk). For more on our approach to Information Assurance and Security visit: <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/index.html>.

Why have I been invited to take part?

Several criteria were set for participation in the study. You have received this invitation because the study focuses on top managers at the first two levels of management who work in municipal services of general interest.

At least 20 participants are to be recruited for this study. Given the possibility that it might be a challenge to recruit 20 participants who meet these criteria, the criteria may change/adapt slightly. In this case you will be informed.

How do I take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part in this study. Please take your time to decide and talk to others about it if you wish. Deciding to take part or not will not impact on the studies at the University. The procedure for you to agree to participate is to send a message to the author at BOCL1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk up to four weeks after receiving this letter. If you do decide to take part, at the data collection stage, you will be asked to sign a consent form (details see below: What will happen if I agree to take part).

How can I withdraw from this study after agreeing to participate?

Once you have agreed to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time up to 21 days after the interview has been conducted. If you wish to withdraw your data, please contact us (researcher's email address: BOCL1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk) and include your participant number - which will be randomly generated on the day of the interview and given to you during the interview - so that your data will not be used. All data provided or collected by you (incl. your message regarding the desired withdrawal and, of course, all interview data (audio files, transcripts, etc.)) will then be irrevocably deleted.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

The first priority is that you feel safe and comfortable during the study. This starts with making sure that you receive all the information you need and that any questions you have about the study are answered. This also includes that you can be sure that both the content of the interview and all information related to the study will be kept strictly confidential, so that no identification of you, companies or the like is possible for third parties. The further procedure after your consent is then as follows:

- If you agree to participate in the study, you will be offered the opportunity to make an appointment (preliminary interview by phone or video call) with the researcher before the actual interview date is arranged. During this possible preliminary interview, any questions

that have arisen up to that point can be answered. You can also express your willingness to participate here in conclusion.

- After this (possible) preliminary interview and a few days before the interview date, you will receive all the necessary documents for the data processing by e-mail so that you can read them through at your leisure.
- Immediately before the start of the ('on-site'/in-person) interview, you will also have the opportunity to ask further questions. Before the recording begins, the previously sent consent form (as well as the one printed out and carried by the researcher) will be signed in duplicate by both the researcher and you. One copy will then remain in your possession. In order to keep your identity secret already here and in the future, the researcher will from now on use a randomly generated participant number for you. You will then find your participant number accordingly on your consent form.
- One interview per interview partner is planned, which will take about 60-90 minutes. If, contrary to expectations, it turns out during the interview that more time is needed, the researcher would arrange a second appointment with you, if necessary, in this unlikely case.
- The study aims to collect data through semi-structured interviews. The interview will be conducted by the researcher. A prepared interview guide with predefined topic areas and associated questions will guide the interview; however, this guide can be used flexibly.
- The study requires a semantic (audio) recording of the interview and a transcript of all spoken words of the interview participants. It is therefore necessary that the entire interview is recorded. The interview will be recorded on audio only and not on video.
- The researcher will take some handwritten notes in the form of keywords during the interview as an aid to thought. The recorded data will then be transcribed (reproduction of the spoken language in written form). Your name and the names of persons or organisations are anonymised in the transcript. Finally, the transcript is analysed by the researcher.
- The data obtained will be used exclusively for research. The recorded and processed (transcribed) data will be stored safely and securely in a password-protected area on the university's drive to which only the researcher has access. The audio recordings are kept until the data has been transcribed and analysed. After that, the recordings are completely deleted. The transcripts in the author's possession are also completely deleted after the dissertation has been completed. Only the dissertation itself and the anonymised transcripts, which - as shown - do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the interviewees or any information related to them, will remain in the University of Worcester Archives for retention purposes in accordance with the retention/archiving guidelines (see also: <https://www2.worc.ac.uk/informationassurance/>). Notes taken during the interviews will be securely stored on the researcher's password/FaceID protected iPads. After completion of the dissertation, these notes will also be completely deleted.

Throughout the process (before, during and after the interview) you can make an appointment with the researcher at any time so that you have the opportunity to ask questions or clarify any other issues that may arise in relation to your interview participation. In addition, as outlined, you have the right to withdraw and withdraw your consent up to 21 days after the interview appointment; a short message (email or phone call) to the researcher stating your randomly generated participant number is sufficient.

