

Susanna Holma

# **THE WORKPLACE WELL-BEING OF HIGHLY SENSITIVE INDIVIDUALS IN MANAGERIAL AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS**

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Supervisors: Riitta-Liisa Larjovuori and Malla Mattila

# ABSTRACT

Susanna Holma: The Workplace Well-Being of Highly Sensitive Individuals in Managerial and Leadership Positions  
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In today's world, the need for sustainable practices across sectors and industries is becoming increasingly prominent. For sustainable change and development to take place in societies, workplaces must implement practices that support such change. Workplace well-being is a crucial part of the social sustainability and success of an organization. Managers and leaders are at the forefront of this change and play crucial roles impacting the direction their workplaces are taking. A great variety of individuals work in managerial and leadership positions, however, media only presents a rather narrow and stereotypical image of leadership. This image does not reflect the spectrum of personalities, traits, skills, and backgrounds that occupational leaders and managers possess. High sensitivity is an individual trait that impacts the way a person perceives varying aspects of the world. Highly sensitive people have an elevated level of sensory processing sensitivity, and common characteristics include a tendency to process things deeply and a high level of awareness of subtle stimuli in the external and internal environments. Occupational managers and leaders with high sensitivity can perceive situations and matters they encounter at work in vastly different ways compared to people without this trait. It is therefore important to consider and support their well-being at work and conduct further research on the topic to increase the understanding and awareness of it.

The purpose of this research is to find out about the perceived workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals in managerial and leadership positions, the coping mechanisms they use in work-related matters and situations, as well as what improvement suggestions they have for the future regarding the consideration of their well-being at work. The theoretical background of the research combines literature on occupational leadership, high sensitivity in humans, and workplace well-being, with focus on the Job Demands-Resources Model. Relevant concepts from the key theoretical areas are also discussed.

This research was conducted using the qualitative research method. The methods philosophy followed was phenomenological research, as the aim was to study the real, lived experiences that highly sensitive managers and leaders have regarding their workplace well-being. The data collection method was elicited writing, which allowed the participants to write about their experiences and opinions anonymously, in their chosen format and on their own time. The data collected consists of eight written responses, from four managers and four leaders. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Conclusions of the research findings suggest that workplace well-being is perceived in a great variety of ways by highly sensitive managers and leaders, due to the subjectivity of the matter. Impactful factors were found out to be an open work community that encourages discussion, general atmosphere at work, and a suitable work environment. Work-related matters were found to impact such managers and leaders negatively outside of working hours, and the differing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their well-being highlighted the role that personal and situational factors have in facilitating work. The coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders centered around creating a light and positive work atmosphere, often by the means of humour. Reducing stress by preparing in advance and noting things down were also common tactics. Outside of work, the coping mechanisms focus on taking distance from work-related matters and doing things that bring oneself joy, such as hobbies. Highly sensitive managers and leaders are aware of and have identified what needs to be done to better facilitate their well-being at work. Common improvement suggestions center around education, both about high sensitivity and about self-empathy, as well as social action, referring to peer support, encouragement for discussion and easy access to help. Flexible and fair structures, such as flexibility regarding work schedules and fairness in the division of responsibilities are matters that require improvement.

Keywords: High sensitivity in People (HSP), Occupational Leadership, Workplace Well-Being, Job Demands-Resources Model

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tarve noudattaa kestäviä käytäntöjä työelämässä on kasvamassa monella alalla ja sektorilla. Jotta yhteiskunta kykenee toteuttamaan kestäväää muutosta ja kehitystä, työpaikkojen on tuettava tämänmukaisia käytäntöjä. Työhyvinvointi on keskeinen osa työpaikan sosiaalista kestävyyttä ja yleistä menestystä. Johtajat ja esihenkilöt ovat eturintamassa tässä muutoksessa, ja heidän roolinsa on tärkeä työpaikan tulevaisuuden suunnan määrittelyssä. Johto- ja esihenkilötehtävissä työskentelee laaja kirjo erilaisia ihmisiä, mutta mediassa on yleisesti esitetty varsin kapeakatseinen ja stereotyyppinen kuva johtajuudesta. Tämä kuva ei vastaa sitä persoonallisuuksien, ominaispiirteiden, taitojen ja taustojen spektriä, jota esihenkilöt ja johtajat edustavat. Erityisherkkyyks on yksilöominaisuus, jolla on vaikutus siihen, miten ihminen hahmottaa ja mieltää todellisuutta. Erityisherkillä ihmisillä on yleistä autonomisen hermoston herkkä reagointi, ja piirteisiin kuuluvat myös taipumus pohdiskella ja prosessoida asioita syvällisesti, sekä herkkä ulkoisen ja sisäisen ympäristön hienovaraisten ärsykkeiden tiedostaminen. Erityisherkkät esihenkilöt ja johtajat saattavat kokea työhönsä kuuluvat tilanteet ja asiat varsin eri tavoin kuin ihmiset, joilla ei tätä ominaisuutta ole. Täten onkin tärkeää, että heidän työhyvinvointinsa huomioidaan ja sitä tuetaan. Tätä aihetta laajemmin tutkimalla voidaan kerryttää tietoisuutta ja ymmärrystä erityisherkkyydestä ja sen vaikutuksesta johtajuuteen ja työhyvinvointiin.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tunnistaa, millaiseksi esihenkilö- ja johtotehtävissä työskentelevät erityisherkkät kokevat työhyvinvointinsa, millaisia coping-keinoja he käyttävät töihin liittyvissä tilanteissa ja asioissa, sekä millaisia parantamisehdotuksia heillä on työhyvinvointinsa huomioonottamiseen ja tukemiseen liittyen. Tutkimuksen teoreettisessa taustassa yhdistyy johtajuuden, erityisherkkyyden, ja työhyvinvoinnin kirjallisuutta, ja teoreettisena tukirankana toimii työn vaatimusten ja voimavarojen malli. Aihealueeseen liittyviä käsitteitä avataan myös.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisena eli laadullisena tutkimuksena. Sitä ohjasi fenomenologinen menetelmä, sillä tavoitteena oli tutkia erityisherkkien johtajien ja esihenkilöiden aitoja, elettyjä kokemuksia työhyvinvointiin liittyen. Tutkimusmetodina toimi teemakirjoittaminen, joten tutkimukseen osallistujilla oli mahdollisuus kirjoittaa kokemuksistaan ja mielipiteistään anonyymisti, valitsemallaan tyylillä ja omassa rauhassaan. Kerätty aineisto koostuu kahdeksasta kirjoitetusta vastauksesta, joista neljä oli esihenkilöiltä ja neljä johtajilta. Data analysoitiin hyödyntäen temaattista analyysimenetelmää.

Tulosten johtopäätöksiin mukaan erityisherkkät esihenkilöt ja johtajat kokevat työhyvinvointinsa vaihtelevin tavoin, asian subjektiivisuudesta johtuen. Vaikuttaviksi tekijöiksi tunnistettiin avoin, keskusteluun kannustava työyhteisö, työpaikan yleinen ilmapiiri ja itselle sopiva työympäristö. Töihin liittyvät asiat vaikuttavat esihenkilöihin ja johtajiin negatiivisesti työajan ulkopuolella, ja COVID-19 pandemian vaihtelevat vaikutukset heidän hyvinvointiinsa korostivat henkilö – ja tilannekohtaisten tekijöiden vaikutusta työntekoon. Erityisherkkien johtajien ja esihenkilöiden käyttämät coping-keinot keskittyvät kevyen ja positiivisen työilmapiirin luomiseen, usein huumorin avulla. Stressin vähentäminen etukäteen valmistautumisen ja asioiden ylös kirjaamisen avulla tunnistettiin myös coping-keinoksi. Työajan ulkopuolella coping-keinot keskittyvät työasioista etäisyyttä ottamiseen ja asioihin, jotka tuovat henkilölle iloa, kuten harrastuksiin. Erityisherkkät esihenkilöt ja johtajat ovat tietoisia asioista, joita pitäisi muuttaa, jotta heidän työhyvinvointiaan voitaisiin tukea paremmin. Yleisiä parannusehdotuksia olivat koulutus, sekä erityisherkkyyteen että oman itsensä empaattiseen kohteluun liittyen, ja sosiaaliset toimenpiteet, kuten vertaistuen saanti, keskusteluun rohkaisu ja avun helppo saavuttaminen. Joustavat ja tasapuoliset rakenteet, kuten joustavat työajat ja vastuiden tasapuolinen jakaminen ovat asioita, joissa on parantamisen varaa näiden esihenkilöiden ja johtajien työhyvinvoinnin tukemiseksi.