What are the benefits for me in taking part?

The digital transformation will lead to drastic changes in the world of work in general and thus inevitably to changes in leadership within organisations in particular. This has implications for leadership research in the field of public organisations in general and organisations in the context of municipal services of general interest in particular, as this context is still underrepresented compared to the private sector.

With your participation in this study, you have the opportunity to generate knowledge in this area and at the same time contribute to deepening the understanding of the connections between the digital transformation on the one hand and the topic of leadership or leadership behaviour in the context of municipal services of general interest on the other hand and - with your contribution - to close gaps in theory and practice.

Based on the findings, practical suggestions can be made in the following to actively shape the challenges associated with the digital transformation in the context of municipal services of general interest. After completion of the study, I will be happy to grant you access to the results of this research if you are interested.

Are there any risks for me if I take part?

There are no immediate potential risks associated with the research. However, if you feel unwell during the interview, the researcher will support you by addressing your individual needs - and, for example, a break will be taken, the interview will be postponed or, at your request, the interview will not be continued.

As your health and well-being are central to this research, it is also important to avoid physical, emotional, and psychological risks that could be caused by Covid-19. As the data will be collected in the form of face-to-face interviews "in the field", special precautions need to be taken here:

The basic framework and minimum standard here are the regulations of the Federal Ministry of Health in Germany valid at the time of implementation, as well as corresponding ordinances of federal states, cities, and municipalities. In addition, the precautionary measures desired by the respondents are always in the foreground; any undercutting of the applicable ordinances by the political side will not take place in any way but will be surpassed at any time at the request of you as the respondent(s), e.g., through even stronger precautions and protective measures.

In case of uncertainties, the interview will be conducted via an online platform (MS Teams) for the protection of the respondents.

What will you do with my information?

Your personal data/information will be treated confidentially at all times, i.e., it will not be passed on to third parties. It will also not be shared with third parties specified in the consent form unless it has been fully anonymised. The exception to this is if you tell us something that indicates that you or someone else is at risk of harm. During the project, all data / information will be kept securely in line with the University's Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data and its [Information Security Policy](#).

We will process your data for various purposes in connection with the project. You can be assured that all information used in connection with the research will always and at all times be presented at a summary level and will be fully anonymised. There will be no way to identify your data (names, places, companies) from the information summarised in this way. The transcripts of the interviews will be used - together with the transcripts of other participants in the research project - to gain new knowledge and understanding from the information collected. This information will be summarised and published in written form (e.g., in research reports, dissertations, conference papers, journal articles or other publications). The summary(s) and conclusions from the research project may also be used for teaching and other research purposes.

If you would like to receive a summary of the research results or have access to one of the publications resulting from the research, please contact us.

How long will you keep my data for?

Your personal data will be retained until the project (including the dissemination period) has been completed.

At the completion of the project, we will retain your data only in anonymised form. This anonymised data will be archived and shared in line with our Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data.

How can I find out what information you hold about me?

You have certain rights in respect of the personal information the University holds about you. For more information about Individual Rights under GDPR and how you exercise them please visit:

<https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/requests-for-personal-data.html>.

What happens next?

Please keep this information sheet.

If you would be interested in taking part, please contact us using the details below and we will be delighted to answer any further questions you have about the research.

Our contact details are:

- Doctoral Student:
Lars-O. Böckmann
Baesweilerhof 28
50933 Köln
m: (+) 49-170-8144276
mail: BOCL1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the project at this point or at any later date you may contact the researcher (contact as above), or you can contact the Director of Study or the Supervisor:

- Director of Study (DOS):
Dr. Olu Shokunbi: o.shokunbi@worc.ac.uk
- Supervisor:
Prof. Dr. John Sparrow: profjohnsparrow@hotmail.com

If you would like to contact an independent person, please contact:

Secretary to Research Ethics Panel for College of Business, Psychology and Sport
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ
ethics@worc.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Appendix E: Informed Consent

Final version following ethical approval (amendments highlighted):