Avainsanat: erityisherkkyyks (HSP), johtajuus, työhyvinvointi, työn vaatimusten ja voimavarojen malli

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## List of Abbreviations

SPS – Sensory Processing Sensitivity

HSP – Highly Sensitive People/Person

HR – Human Resources

JD-R Model – Job Demands-Resources Model

WEIRD – Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (countries)

TA – Thematic Analysis

RCR – Responsible Conduct of Research

TENK – Tutkimuseettinen Neuvottelukunta (The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity)

COVID-19 – Corona Virus Disease

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Workplace well-being is a critical component in establishing and maintaining a successful company. Bryson, Forth and Stokes (2017) found a statistically significant positive relationship between mean job satisfaction at the workplace and workplace performance. They identified employee satisfaction to be positively associated with workplace financial performance, labour productivity and the quality of output and service (Bryson et al., 2017). Social sustainability is not as well researched as environmental and economic sustainability, implying that new viewpoints, observations, and analyses of the situation are needed. Baumgartner (2014) discusses the relevancy and importance of including corporate social responsibility and sustainability topics and initiatives in the boardroom discussions of companies. Developing more sustainable societies, not only economically or environmentally, but also socially, requires companies to embed activities in their processes that support such development, according to Baumgartner. While varying kinds of tools and approaches have been developed to aid companies in integrating more sustainable practices and managing them, there is still a lack of more comprehensive understanding of corporate social responsibility and sustainability management (Baumgartner, 2014).

Media and research portray a relatively narrow and stereotypical image of occupational leadership. By investigating the well-being of highly sensitive (HSP) managers and leaders, I aim to produce a fresh perspective to the field of workplace well-being research and widen the portrayed image of leadership. VanDerLinden and Eddy (2006) discuss the redefinition of leadership from the traditional “hero leader”, a goal-centered and position-oriented figure, to an updated version where the actions of the leader form a basis for how their leadership is defined. As the social landscape at businesses and organizations is changing (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016), and as occupational fields are becoming more accepting and aware of the varying strengths, traits and values of managers and leaders that do not necessarily align with the traditional characteristics and goals of the hero leader (Lehto, 2017), new leadership styles are evolving. This aids steer leadership in new directions and creates opportunities to enhance the well-being of varying types of managers and leaders, as well as their organizations and companies.

High sensitivity can show itself in a person through various traits (Aron & Aron, 1997). Such traits include, but are not limited to, advanced empathy and listening skills, depth of processing and thinking, increased sensory processing sensitivity, and tendency to become overwhelmed in situations with several sensory stimuli (Aron & Aron, 1997; Sand, 2016; Cater, 2016). The diverse situations that leaders and managers encounter in their profession can be internalized vastly differently by individuals with traits of high sensitivity, compared to individuals without such traits or with a lower exhibition of them. According to the Job Demands-Resources model of workplace environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), in any given workplace, there are job resources and job demands. Job resources, such as autonomy or training opportunities, buffer the negative effect of job demands, such as intense time pressure or corrupt management. Personal resources, such as self-created coping mechanisms like strategies or routines, are connected to job resources (Bakker, Demerouti, & Chen, 2017). This thesis research is interested in examining what job resources, including personal coping mechanisms, and job demands, highly sensitive managers and leaders perceive, use and experience in their work, and how these affect their workplace well-being.

By studying this topic, I hope to take part in creating awareness of high sensitivity and how it can manifest itself in different situations and areas of life. As the concept of HSP is becoming more known amongst people through media, an increasing number of people is starting to recognize traits of high sensitivity in themselves. This adds to the importance of gaining an understanding of the matter and including such an understanding in the planning of HR and workplace well-being activities, when relevant. By studying the well-being and needs of different kinds of leaders, HSP in this case, we can gain a clearer understanding of what kind of activities are required to improve and maintain a healthy level of workplace well-being for them. This benefits the entire organization.

## **1.2 Research Aims & Questions**

This research aims to examine the state of workplace well-being among highly sensitive (HSP) individuals in leadership and managerial positions. It also intends to explore how such managers and leaders cope with their profession-related tasks and pressure. Additionally, their possible suggestions for improvement regarding the support they receive at work are studied. The overall aim is to understand this type of leader better in terms of



their perspectives regarding well-being at work and to map the need for improvements in how HSP are being recognized and supported in occupational leadership and managerial positions. It is also intended that the study will potentially yield ideas for future research, as this specific topic has not been studied extensively in previous HSP and leadership research.

### **Research Questions**

My research questions are the following:

- 1) How do individuals in managerial or leadership positions, who identify as highly sensitive, perceive their workplace well-being?
- 2) What coping mechanisms do highly sensitive leaders and managers use in work-related situations and matters?
- 3) How can the workplace well-being of highly sensitive leaders and managers be improved?

## **1.3 Key Concepts**

### **Sensory processing sensitivity**

Sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) is a personality construct that describes individual differences in sensitivity to internal (such as pain and hunger) and external (such as light and noise) stimuli (Cater, 2016). Individuals scoring highly on SPS scales are described with having heightened sensory sensitivity and deeper processing of stimuli, according to Lionetti et al., 2019. These researchers mention that studies have also established a connection between SPS and prominent activation of the brain regions significant in social processing, empathy, and reflective functioning. SPS has been found out to be a marker of behavioural plasticity in response to the environment, and individuals with high scores of SPS tend to experience fewer behavioural issues and better socio-emotional wellbeing as a response to supportive conditions, such as intervention programs or positive parenting (Lionetti et al., 2019).

### **High sensitivity in people**

People with high SPS are referred to as Highly Sensitive People (HSP) (Aron & Aron, 1997). According to Aron and Aron, HSPs react more strongly to physical, emotional,

environmental, and social stimuli have narrower comfort boundaries than most people. They process stimuli deeper than the average person, are more aware of the subtle matters in their external and internal environments and tend to have a highly functioning nervous system (Cater, 2016). The Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS), a 27-point self-test that measures responses to general and subtle environmental and internal stimuli, can be used to identify HSP in humans (Aron & Aron, 1997). Around 30% of the general population score high on the HSP scale (Lionetti et al., 2018).

### **Workplace well-being**

Workplace well-being consists of several factors, of which the most relevant and impactful are the physical work environment, mental and physical health of employees as well as the relationships between individuals working at the place, the psychosocial environment (Day;Kelloway;& Hurrell, 2014). In addition to these, individual traits such as personality have an impact on the perceived and experienced workplace well-being of an individual (Biggio & Cortese, 2013). Related politics also have an impact, as well as larger, organization-wide policies (Mäkikangas, Mauno, & Feldt, 2017). Laine (2013) defines workplace well-being as a subjective state of well-being, influenced by one's health, capacity to perform one's job, work environment and specific role, interpersonal interactions at work, leadership, and workplace politics (Mäkikangas et al., 2017). The definition of workplace well-being, hence, has multiple alternative approaches and the concept can be discussed from several varying perspectives.

### **The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model**

The job demands- resources model aims to understand and explain occupational well-being. The core propositions of this model include the notion that work characteristics can be divided into demands and resources, and that these demands and resources affect workplace well-being through different processes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to Demerouti E., Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli (2001), job demands are social, physical, and organizational aspects of the occupation that demand continuous physical or mental effort and hence produce physiological or psychological costs, such as exhaustion. These researchers mention that job resources, then, refer to the social, psychological, physical, and organizational aspects of the job that protect the health of the people working there. According to Demerouti et al., such resources can aid in completing organizational or work goals, reduce job demands at the correlated psychological and physiological costs, as well

as support personal development and growth. Job resources are divided into two categories, namely external resources, which are related to organizational and social aspects, and internal resources, which refer to cognitive features and action patterns (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands and resources interact with each other within an organization, and resources can be used to buffer the negative effect of job demands.

### **Managerial and leadership positions at the workplace**

The nature of managerial and leadership positions varies depending on several matters, including the workplace in question and the leader's personality traits and background, as well as the people being led. Common characteristics include having responsibility over functions and/or people, to varying extents, as well as being the main contact person to specific stakeholders, partners, and other representatives. In managerial and leadership work, the importance of communication, empathy, ability to lead change and manage one's own development are emphasized (Lehto, 2017). A leader is responsible not only for their own development but also directing their employees towards possibilities to develop professionally and realize their talents and skills (Wainio et al., 2020).

### **Coping mechanisms**

In research, coping is defined as thoughts and behaviors used to deal with stressful input of both internal and external kind. The term coping is used for behavior and actions that are conscious and voluntary and aim to reduce or tolerate stress (Algorani & Gupta, 2021). According to French (2014), when a person uses coping mechanisms, they make use of their emotional, physical, and social resources to prevent the negative effects of stress. When successful, coping mechanisms result in the re-establishment of balance. French mentions that there are varying kinds of coping mechanisms, such as emotion-focused mechanisms, used to maintain optimism and hope, and problem-focused mechanisms, used to define the problem, producing a solution and acting on it. There are also several types of goals that these mechanisms are used to reach: some strategies aim to manage the source of stress, whereas some aim to regulate the emotional response to stress (French, 2004).

## **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis begins with an introduction chapter providing background information on the topic of workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals in managerial and leadership positions, why it is important to study it, the research aims and questions of the study as well as key concepts. This is followed by a theoretical section on literature review, discussing relevant theories, concepts, and studies on the topic. Key areas include high sensitivity in people (HSP), occupational leadership and the Job Demands-Resources Model. Afterwards, the methods used in the research are discussed, including research philosophy, data collection and analysis methods, as well as ethical aspects of the research. This is followed by a discussion of results and concluding remarks. Finally, the study is concluded by a recap, discussion on the scientific contribution and credibility of the research, as well as its implications for business management and recommendations for future research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Individual Traits Affecting Workplace Well-Being**

A person's experience of workplace well-being can be affected by varying factors. These can be external factors stemming from the work environment, as well as individual traits of the person. The interaction of these external and internal factors results in the perceived level of well-being at work, emphasizing the importance of person to job fit (Biggio & Cortese, 2013). Examples of such individual traits include personality and the level of sensory processing sensitivity of the person. These traits affect how a person reacts to, perceives, and experiences the environment at work, and hence play a significant role in the resulting experience of well-being at work. The overall well-being of a person is tied to the level of workplace well-being they experience (Mäkikangas et al., 2017), hence, how people feel at work plays a crucial role in the lives of the working population.

## **Personality**

Together with other individual traits and external factors related to one's work environment, personality can greatly affect how one perceives their well-being (Marzuki, 2013). Personality has been extensively discussed in workplace well-being research. There are a multitude of models aiming to capture the fluidity and layering of this central trait in humans. The five-factor model of personality (FFM) is one of these models, consisting of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Smolewska;McCabe;& Woody, 2006). How a person places on these scales can yield significant information on what their personality is like, and each of these factors is strongly correlated with well-being, according to Marzuki (2013).

Marzuki (2013) discusses findings from a study on the well-being of lecturers in a public university in Malaysia. These findings indicate that openness to experience and conscientiousness, followed by extraversion, are the most significant factors for people in this profession in terms of well-being. Further research indicates that while the FFM seems to be universal in urban and literate human populations, it appears not to be so in other types of societies. Results from a study testing the universality of the FFM suggest that in a largely illiterate, indigenous society, the model does not function, receiving no robust support based on tests (Gurven;von Rueden;Massenkoff;Kaplan;& Lero Vie, 2013). This emphasizes the fluidity and versatile nature of personality, and the difficulty in measuring and classifying aspects related to it.

## **High sensitivity**

High sensitivity is an individual trait that this thesis focuses on in the context of workplace well-being amongst managers and leaders. Highly sensitive people have elevated levels of sensory processing sensitivity (Aron & Aron, 1997). Like personality, high sensitivity can impact the perceived and experienced workplace well-being of an individual, both in positive and negative ways (Ollila & Kujala, 2020).

## **2.2 High sensitivity**

People with high levels of sensory processing sensitivity (SPS), an intrinsic personality trait that processes in-coming internal and external sensory stimulation, are described as

highly sensitive (Cater, 2016). This trait is characterised in various ways which can differ greatly from person to person. Characteristics include an increased awareness of subtle stimuli in the external and internal environment and the tendency to process things deeper than the average person, according to Aron & Aron (1997). HSPs are more sensitive to environmental, physical, emotional, and social stimuli, and their comfort zones are narrower than the general population (Aron & Aron, 1997). Common characteristics include also advanced skills of empathy and deep listening, as well as good memory and being affected by other people's moods (Sand, 2016).

Sensory processing sensitivity as a concept and following that the term highly sensitive people to describe people with high SPS, were first introduced by Elaine Aron, an American psychologist. Aron & Aron (1997) developed The Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS). This 27-point self-test measures responses to general and subtle environmental and internal stimuli and can be used to identify HSP in humans. Aron & Aron (1997) proved the HSPS to be a valid tool for research and demonstrated its adequate psychometric properties for such purposes. The 27-item questionnaire had an internal consistency reliability (alphas) rate of 0.87 and 0.85 in two of the studies included in Aron & Aron's research, as well as a high level of content validity, as the concept of high sensitivity, according to the researchers' definition, implies both, elevated levels of sensitivity to subtle stimuli and being easily aroused. By including these two items, the research likely reduced social desirability bias compared to previous research studying concepts related to sensitivity. Finally, the full collection of the studies included in the research by Aron & Aron supported the measure's discriminant, convergent and overall construct validity (Aron & Aron, 1997).

In further studies, test data from the HSPS has indicated the existence of three factors: ease of excitation (EOE), meaning being easily overwhelmed by internal or external stimuli, aesthetic sensitivity (AES), referring to a deep awareness of the aesthetic environment around, and low sensory threshold (LST), referring to a negative sensory arousal caused to environmental stimuli, according to Lionetti et al. (2018). The correlations between these three factors indicate the existence of a general environmental sensitivity trait (Lionetti et al., 2018). Aron & Aron's (1997) work has thereafter been used as the backbone in further HSP research (Aron;Aron;& Jagiellowicz, 2012; Lionetti et al., 2018; Lionetti et al., 2019; Smolewska et al., 2006), expanding knowledge of the topic and approaching it from different angles.

Around 30% of the general population score high on SPS scales and can hence be considered highly sensitive (Pluess et al, 2018; Lionetti et al., 2018). In professional and work environment related contexts, research on high sensitivity has focused on employees and university students (Ollila & Kujala, 2020; Cater, 2016). Studies on the workplace well-being and job-related conditions of HSP in managerial and leadership positions are only emerging, however, a number of studies have been conducted on it, with results indicating that such leaders place great significance on peer support, support and guidance from their higher-ups and the work community, as well as instructional activities regarding their job (Ollila & Kujala, 2020).

### **2.2.1 Characteristics of High Sensitivity**

High sensitivity can show itself in a person in various ways. Common characteristics include sensory sensitivity (being very alert to the surrounding environment and one's own inner world, observing both carefully, a result of a highly reactive nervous system), depth of processing (automatically processing information and observations in depth), overarousability (tendency to become stressed or overwhelmed in situations of high intensity or with overflow of sensory perceptions or information), as well as emotional intensity (high level of empathy, vivid inner world, strong emotional abilities) (Sand, 2016; Cater, 2016; Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron et al., 2012). A person can recognize high sensitivity in themselves based on various tests, but there is no official medical diagnosis for it at the time being.

In their work, Sand (2016) further discusses the characteristics that are common in highly sensitive individuals. Central attributes include a delicate nervous system, an automatic in-depth processing of input and nuances, and a vivid and rich inner world. The information and inputs highly sensitive people receive from their surroundings can trigger a large scale of reactions, thoughts, concepts, and associations. According to Sand, these mental processes can accumulate and start straining the person, making them feel easily overwhelmed. On the other hand, input that a person perceives as positive and joyful in that situation, for example, music, art, scents, pleasant scenery or flavors, can create strong, even intense, feelings of delight that a highly sensitive person takes deeply into themselves (Sand, 2016). These findings are consistent with the study results of Lionetti et al. (2018) and Cater (2016).

Research findings also describe the tendency of highly sensitive people to sense and be affected by the moods of other people. This has both downsides and upsides, as other traits of being highly sensitive. Sand (2016) and Cater (2016) describe that on the other hand, if a highly sensitive person finds themselves in a situation of high tension, for example witnessing a verbal argument between two colleagues, they might become exhausted by the situation. The again, highly sensitive people tend to have highly developed compassion and empathy skills, enabling them to listen to and relate to people in a deep manner (Sand, 2016; Cater, 2016).

The aspects of high standards and low self-esteem are of significance regarding well-being in the context of high sensitivity. According to Sand (2016), it is common for HSP to set high personal standards and maxims and require oneself to reach these maxims in all situations. For example, one might have a set the maxims of having to do their best, if not a bit more, in each situation, or requiring oneself to never act in a selfish manner. Sand mentions that holding high standards for one's own behaviour is also typical for HSP. One might have high standards in areas such as being helpful, being considerate, paying attention or being responsible and reliable (Sand, 2016).

Furthermore, highly sensitive people tend to have a low self-esteem due to varying reasons, according to Sand (2016). As society in general is not built to favor highly sensitive people, it is common for HSP to have childhood experiences of being accused of shortcomings or not being enough, which can have led to significant negative alterations in how they perceive themselves, their thoughts, or memories. Sand discusses the likelihood that the parents of a highly sensitive child have complained about them, as they often might cause some extra work for the parent, and this complaining often does not go unnoticed by the child. The impact of childhood experiences on a highly sensitive person were found to be significant by Aron and Aron (1997). As HSP strongly tend to avoid causing other people burden or making them feel negative emotions, memories of having caused strain to one's parents can stay in the mind of a highly sensitive person for a long time, according to Sand. Additionally, it is common that a HSP looks for the fault within themselves and is much more comfortable blaming themselves than having another person unexpectedly criticizing them (Sand, 2016).

In research, high sensitivity has often been linked with emotionality and introversion. Aron & Aron (1997) found that there appears to be unidimensional construct of high sensory



sensitivity that is to some extent independent of emotionality and introversion. High sensitivity in itself was found to have an extensive impact on a person's behaviour and experiences, demonstrated in the study by several variables that were found to have unique correlations with it, such as sensitivity to overstimulation, change, hunger, or pain. High sensitivity was found to be closely related to emotionality and introversion, but not identical. Additionally, the study found that among the participants, there were two groups of highly sensitive individuals: a larger group similar to non-highly sensitive individuals expect for their sensitivity, and a smaller group where members had had an unhappy childhood or other related factors. It was also found that, especially for men, sensitivity moderates the relation between parental environment and having had an unhappy childhood (Aron & Aron, 1997).

The figure below is a synthesis of traits that can be found in highly sensitive people. It is not an exhaustive list, but rather a summary of common traits that have been discussed in this chapter.