**University
of Worcester**

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (NON-NHS RESEARCH)

Title of Project "THE ROLE OF INSPIRATIONAL AND MOTIVATIONAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN ORGANISATIONS OF MUNICIPAL SERVICES OF GENERAL INTERESTS IN GERMANY"

Participant identification number for this study → _____

Name of Researcher Lars-O. Böckmann

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please initial boxes as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated → _____ or it has been read to me.	
2.	I have been able to ask questions about the project and my participation and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
3.	I understand that taking part in this study involves participation in interview(s) and that the data will be audio recorded and that written notes will be taken during the interview. I understand that the audio recordings will be transcribed as text after the interview(s). I was informed that the audio recordings will be kept until the data will be transcribed and analysed and that the audio recordings will be deleted afterwards. I know that notes that have been taken during the interview(s) will be deleted as well as the transcripts after the completion of the dissertation. Anonymised transcripts will be retained by the University of Worcester only, within the applicable retention and archiving policies of the University of Worcester.	
4.	I understand that I can withdraw up to 21 days after the interview without giving any reason and that I will not be penalised for my withdrawal nor questioned about the reasons for my withdrawal.	
5.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for: publications, recommendation for action, training/consulting activities (researchers' business website, client presentations, social media channels).	
6.	I agree that my data/ information - in aggregated as well as anonymised form, which do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about me or my environment (employer, persons, etc.) - can be quoted in research outputs.	
7.	I understand that my real name will not be revealed, and pseudonyms will be used for quotes.	
8.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g., use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	
9.	I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name, or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.	
10.	I consent to the audio recording during the interview(s).	
11.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this (anonymized) data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	
12.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	
13.	I understand that the data will be archived in anonymised form in accordance with the University of Worcester's retention policy, which has been explained to me or I know where I can read about it.	
14.	I know who to contact if I have any concerns about this research.	

.....		
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
.....		
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

1

UW Consent Form
Version 2 – 29 April 2021

Appendix F: Postscript – blank



POSTSCRIPT

Participant identification number for this study → _____

Date:

Duration:

Place:

Facts:

Age: ☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-59 ☐ 60+

Job title/position or level:

How long have you been a (top) manager:

Experience within and outside the research context Municipal Services of General Interests:

Special incidents at the time of contact:

Special incidents during the interview:

Remarks after the recording device was switched off:

Impressions to stimulate own reflexivity before, during and after the interview:

Structure:

Dynamics:

Mutuality:

Asymmetry:

Appendix G: Confidentiality Agreement



abtipper.de

Hannover, 31. August 2022

Herrn Lars Böckmann

Per E-Mail: bocl1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk

Confidentiality Agreement

Dear Mr. Böckmann,

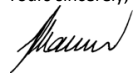
We hereby confirm that all your confidential data and the contents of your transcripts ("**Confidential Information**") are treated confidentially and protected against access by unauthorised third parties. We oblige all our employees and subcontractors in the same way to comply with the applicable provisions of the law and our contractual agreements to maintain confidentiality and protect the data and content.

After completion of the project, the data is completely deleted from our computers. Confidentiality extends beyond the project for a further five years.

The confidentiality obligations described above do not apply to Confidential Information generally known and thus already available to the public. In addition, the confidentiality obligations do not apply to Confidential Information that is lawfully in our possession prior to this Agreement or, in the case of compulsory disclosure by law, court order, or instruction by a government agency.

Please feel free to contact us for any further questions.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Jens Claussen
Managing Director

abtipper.de is an offer of Digitalmeister GmbH, Address: Fernroder Straße 9, 30161 Hannover, Managing Director: Dr. Jens Claussen; Mail: kontakt@abtipper.de,
Web: www.abtipper.de, Telephone: 0511-51515817, Court of register and registration number: District Court Hannover, HRB 214861; VAT-ID: DE310197564;
Tax number: 25/212/02082, Tax authority Hannover-Nord; Bank details: Deutsche Bank AG, IBAN: DE93 2507 0024 0202 4503 00, BIC: DEUTDE33HAN

Appendix H: Ethics Confirmation & Approval



BUSINESS, PSYCHOLOGY & SPORT RESEARCH ETHICS PANEL (BPS REP)

CONFIRMATION OF APPROVAL

6 February 2023

REP CODE: BPS22230009-R1

THE ROLE OF INSPIRATIONAL AND MOTIVATIONAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN ORGANISATIONS OF MUNICIPAL SERVICES OF GENERAL INTERESTS IN GERMANY

Dear Lars

Thank you for your revised application for proportionate review ethical approval to the Business, Psychology and Sport Research Ethics Panel submitted on 6 February 2023.