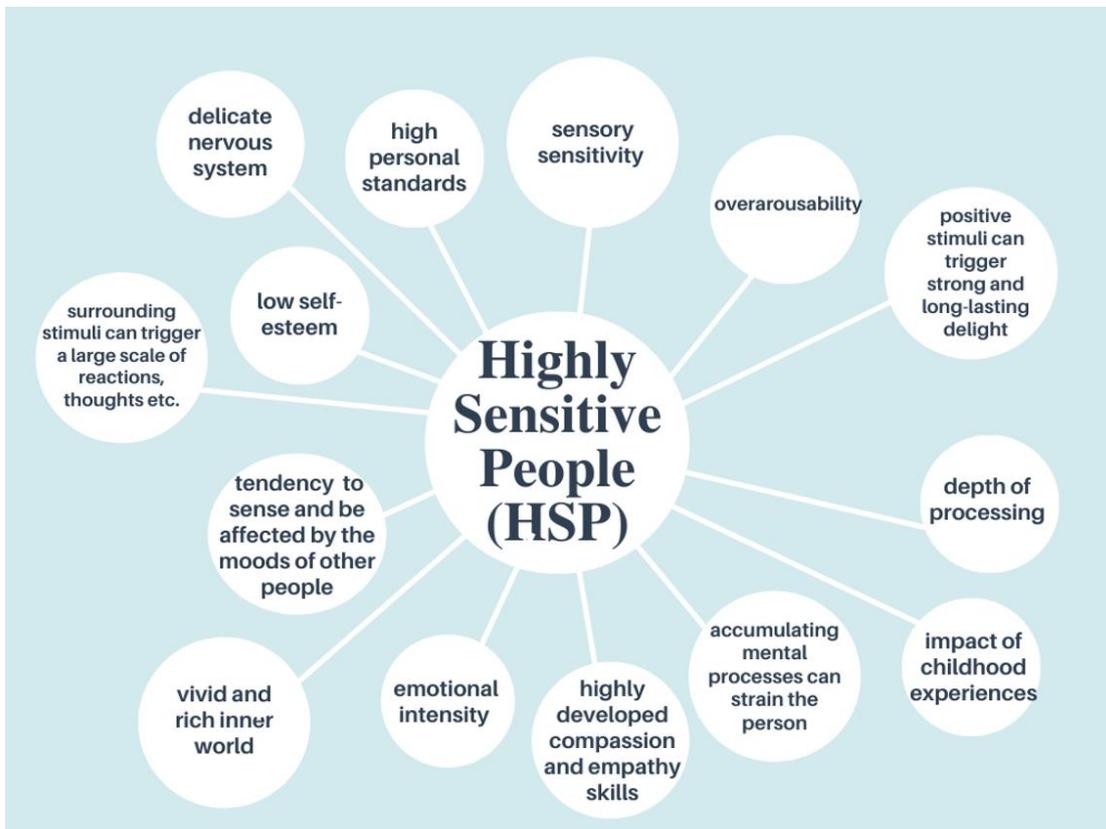


Figure 1. Characteristics of High Sensitivity in People (based on the works of Aron & Aron (1997), Cater (2016,) Aron et al., (2012), Sand (2016), and Lionetti et al. (2018)).

### **2.2.2 High Sensitivity and Well-Being**

Highly sensitive people vary in the ways they perceive well-being. In their study focusing on how highly sensitive individuals perceive and experience well-being, Black and Kern (2020) found that people with high sensory processing sensitivity seem to perceive well-being to be formed based on a harmony across multiple dimensions of well-being. These dimensions were discovered to include, for example, self-awareness, self-acceptance, a balance between positive relationships and times of solitude, connecting with nature, having a sense of meaning and contemplative practices. Matters that were mentioned as being barriers of well-being include difficulties saying no to others and physical health problems. These findings suggest that highly sensitive people who live in environments typical to WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) countries, where being extroverted and outgoing is the preferred norm, tend to experience and understand well-being in a different way to what is generally expected (Black & Kern, 2020).

Sensory processing sensitivity appears to have a positive correlation with high stress levels and physical ill-health. Benham (2006) explores the relationship between an individual's sensory processing sensitivity, self-perceived stress and reported physical symptoms. The study results suggest a positive correlation between sensory processing sensitivity, greater stress levels and more frequent symptoms of ill-health. These results are in line with Cater's (2016) study findings, regarding increased stress levels in HSP. In Benham's (2006) study, it was found that among the study participants, sensory processing sensitivity was a stronger predictor of health than self-perceived stress. The relationship between sensory processing sensitivity and health was not found to be conditional on the levels of stress. According to the researcher, the reasons for why highly sensitive individuals are more likely to experience symptoms of ill-health remain unclear. One possible explanation could be that high sensitivity increases physiological arousal in general, which can lead to chronic stress to the body, potentially leading to subsequent health issues. Another explanation could be based on the discovery that individuals with heightened sensitivity are more aware of and sensitive to somatic symptoms and pay attention to minor physiological sensations that might go unnoticed by other people, as discussed by the researcher. As the study was based on correlational data, it was not possible to establish a causal relationship between measures of sensory processing sensitivity and health related issues. Previous research has found that

anxiety, amongst other issues, might be a contributing factor for the observed correlations (Benham, 2006).

As highly sensitive people become aware of their trait, they enable themselves to learn about it, and turn it into an asset. According to Sand (2016), when a person recognizes their self-sabotaging behavior, such as setting unrealistically ambitious standards or placing the blame on themselves unnecessarily, it is possible to work on changing this type of mindset. This observation is in line with the comments that participants expressed in Cater's (2016) study, indicating significant relief, feeling of belonging and gaining a greater understanding of themselves after learning about HSP and scoring high on the HSPS test. Practicing acting against one's maxims can be scary at first but finding out that the worst possible outcome did not happen, can be a major help in letting go of catastrophe thinking, as discussed by Sand (2016). Each time a person notices that they turned out all right in the situation, even without meeting their ambitious standards, it helps them leave the perfectionist mindset behind. The experience of feeling okay just being one's own self contributes to the creation of a more relaxed and self-caring version of a person (Sand, 2016). Each person has their own background and journey with high sensitivity, and the thought-processes and experiences, tools and methods used, vary from person to person.

### **2.2.3 The Concept of Coping Mechanisms**

In the context of the current study, the term coping mechanisms is used to refer to the different strategies, actions and internal processes that people, here managers and leaders, use to deal with, reduce or eliminate stress caused by work. According to French (2014), when using coping mechanisms, an individual uses the emotional, physical, and social resources available to that person in order to avoid the adverse impact of stress. The researcher describes that successful coping mechanisms tend to result in a restoration of balance. Coping strategies can be used to reach different kinds of goals. Some strategies are used to manage the source of the stress, whereas others are used to regulate the emotional response to the stress, as discussed by French. Emotion-focused mechanisms are focused on maintain optimism and hope, whereas problem-focused coping strategies are focused on problem definition, solution production, choosing and action (French, 2004).

In this research, coping mechanisms are interpreted as a tool that individuals with traits of high sensitivity employ to respond to the nature and demands of their work and workplace. Coping mechanisms are seen as individual instruments that people use to reduce stress and

hence, they form an important part of the experience of workplace well-being of a person. In the following chapter, workplace well-being and its factors are discussed in further detail.

## **2.3 Occupational Leadership**

### **2.3.1 Characteristics and Responsibilities of Occupational Leadership Roles**

The nature, characteristics and responsibilities of occupational leadership positions can vary greatly between workplaces and industries, but similarities have been identified through research. In their study, Azambuja and Islam (2019) found that emancipation and alienation, as prevalent characteristics of the role of middle-managers, co-exist and affect their experiences of boundary work. As they work in a space between higher leadership and managed employees, an important part of their work is understanding, facilitating, and holding together different experience backgrounds. According to the researchers, while having an active role in the middle of the hierarchical and functional spectrum, middle-managers face unique demands from multiple directions, which can cause feelings on alienation, as well as emancipation. Being open, versatile, and able to perform multiple roles in the in-between position of a middle manager were found out to be significant characteristics of the role (Azambuja & Islam, 2019).

Occupational leadership positions usually involve prominent levels of responsibilities of varying kinds, emphasized need to succeed, and heavy job demands (Munafò; Patron; & Palomba, 2016). A common responsibility in a managerial or leader position is managing task interdependency, meaning the degree to which another entity, such as another person or department in the organization, influences or determines the completion of a work task (Wong; DeSanctis; & Staudenmayer, 2007). This involves managing the exchange, receipt, and delivery of knowledge, information, and material resources, as well as pressure and stress created by demands regarding timely and efficient operations, smooth solving of conflicts, and overseeing social collaboration and co-operation (Wong et al., 2007). Due to these accumulating responsibilities and elevated difficulty levels in their position, managers tend to report high levels of stress, despite their elevated levels of job autonomy, non-routine work, and control over their schedule, as well as high income levels (Munafò et al., 2016).

### **2.3.2 The Importance of Context**

As different industries and sectors have their own customs, norms, challenges, and possibilities, occupational leadership tends to be context specific. The given context impacts the role of a manager and leader significantly, binding together with other factors such as culture. Business leadership, for example, is anchored in scarcity, value-creation, value consumption and property, and hence differs from leadership in other areas, such as the psychological, social, or legal spheres (Spender, Hulin, & Chabault, 2016). The concept of leadership is moving into a new direction, and common, emerging, issues for all sectors include globalization and changing worldview, a global mindset and following that, a need to adapt an intercultural competence. A growing need for holistic and systematic thinking is emerging as the world is becoming more complex, interconnected, and interdependent. In addition, organizations and companies in all sectors must pay increased attention to being agile, innovative, and creative, and the management and leaders are the ones who will be required to drive this change (Veldsman & Johnson, 2017).

### **2.3.3 The Social Aspect of Leadership**

The people and social aspect of leadership is a significant factor in successfully leading an organization. For highly sensitive leaders and managers, such an aspect is often further emphasized due to their traits of empathy, ability to sense and be affected by other's moods, and their sensitivity to feedback and changes in their environment (Sand, 2016). In their work, Guglielmo and Palsule (2016) explore the social side of leadership and what it means to be a leader in today's social context. They describe the modern social era in the professional landscape as having the key characteristics of socially created information, the rise of internationally connected communities and the appearance of social age native prosumers, who want and expect to have a say and take part in the decisions and strategies companies make and on the products and services they produce, in a proactive manner. In today's work environment, knowledge forms a commodity and the hierarchy that used to take place in companies and organizations is replaced by community, with social information and communication being central in the new structure of work (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016).

The significance of social and emotional aspects in leadership are enhanced especially in the interaction between leaders and the led. Guglielmo and Palsule's comments are in line with Iszatt-White's (2013) work on leadership as emotional labour. To achieve optimal operations, regardless of the industry or sector, leaders and managers must lead, allocate, communicate, and work in a way that encourages the employees, makes them feel motivated, healthy, and taken care of. According to the researchers, leaders must channel their own passion, motivation, and emotions, in a way that creates trust, loyalty, and a strong, positive bond between their employees. As the future holds many changes and challenges in occupational fields, this trust and loyalty must also be gained regarding the new directions, guidelines and practices that the company or organization will implement or take part in in the future (Iszatt-White, 2013).

Regarding the changes and challenges that organizations will face in the future, Guglielmo and Palsule (2016) discuss the five main challenges of leadership in the modern social era, namely discontinuity, ambiguity, connected constituencies, social information and everyone having a megaphone, meaning everyone can highlight issues or express their opinion for everyone to hear. Discontinuity refers to the increased rate of change that technology and innovation has brought into the business landscape in the recent years. The researchers discuss that today, it is crucial for leaders to be able to pick up signals from their field in order to be prepared for changes that might affect their business or organization. Ambiguity, then, refers to the challenge of navigating the ever-changing and unpredictable market and environment that the company or organization operates in. Leaders must stay confident in their strategies and be agile in the right situations (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016).

Connected constituencies, meaning the heightened demand for authenticity and transparency leaders of companies face from their constituents, is another key challenge that is growing increasingly significant for modern managers to consider (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016). Finally, social information being created and exchanged at a rapid pace, often in public, creates new dimensions of responsibility and adaptiveness that need to be mastered by leaders. Information being created continuously and communally on the social media platforms is one of the main aspects of this approach (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016). For highly sensitive leaders, such changes might come amplified. For such leaders and managers, change might feel straining, but the positive effects of change can fuel such a leader and create an organization-wide effect of improvement (Sand, 2016). Highly sensitive people tend to be able to pick up subtle signs and energies from their environment,

and a leader equipped with such a trait will be able to navigate situations in a deep, holistic way, helping them communicate and understand others better. The increasing level of change does correlate with the increasing need of resting and self-care for many HSP (Sand, 2016).

As the importance of the social environment at occupational fields is becoming growingly emphasized, the characteristics and skills required for successful leadership change. An ability to acquire an overall holistic view of situations, issues, markets and other relevant matters, agility in situations that need it and skills to predict and prepare for changes in routine, as well as intercultural and communication abilities are of growing importance in modern leadership (Lehto, 2017). In line with this, Guglielmo and Palsule (2016) present five tenets that they consider significantly important for leaders to master in today's social work context. First, they mention the need for leaders to be mindful in four different areas: temporal, peripheral, situational, and self. Being aware of matters in a holistic manner creates in-depth presence and helps optimize the impact a leader can have in their role. Second, proactivity helps the leader stay in top of the situation and taking matters ahead, instead of passively following the chain of events. Third, authenticity refers to being able to positively affect another person's belief in one's own credibility, build trust in a relationship and confront competing opinions and disagreements in a positive manner (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016).

As the occupational landscape is in a constant state of transformation, change is an increasingly common phenomenon at workplaces. As the fourth point, Guglielmo and Palsule mention that openness is a key virtue in the sense that it optimizes the leader's outlook by allowing them to thrive, act and learn from novel, complex and ambiguous situations. In addition to these four tenets, Guglielmo and Palsule also offer the concept of social scalability, which refers to the ability of a leader to lead in different situations and context, for example leading one person, a small team, or a large company. As the social ear has lowered, and in some contexts completely erased, the social boundaries between leaders and the ones led, managers must transfer from leading only their own team to being able to lead at multiple levels within the organization (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016). Again, the traits of HSP managers and leaders can potentially aid or burden them when moving towards a new type of leadership. Skills in empathy, listening, and being present, will form an asset in the new social era, as these traits help with forming trust, authenticity and

communicating. On the other hand, an increased rate of change might cause strain and exhaust some HSP leaders or managers (Cater, 2016).

### **2.3.4 Highly Sensitive Leaders**

For managers and leaders with traits of high sensitivity, workplace well-being can be made up of a greater array of factors than usual (Sand, 2016). In their study, Ollila and Kujala (2020) examine the work life experiences of highly sensitive employees and leaders. Their study results suggest that highly sensitive people perceive HSP leaders to be skilled in empathy, able to notice fluctuations and differences in workplace atmosphere and place high value on being organized. Other characteristics mentioned include advanced listening skills and ability to be present and sense the emotional states of other employees instinctively, which contribute to a strong understanding of individuals and situations at the workplace. In the survey, highly sensitive business leaders described feeling easily overwhelmed especially if their job was demanding and they felt their input was not appreciated. Completing tasks with a deeply diligent and approach was seen as a strength, but also a weakness that it contributed to exhaustion. In addition, creativity and inspiration to develop and improve matters at work were mentioned as typical traits of HSP leaders. According to the study results, highly sensitive respondents in general wanted to avoid leadership level tasks, if possible, due to the demanding nature and high level of mental strain and stress (Ollila & Kujala, 2020). The characteristics mentioned describe highly sensitive leaders in general, however, as everyone is different, there naturally exist HSP leaders with vastly varying sets of characteristics.

## **2.4 Theoretical Background: Workplace Well-Being**

### **2.4.1 The Concept of Workplace Well-Being**

The concept of workplace well-being is multidimensional. It includes several aspects that contribute to a complex construct that can also be viewed as something subjective. Mäkikangas et al. (2017) discuss the notion of workplace well-being and how it can be defined, using the different factors that contribute to it and affect it. According to Vartiainen (2017), one of the contributors of the book by Mäkikangas et al. (2017), workplace wellbeing has a systematic nature and one's perception of it is sensitive to changes in the



factors that contribute to it. The experience of workplace well-being is tied to a person's experience and satisfaction in their personal and overall well-being. Previous experiences as well as the impact that value-related matters around responsibility, authority, and varying interests in one's working environment also shape the perception of workplace well-being, forming a part of the discussion around person to job fit (Biggio & Cortese, 2013).

As a systematic phenomenon, workplace well-being is affected not only by the individual's personal resources and attributes, but legal legislation around employment-related matters, work safety measures targeted at risk factors at work, workplace practices and politics also impact the level of workplace well-being perceived by an individual (Mäkikangas et al., 2017). These remarks are in line with the work of Day et al. (2014), who emphasize the importance of physical, psychological as well as psychosocial safety and well-being at the workplace. To include an additional approach to defining workplace well-being, Mäkikangas et al. (2017) include Laine's (2013) definition of the phenomenon. Laine defines workplace well-being as a subjective state of well-being, affected by one's health, ability to perform one's job, work environment and specific role, relationships at work, leadership, and workplace politics. The definition of workplace well-being, hence, has several different approaches and the concept can be discussed from varying perspectives.

In their research Manka and Manka (2016) define the concept of workplace well-being capital. This concept refers to three spheres of well-being capital: first, an individual's personal capital, including their psychological capital and other meta skills, attitudes, knowledge, and abilities. Second, the organization's functionality and social capital, including social support and manager- employee relationships. Third, the structural capital of the organization, meaning information and leadership systems, efforts of development and organizational culture. These three areas of workplace well-being capital can be maintained and improved especially with precautionary practices, and they form a basis for the functioning and capability of the company to utilize other humane resources in their use. Manka and Manka define workplace well-being capital as a strategical resource, which contents, aims and challenges must be studied individually in the context of the organization in question. According to the authors, maintaining a high level of work-place well-being capital is important, especially in terms of long-term competitiveness of the company (Manka & Manka, 2016). The concept of workplace well-being capital is in line with other research on occupational well-being as it includes the three aspects of personal well-being

and individual traits, psychosocial well-being as well structural, organizational well-being (Day;Kelloway;& Hurrell, 2014; Biggio & Cortese, 2013; Marzuki, 2013).