Your application has been reviewed in accordance with the University of Worcester Ethics Policy and in compliance with the Standard Operating Procedures for proportionate ethical review.

The outcome of the review is that the Panel is now happy to grant this project ethical approval to proceed.

Your research must be undertaken as set out in the approved application for the approval to be valid. You must review your answers to the checklist on an ongoing basis and resubmit for approval where you intend to deviate from the approved research. Any major deviation from the approved application will require a new application for approval.

As part of the University Ethics Policy, the University undertakes an audit of a random sample of approved research. You may be required to complete a questionnaire about your research.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Morgan".

DR BLAIRE MORGAN

Chair – BPS Proportionate Review Panel

Deputy Chair - Business, Psychology and Sport Research Ethics Panel

ethics@worc.ac.uk

Appendix I: Excerpts Postscripts (No. 1 & 19/ 19)

Postscript 1 (reflective key points highlighted):

**University
of Worcester**

POSTSCRIPT

Participant identification number for this study → Ns9u

Date: 21.02.2023 **Duration:** ca. 1:30

Place: Aachen, Manager's Office

Facts:

Age: ☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☒ 50-59 ☐ 60+

Job title/position or level: HR Director

How long have you been a (top) manager: >20 years

Experience within and outside the research context Municipal Services of General Interests:

About 5 years in international corporate function, 20 years in this context (> 15 years as an HR Director)

Special incidents at the time of contact:

The IP was a little concerned about whether he could make a relevant contribution to this issue. It was made clear that it is not about 'knowledge' but about perspectives on the research topic and that there is great interest in exploring these perspectives together. Consequently, it was necessary to pay into the "trust account" so that he believed me that it was really about his point of view.

Special incidents during the interview:

During the interview, it was helpful that I was familiar with the context, so the IP seemed to feel understood more quickly. Statements such as "You know what it's like..." can be inferred from this perspective, as can the short follow-up conversation after the interview. Here, however, it was also important that I did not assume that I already understood what the IP meant, but rather asked him again in a friendly way to explain it anyway, even if we (supposedly!) both knew what was meant. However, this did not lead to any irritation from my POV.

Remarks after the recording device was switched off:

The IP gave (unasked) feedback on the interview and indicated that from his studies (lawyer) he did not understand exactly how insights could now be generated from his data. After a somewhat more detailed explanation on the topic of qualitative research (especially on codes, categorisation, etc. across several IPs), the IP indicated that he would be absolutely interested in the main findings (in the form of a summary) after the research work was completed.

Impressions to stimulate own reflexivity before, during and after the interview:

Structure:

The structure provided a helpful means to keep the thread going. As this was the first interview, the guide was therefore important in order not to digress too far, but to stick to the topics of the guide or the research. In the meantime, however, this also had an impact on the 'liberty' in the design of the process (Dynamic).

Dynamics:

While the structure of the guide was helpful, I had to keep 'calibrating' myself not only to fire the questions, but to stay in touch with the IP, to keep the rapport and maintain a good interview flow. I was able to achieve this by repeatedly putting down the list of questions and concentrating fully on the IP, so that the interview had more of a dialogue character or the character of a good conversation.

Mutuality:

This swinging back and forth between structure and dynamism was gradually more successful, especially from the first third of the interview onwards. While at the beginning it was still characterised by some nervousness on my part (does the recording work? did I have everything filled out correctly? does the IP feel comfortable? etc.), the interview gradually took on a (more) reciprocal character.

Asymmetry:

In particular, with the very open questions, it appeared again and again that the IP was hinting at a desire for more 'clearness/ unambiguousness'.