#### **2.4.2 The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model**

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, which is an extensively cited theory of workplace well-being. First introduced by Demerouti et al. (2001), the model has developed in many aspects since its original version. According to this model, job resources act as a buffering factor against the negative impact that the demands a person encounters at their job can have on their well-being (Xu & Payne, 2020). At the core of the JD-R model lies the belief that while different occupations have different types of risks and factors causing job stress, such factors can be divided into two categories, namely demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These categories jointly constitute a model that can be applied to occupational settings of various kinds, regardless of the particular demands and resources present in the situation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

#### **Job Demands and Job Resources**

In the context of the JD-R model, job demands refer to the psychological, social, physical, and organizational aspects of the job that demand sustained psychological or physical skills or effort and are hence associated with specific psychological or physical costs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2017, Bakker et al., 2001). Job demands are not necessarily negative, but they might become job stressors if they require significant effort from which the person struggles to recover, according to Demerouti et al. Examples of job demands include an unpleasant work environment, a fast work pace or emotionally challenging interactions with clients. Job resources, on the other hand, include the social, organizational, physical, and psychological aspects of the job that combat job demands by decreasing them and the related psychological and physiological expenses, according to Demerouti et al. (2001) and Bakker and Demerouti, (2007). Job resources support and enable the achievement of work goals and stimulate personal development, growth, and learning at the workplace (Demerouti E. et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

In the context of the JD-R model, resources are valuable on their own as well as a means to balance job demands. They can be used as a tool to achieve or protect other valuable

resources. Job resources can be found in several levels within an organization, such as the organization at large, including career opportunities and job security, according to Bakker & Demerouti (2007). Other levels include interpersonal and social relations, including work climate and support networks at work, the organization of work, including decision making participation and how clear roles are at work. Finally, the fourth level is the level of the task, referring to task identity and significance, skill variety, autonomy, and performance feedback (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

According to the JD-R model, personal resources, such as optimism and self-efficacy, can have a similar impact to job resources (Xu & Payne, 2020). Personal resources refer to an individual's perceptions of how much control they hold over their environment. If a person has a high level of optimism and self-efficacy, they are likely to be confident in that they are capable of handling challenging and surprising events, and that positive events will happen in their life (Xu & Payne, 2020). Bakker, Demerouti, and Chen (2017) propose that personal resources have a direct positive impact on work engagement, and that such resources can be expected to mitigate the negative effects of job demands on strain while enhancing the positive effects of job demands on motivation.

Coping mechanisms are similar to personal resources in that they stem from the individual themselves, they are person-specific and personal. Proactive coping has been examined as an example of a personal coping mechanism in the context of the job demands resources model. Searle and Lee (2015) found that proactive coping is indeed a personal coping mechanism, and their findings suggest that it has potential to buffer some demands more efficiently than traditional work resources. In addition, the findings indicate that in situations with extensive amounts of challenge demands, employees who reported using more proactive coping were more engaged compared to employees who were less active in employing proactive coping mechanisms when dealing with stress (Searle & Lee, 2015). Coping mechanisms differ from performance-protection strategies, meaning strategies people employ under the impact of environmental stressors (Demerouti et al., 2001), in that they can be formed and used in a variety of situations where a person's own traits or these traits' interaction with the environmental stressor causes strain to the person.

In Searle and Lee's (2015) study, the relationship between challenge demands and burnout was found to vary by level of proactive coping. Challenge demands were found to be unrelated to burnout in general, but for individuals who engaged in proactive coping

behavior, more challenge demands were associated with less burnout. These results emphasize the significance of differences in how people approach to and their abilities of dealing with stressful situations and stimuli (Searle & Lee, 2015). If workplaces support and enhance proactive coping strategies, employees as well as the organization may end up being better off (Bakker & Costa, 2014). Productivity may increase if employees engaging in proactive coping are able to find challenge demands at work more engaging (Searle & Lee, 2015). These types of employees can potentially cope with more challenging and demanding work roles and thrive on having great responsibilities. Findings from Searle and Lee's (2015) study also indicate that such employees experience less burnout in highly challenging situations.

### **Job Strain and Job Motivation**

The JD-R model proposes that two underlying psychological processes contribute to the creation of job strain and motivation. This forms the assumption that job resources have a motivational potential and can lead to improved work engagement and performance and reduce cynicism (Bakker & Costa, 2014). In the first process, there are two types of motivational roles that job resources can play, namely intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to Bakker and Demerouti, intrinsic motivation refers to resources that enhance employees' development and learning, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to resources that aid employees in reaching their goals at work. The concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are discussed in further detail in the following chapter on mechanisms for supporting workplace well-being.

The second psychological process, the health impairment process, refers to the creation of job strain. In work environments where people face on-going job demands and work poorly designed jobs, there is a risk of job exhaustion (Bakker & Costa, 2014). When employees' mental and physical resources are exhausted, the risk for health problems and burn-out increase. In challenging conditions, individuals tend to use performance-protection strategies (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), such strategies apply the mobilization of sympathetic action, both autonomic and endocrine, as well as the increasing of subjective effort, by means of active control in information processing. According to the authors, the psychological cost occurred to the individual is correlational with the degree of activation or effort. There are varying kinds of patterns of indirect degradation that can be identified within this process, namely compensatory costs,

meaning increased activation and/or subjective effort, strategy adjustments, referring to increased selectivity, narrowing of attention and redefinition of task requirements, and fatigue after-effects, meaning high-risk choices and increased levels of subjective fatigue (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The long-term effect of performance-protection strategies can be drastically negative, and in worst cases, results in burnouts or severe health issues, according to Bakker and Demerouti.

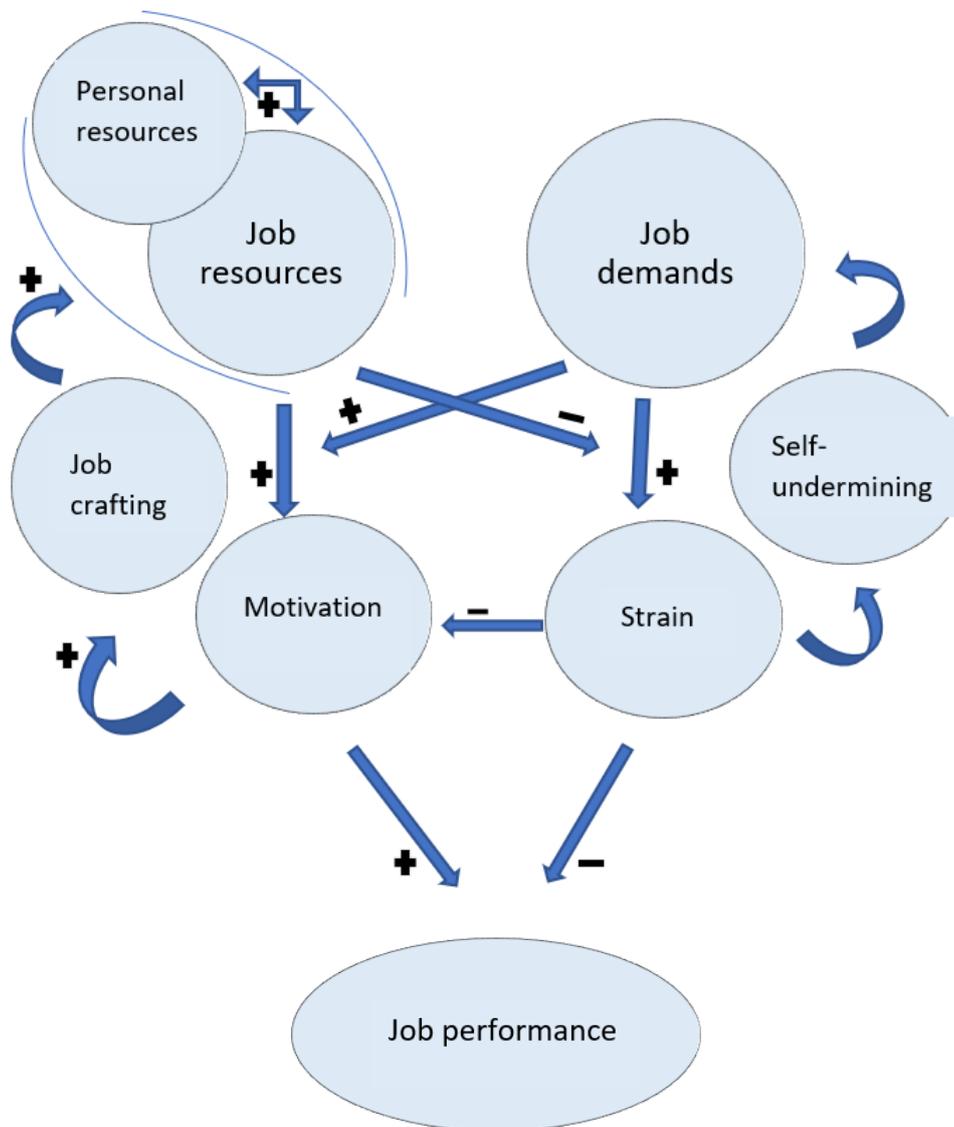
### **Job Crafting and Self-Undermining**

Bakker et al. (2017) discuss the concept of job crafting, defined according to the authors in question as the proactive changes in job demands and resources that employees make. In addition, Bakker et al. argue that employees are capable of proactively increasing their job resources, for example by asking for feedback and help. They may also challenge their job demands using different means, for example by learning a new, critical skill (Bakker & Costa, 2014). Employees can also decrease their hindrance job demands, by reducing workload and bureaucracy, for example. These examples demonstrate the bottom-up approach in the context of workplace, through which employees can stay motivated and optimize their work environment. The JD-R theory proposes that motivated employees are likely to use job crafting behaviors, leading to increased levels of job and personal resources, and further increasing motivational levels (Bakker et al., 2017). Hence, it is possible for highly engaged and motivated individuals to create a “gain spiral” of resources and work engagement by using job crafting.