The change between open questions (at the beginning of each interview section) to more and more concrete questions and then back to a very open question for the next section was (in the first half of the interview) not easy to handle. It almost seemed as if the IP wanted a(n) (easy aka 'clear') question that could be answered clearly, to which he could then give a clear answer that was as simple as possible, in order to then - after an initial succinct answer - answer it again in more detail in the following.

In these phases of changing the levels of abstraction, the 'tone of the conversation' became somewhat more objective from my point of view; here it was necessary not to act with counter-pressure, but to keep the structure, to respond to the IP with openness and respect. The previous structure of the report became central here, so that the IP allowed himself to be led 'gently' through the question part without feeling any 'pressure'.

Personal Conclusion:

The structure of the report is one (if not the) central element for conducting the interviews. It seems (hypothesis after the first interview) that the IPs might be used to answering only clear questions when possible and - if they do not know exactly - might act rather cautiously or 'brashly'.

This could be due to the position (CEO-1 of the first IP); speaking openly and freely here could be a hurdle that I encounter again.

Also, it might be advisable to tell a bit more about the qualitative research before the interview starts, so that the IPs get an idea of how I will work with the data. This could also help to give the IPs a sense of control, that they are allowed (or expected) to store their thoughts, as it will be less about the individual statement and more about patterns in the course of the research.

All in all, the interview was successful, but in the end - despite extensive experience in conducting interviews - I was not 100% satisfied with myself. Specifically, I am comfortable in everyday life (also from feedback from previous years in interviews (Master's in psychology, cultural interviews in the context of my previous consulting work, etc.) to maintain the balance of structure on the one hand and 'dynamics' on the other, as well as the balance of asymmetry on the one hand and reciprocity on the other. this is something I should reflect on more closely in the next interviews, because obviously something seems to be different in this situation. My assumption at the moment is that - possibly due to the hierarchical position in connection with the fact that I 'want' something from my counterpart - I was good but not yet very good in handling the various asymmetries.

In the end, however, the IP was satisfied with the course of the interview and also interested in the results of my research.

Reflections/To Dos based on the hypotheses:

- Give more background information on qualitative research before starting the interview (control-experience for/ of the IP).

- Even if 'we' are sure we understand the same thing, keep asking for an explanation of the 'common understanding' between IP and me in terms of the interview data. --> Do not presuppose understanding, but also explore the supposedly obvious.
- Put down the interview guide more often and turn to the IP. Signal openness, interest and strengthen the trust that everything that is happening is exactly right as it is happening.
- Do not react with counter-pressure if the 'pressure' from the IP (perceived) increases. Stay calm and give the feeling that everything that is happening (and being said) is exactly right. If the question does not resonate with the IP, rephrase the question afterwards in order to get back to the intention of the question.
- Afterwards, reflect again calmly (but promptly after the interview) on what was going on 'inside you' in terms of asymmetry or similar. ("What did the situation do to you? How did you feel during the process? What could be the background of these feelings?")

Postscript 19:



POSTSCRIPT

Participant identification number: RP003

Date: 10.06.2025 **Duration:** ca. 1:07

Place: IP's Office

Facts:

Age: ☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☒ 50-59 ☐ 60+

Job title/position or level: CEO

How long have you been a (top) manager: >20 years

Special incidents at the time of contact:

None.

Special incidents during the interview:

The reflection partner had asked for the meeting around 25 minutes late and also indicated that a maximum of 1 hour and 10 minutes would be available for the interview due to a follow-up appointment.

Remarks after the recording device was switched off:

The RP was very interested in the documents discussed (themes, etc.) and wanted to keep them; however, I agreed that the RP would be the first to be informed when the results are published so that she can view them.

Impressions to stimulate own reflexivity before, during and after the interview:

Structure & Dynamics:

At first, it seemed difficult for RP to settle into the interview situation; with several appointments to attend to and a clear time limit for the end of the conversation, it took a few minutes to get used to the setting. However, once settled in, the results could be reflected upon and, in some cases, discussed in greater depth.

Mutuality & Asymmetry:

In this conversation, too, the author was regarded more as an "expert" on the issues of leadership and DT in the chosen context.