Previous research indicates that individuals who experience continuous or prominent levels of stress perceive and create more job demands over time. According to Bakker and Costa (2014), this is the result of self-undermining behavior, which refers to actions that create obstacles that may jeopardize performance. Employees who take part in self-undermining are likely to be at risk of increased levels of job strain, such as chronic exhaustion or health issues. Bakker and Costa mention that this decreased level of well-being may deteriorate one’s communication abilities, lead to increased conflict and a greater risk of mistakes, augmenting the already elevated level of job demands. Individuals suffering from such issues may also find it increasingly difficult to control their own emotions, leading to further issues and conflict. Caused by high levels of job strain, self-undermining advances the spiral of high job demands and strain (Bakker & Costa, 2014).

In the Figure 2. below, the JD-R model is summarized.

## The Job Demands-Resources Model



+ = positive impact, - = negative impact

Figure 2. The Job Demands-Resources Model (based on Bakker et al. 2017, Bakker & Costa 2014, Demerouti et al. 2001)

### The Interactions Between Job Resources and Job Demands

The interactions between job resources and job demands are of significant importance in terms of the development of job strain and motivation. According to the JD-R model, several job resources of varying kinds can act as a buffer for several job demands of various kinds

(Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The context of the specific job and its characteristics in its organization define which job demands and resources can interact or act as buffers (Shin & Hur, 2020). Potential buffers and moderators against job strain include social support, being a well-known situational variable, as well as the extent to which the onset of a stressor is predictable and the extent to which the reasons for the presence of a stressor are understandable, such as through information given by supervisors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In addition, the degree to which the individual who must endure the stressor has control over certain aspects of it is a potential buffer (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The reason for why a specific job resource acts as a buffer in a specific situation varies within the resource in question. An example of a contextual buffer that can be significantly important for employee health and well-being is job autonomy, as having a high degree of autonomy is shown to increase the opportunities to cope with stressful situations, as discussed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). According to the JD-R model, the influence of job resources on work-engagement and motivation increases as the amount and difficulty of job demands increases (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

The buffering effect of job control as a job resource has received inconsistent evidence in previous research. In their research discussing the methodological and conceptual explanations for this inconsistency of job control's function as a buffer against job demands, Xu and Payne (2020) used occupation-specific measures of job control, research task discretion in this case, and job demands, referring to research task ambiguity in the context of the study. For conceptual explanations, individual differences in job self-efficacy and negative affectivity were tested, and to find out about methodological explanations, study design and statistical power were measured. The results of the study suggest that job resources are more likely to reduce the synchronic impacts of job demands on well-being, compared to the lagged impacts. The buffering impact of research task discretion was observed only for the larger of the studied samples with high research task discretion and low job self-efficacy. For employees with a low level of job self-efficacy, a buffering effect caused by job control was observed (Xu & Payne, 2020).

In addition, Xu and Payne's study results indicate that, contrary to the JD-R model, job control worsened rather than buffered the negative effects that task ambiguity caused on employee well-being. This was especially evident for employees with a high degree of self-efficacy across sectional samples. These results suggest that the detection of buffering

effects might be influenced by statistical power and study design. Similar remarks were made in relation to the detection of reverse buffering effects of job resources. These findings demonstrate examples of when job resources counteract impact of job demands (Xu & Payne, 2020).

### **2.4.3 Supporting Workplace Well-Being**

Workplace well-being is impacted by varying factors, stemming from both the organizational structure and social environment of the workplace. Manka and Manka (2016) further discuss their overall model of workplace well-being. This model includes five sections: first, the organization and its flexible structure, continuous development, aims and functional work environment, which together constitute to structural capital. Second, leadership, meaning a proactive and supportive leading style, which constitutes to social capital in the context of the model. Third, work community, including open communication and work community skills, also constituting to social capital. Fourth, work management, referring to opportunities to influence, support value in learning and diversity, which together create structural value. Finally, the fifth sphere is the self, meaning the person's own psychological capital, health, and physical well-being.

In short, Manka and Manka's model suggests that the structural capital of a workplace can be maintained and improved when the work tasks are positively challenging and diverse, enable learning and allow for the possibility to affect the work goals and rules. Social capital can be supported by a high quality in leadership and the atmosphere at work, and by how well employees are getting along together (Manka & Manka, 2016). In relation to the JD-R model, Manka and Manka's five section model effectively categorizes varying factors that contribute to both job resources and demands, such as the quality of leadership in the social capital sector and state of work conditions in the structure capital section. In addition, workplace discrimination, impacting and impacted by all the five categories in Manka and Manka's model, is a significant demand according to the JD-R model (Lee, 2019).

The figure below is a summary of the components of Manka & Manka's (2016) overall model of workplace well-being.





Figure 3. The Components of Workplace Well-Being (based on the work of Manka & Manka 2016)

Manka and Manka (2016) define a set of tools that can be used to proactively support a healthy workplace environment and prevent damage to the well-being of the workplace. Issues related to the organization, its leadership and community can be measured and assessed by development conversations, surveys targeted at the work community, self-assessments, as well as social and psychological capital. To prevent and treat problems in this sphere, continuous care must be taken of the functionality of the workplace and the resources of its members. In regard to problems within the work community, Manka and Manka mention that absences due to sickness and the weakening of the work effort of the members can be assessed and targeted by keeping track of absences, track of productivity, and track of the turnover rate. A manager's intuition can also assist when discussing, preventing, and solving such issues. Other tools include early intervention in terms of discussion, mediation, discussions about well-being as well as supporting the process of returning to work after leaves or other intermissions (Manka & Manka, 2016). Again, Manka and Manka's set of tools can be directly divided into job demands and resources, according to the JD-R model. Depending on their quality and how they are executed, they can be either categorized as resources or demands (Day, Kelloway, & Hurrell, 2014).

The third set of tools by Manka and Manka (2016) is related to matters surrounding crisis in the work community, disablement to work, and a decreasing productivity rate. A system of retirement information and a profit track help in maintaining an understanding of these, and remedial measures and rehabilitation can be used to target these issues, according to the authors. Each of the three mentioned sets of tools, when used proactively and for the right purposes, can effectively maintain and improve the state of workplace well-being in a company. When intervening and taking actions before issues arise, budget savings grow and the personal well-being of community members improves, as discussed by Manka and Manka. If issues are not treated on time and with proper actions, the social risks as well as financial losses in treating well-being issues grow. A well-functioning community helps prevent issues and work disablement from happening (Manka & Manka, 2016). By attending to the improvement and maintenance of well-functioning resources, workplaces can aid the buffering of job demands effectively (Ing-Chung;Pey-Lan;Long-Sheng;Tsai-Fei;& Shu-Chun, 2021).

The processes and initiatives through which workplaces support and accommodate their employees at work vary between institutions. According to the job demands resources model (JD-R model), which proposes that conditions at work can be divided into two extensive categories: job demands and job resources, and that these two categories yield different outcomes (Demerouti et al., 2001). The category of job resources refers to workplace resources that can potentially lead to an elevated level of well-being through two mechanisms: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Nielsen, et al., 2017). According to Nielsen et al., intrinsic motivation relates to basic human needs and through it, workplace resources can fulfil employee needs such as competency and autonomy, whereas extrinsic motivation may help resources to fulfil an employee's professional goals and help improve their development at work. For example, through intrinsic motivation, a company could establish their HR resources to accommodate production employee's physical well-being by offering frequent massage benefits. By using extrinsic motivation, the same company could provide its management team sessions on how to develop their intercultural communication and conversation skills in multicultural meetings.

For the purposes of the study covered in this master's thesis, the JD-R model provides a framework for the research set up and aims. Job resources that managers and leaders have available to them, including personal resources and coping mechanisms, and the impact that they have on job demands, are key components contributing to their well-being. By

investigating the nature and role of such resources and demands in more detail, I hope to widen the understanding of how highly sensitive managers and leaders perceive their workplace well-being, what factors affect it and to what extent.