Personal Conclusion:

Towards the end of the conversation, it increasingly turned into a consultation, because the RP also wanted some input; this happened in particular after the dictaphone had been switched off. However, the author, conscious of his role, held back, but offered a further reflection discussion if there was interest, on how the results could then be put into practice.

Reflections/To Dos based on the hypotheses:

After the second interview, I have decided to leave the to-dos from the first interview here and to add the 'new' aspects, so to speak as a 'growing' list. Little by little I would like to complete this list - and if necessary, prioritize it in the future. (e.g., in phases 'before', 'during' and 'after' the interview). For this reason, I write from now on (and until I have a better idea) in front of the respective key point the serial number of the interview and the new points simply below:

- (1) **Background gives IP control:** Give more background information on qualitative research before starting the interview (control-experience for/ of the IP).
- (1) **Don't take understanding for granted:** Even if 'we' are sure we understand the same thing, keep asking for an explanation of the 'common understanding' between IP and me in terms of the interview data. → Do not presuppose understanding, but also explore the supposedly obvious.
- (1) **Focus? IP!** Put down the interview guide more often and turn to the IP. Signal openness, interest and strengthen the trust that *everything that is happening is exactly right as it is happening*.
- (1) **Rephrase calmly:** Do not react with counter-pressure if the 'pressure' from the IP (perceived) increases. Stay calm and give the feeling that everything that is happening (and being said) is exactly right. If the question does not resonate with the IP, rephrase the question afterwards in order to get back to the intention of the question.
- (1) **Reflexivity is ongoing:** Afterwards, reflect again calmly (but promptly after the interview) on what was going on 'inside you' in terms of asymmetry or similar. ("What did the situation do to you? How did you feel during the process? What could be the background of these feelings?")
- (2) **The interview starts at an early stage:** Even if you know it, always be aware beforehand: The interview does not start when you turn on the dictataphone, but already when you make contact, or at the latest with the (first) personal encounter with the IP - even before you start the interview itself.
- (2) **Use your reflected insights:** Always use the insights of your reflections from past interviews for the next interview situation but be aware that things can always turn out differently and/or something new and different can happen.
- (2) **Interview time is precious – in many ways:** Do not underestimate the time required for the phase before and after the interview: Even if in your mind it is managers who have little time, it may be that they want to 'enjoy' the time with you - for your topic and/ or also the personal encounter or personal exchange. Rapport is everything!
- (2) **Your work could be valuable – not only for you:** Keep in mind that you are asking questions that might help the IP sharpen their thinking on the subject matter of your dissertation, which is of concern to many corporate executives - and, that this might also be helpful to your IP.
- (2) **Keep those who want it up to date:** Consider thanking your interviewees again afterwards and offering those who have shown interest in further support and/or the results to contact you again with questions or with a summary of the findings in the context of your dissertation.
- (3) **Always make clear that it is about perspective(s) and not about knowledge:** Uncertainty can be taken away by clarifying the goal of the research or the interview. Always make clear what it is all about: Getting their perspectives on the topics.
- (3) **The questions can be (very) challenging for the IP:** allow them time to answer and paraphrase as needed.
- (3) **The interview itself can be understood as a (small) intervention:** From another perspective, the interview itself, i.e., the questions asked, can be an intervention in the sense that they (could) stimulate the IP to see the topic (e.g., of DT) from a different perspective. This could have an impact on the design of DT in the IP's organization (although this should not be considered too 'significant').
- (4) **It's about content, but above all about people and how they see the world.** Allow yourself to look beyond the interview-questions and learn (even) more about the IP's perspectives, attitudes, and ways of thinking.
- (5) **Keep the multiple balance-acts in mind.** Pay attention to the different aspects of the reflection model according to Bäckér - and consciously but gently steer what is happening.
- (5) **Role clarity is crucial.** Be very aware of your role in the interview. Make yourself tangible as a human being with all your roles, but make sure that you are primarily sitting in the interview the specific role as a researcher, which comes with goals, tasks, responsibilities.
- (6) **Primacy/recency-effects also play a role in interviews in the research context.** Not every interview is deep and not every interview is superficial - and the reasons for this can be manifold. Re-adjust yourself each time beforehand.
- (6) **Watch your data-generation-ambition!** Keep in mind that each IP speaks from their world and that's what it's all about - and they are not sitting in front of you as a 'data generation machine' to give you new insights.

- (7) **Allow yourself situational flexibility during the interviews.** If questions have already been answered sufficiently, there is no need to repeat them.
- (7) **Keep your role(s) in mind!** This is a research interview (and not, for example, coaching) - and the mandate is only to conduct the research interview.
- (8) **Work with your emotions!** Do not only keep an eye on the data you want to generate - but also listen to what bothers you and note it in the postscripts.
- (8) **Stay open!** Even if the IP or the interview may not meet your (personal) expectations.
- (9) **Check back!** Perhaps your enquiry for the interview has not been seen or has been forgotten.
- (9) **Human encounters leave room for (counter) transference phenomena!** If you are relaxed and professional, there is a greater chance that the interview will be too. But also, never forget:
- (9) **You are human too!** And not a (data generation) machine! Your own mood, attitude and manner of encounter also take place in the interview – and that's also ok, as long you keep it professional!
- (10) **Take your time!** It's not a sprint, but a (half) marathon! Time between two interviews can be helpful in order to do justice to the research and in particular to the interview-partners.
- (10) **Balance is key!** Continue to pay attention to your balance in relation to the three 'poles' in Bäckers model. In particular, the balance of structure on the one hand and dynamics on the other helps you not to become too (unconsciously) unbalanced during the dialogue, but to act appropriately.
- (11) **Adapt the IP's dialogue culture!** Don't assume that people from the same context always have the same (conversational) culture, but – as a researcher - always try to deepen the rapport by remaining open to 'surprises'.
- (12) **After the formal interview is before (and during) the interview!** Use the space and time if the IP is still willing to talk afterwards. This can lead to important findings for research as well as for the setting, etc.
- (13) **Check your insights of your reflections (in the postscripts) before new interviews - they will help you to conduct better interviews.** Reflecting briefly on the key points of your own reflections a few minutes before the interviews helps you to get yourself in a good state for the new interviews.
- (13) **Reflect on what you have reflected on!** Ask yourself again and again: What is the point of the whole thing or what does the whole thing stand for? For example, don't get annoyed about what you see as superficial answers, but ask yourself why you are annoyed (for example) or how it can come about that you receive superficial answers etc.
- (14) **Get yourself into an appropriate state before every new encounter.** A coherent interview is strongly characterised by the fact that the attitude you have developed as a researcher over the past few months before and during the interview matches your behaviour.
- (15) **Establish rapport, starting in the waiting room!** Every point of contact with people in the company (reception, assistants, etc.) paves the way for a good interview.
- (15) **The interview is a special occasion for everyone!** Give the IP time to adjust to the new situation – especially if the interview takes place in the IP's office, where business is conducted at other times.
- (16) **The findings of the thesis (apparently) address topics that could be really relevant for the context!** The processing of the findings must not only be usable for theory, but also for practice, in order to generate the added value that I desire.
- (16) **Stay open until the end!** No matter whether it's the interview itself or the last interview in a series of interviews – even if you think there isn't much new information coming, there can always be surprises.

Reflection Sessions:

- (1) **Be open about any potential development in the relationship with the interviewee in the second conversation!** The reflection partner/ interview-partner may have gained a new perception of you.
- (2) **Even short conversations can be meaningful!** Stay open if you get through the topics quickly; it's not the length of the reflections/conversations that matters.
- (2) **The two sides of the 'Dynamic & Structure' continuum should always be balanced!** Based on the results of your reflection, dare to focus more on dynamics and make changes depending on the situation.
- (3) **Be aware that your results may be of interest to leaders!** You are not only a researcher, but could also be perceived as an expert on a challenging issue in the management of organisations in the context of municipal services today.

Appendix J: Data Documents and Coding Overview

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9-BfK2U		47
10-ick27		49
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Codes		764
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Appendix K: Overview of code structure and themes