## **2.5 The Workplace Well-Being of Managers and Leaders**

### **2.5.1 Workplace Well-Being and Recovery**

The connection between job intensity and well-being has been established in several studies. Stenman et al. (2020) found that work intensity is common for leaders, and that nearly every third leader belongs to a risk profile group regarding job intensity, characterized by prominent levels of job exhaustion and wishes for less demanding tasks. For young leaders, a significant factor affecting work intensity was found to be increasing career planning demands, whereas for older leaders, these factors include increased work intensity and increased demand level for skills and knowledge. The study mentions that while elevated levels of work demand, exhaustion and an increased pace of working are likely to lead to decreased levels of well-being and job satisfaction, positive challenges at work can increase a person's motivation. In situations where work intensity and resources are low, employees tend to experience low strain and mediocre motivation towards work (Stenman, et al., 2020).

People in managerial and leadership positions often encounter work-related demands that shorten their free time and strain their recovery from work. Taris et al. (2006) discuss a study examining the well-being and recovery opportunities related to work-home interference among managers. The study found that while high job demands and low job control were correlated with elevated levels of exhaustion, low levels of enjoyment and high degree of work-home interference, the number of hours worked over-time was, in fact, not significantly correlated with negative health consequences. The study also found that participants who worked several hours over-time reported higher levels of work enjoyment, and several participants who worked full-time reported relatively low levels of exhaustion (Taris et al., 2006). These findings indicate that work-related recovery and well-being are a subjective matter, and different people perceive the demand levels of their job and its effect on their life in general in varying ways. For highly sensitive people, the need for recovery is often higher than the average, and the impact of work-related strain is often emphasized also in their private lives (Sand, 2016). HSP managers and leaders, hence, face varying

challenges when balancing work life well-being and recovery with their occupational demands, and it is one of the purposes of this thesis to research how such leaders deal with this dilemma, or opportunity.

### **2.5.2 The Workplace Well-being of Highly Sensitive Managers and Leaders**

Highly sensitive people in managerial and leadership positions tend to value sharing knowledge, guidance, and experiences with their colleagues. Ollila and Kujala (2020) studied the workplace well-being of highly sensitive business leaders, and their results indicate that such leaders place high importance on receiving support and guidance from their higher-ups and the work community, peer support as well as instructional activities regarding their job. Advanced empathy skills were seen as an asset in maintaining a healthy and balanced workplace well-being. Central importance was given to having a loyal work community, peers to reflect on issues with and receiving feedback and guidance from colleagues (Ollila & Kujala, 2020).

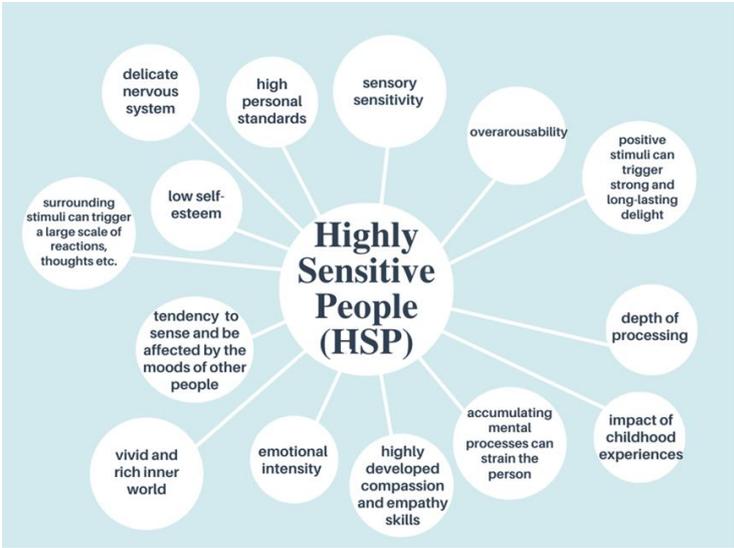
The workspace has an important role in the well-being of individuals and can make a crucial difference in the workplace well-being and productivity of highly sensitive people. The significance of individual differences and preferences regarding the working environment is emphasized in the findings from a study by Roskams and Haynes (2020). Their results indicate that individuals have non-identical workspace requirements, suggesting the need for a situation and organization specific assessment before aligning the workplace to the needs of the employees. According to the results, it is important to conduct a throughout consultation with the end users of the workspace before performing any renovation, relocation, or rearrangements there (Roskams & Haynes, 2020).

Matters that practitioners in charge of redesigning or renovating the workspace should consider depend on the context of the organization, according to Roskams and Haynes (2020). For example, when determining whether a transition to flexible working practices would have a positive impact, the practitioners may consult the employees on their opinions about the possibility of using different functional workspaces and whether this would be beneficial for them. Roskams and Haynes mention that when the end users' opinions and requirements are taken into consideration when designing workspaces, this can help reduce demands and increase resources for the employees working on that site. This has the potential to result in increased productivity and well-being at work (Roskams & Haynes, 2020). When designing environments where highly sensitive individuals work, it would be

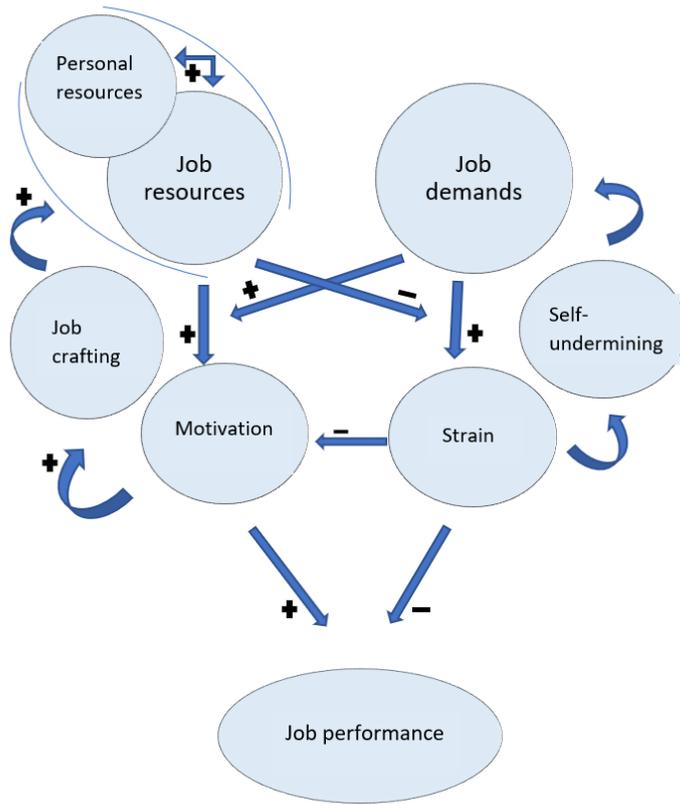
of crucial importance to pay attention to and consult them about their preferences and requirements.

While research has extensively covered topics that form basis for the current study, such as workplace well-being, well-being of highly sensitive individuals and the work-free time balance satisfaction of managers, the topic of workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders remains understudied.

## 2.6 Summary of Theoretical Background

 <p>The diagram is a mind map with a central node labeled "Highly Sensitive People (HSP)". It branches out into 12 peripheral nodes, each containing a characteristic or trait of HSP. The nodes are: delicate nervous system, high personal standards, sensory sensitivity, overarousability, positive stimuli can trigger strong and long-lasting delight, depth of processing, impact of childhood experiences, accumulating mental processes can strain the person, highly developed compassion and empathy skills, emotional intensity, vivid and rich inner world, and tendency to sense and be affected by the moods of other people. Surrounding stimuli can trigger a large scale of reactions, thoughts etc. and low self-esteem.</p>	<h3>HSP Managers and Leaders</h3> <p>High sensitivity has many traits that vary from person to person. Advanced skills in listening, being present and empathy, as well as tendency to think deeply and ponder on things a lot are common characteristics of HSP. Highly sensitive managers and leaders value sharing experiences and knowledge with their colleagues, receiving support and guidance from their higher-ups and value their skills in empathy as a strength improving workplace well-being. As HSP individuals can become strained easier than the average, coping mechanisms of varying kinds are commonly used to restore and maintain balance at work. Examples include communication and sharing feelings.</p>
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### The Job Demands-Resources Model



### Workplace Well-Being (JD-R Model)

Workplace well-being is a key factor in the overall success and performance of an organization. The JD-R Model structures the complicated concept of well-being at work by discussing job resources and job demands, and their impact on job performance. Job resources, correlated with personal resources, contribute to motivation. Coping mechanisms can be seen as a form of personal resources, as they are a personal way of dealing with a matter. Job demands, meaning challenges, and work issues of negative kind, contribute to strain. Job resources aim to buffer the impact of job demands. When a person encounters several job demands, they risk in self-undermining behaviour, whereas if they feel like their job is not meaningful or fulfilling enough, they might engage in job crafting, meaning creating work tasks for themselves that they see as meaningful and important.

### Factors Impacting Workplace Well-Being



There are several aspects and factors affecting workplace well-being. According to Manka and Manka's (2016) model, workplace well-being is impacted by structural capital, social capital, and the self, meaning the person's own psychological capital and physical health. Structural capital includes organizational matters, such as work environment, aims and development, as well as management-related issues, such as possibilities to influence and a supportive attitude towards learning. Social capital includes the health of the work

	community as well as the leadership style.
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Figure 4. Summary of Theoretical Background

Based on the cohesion of the research aims and questions and three main components of the theoretical background, the below combining summary was created:

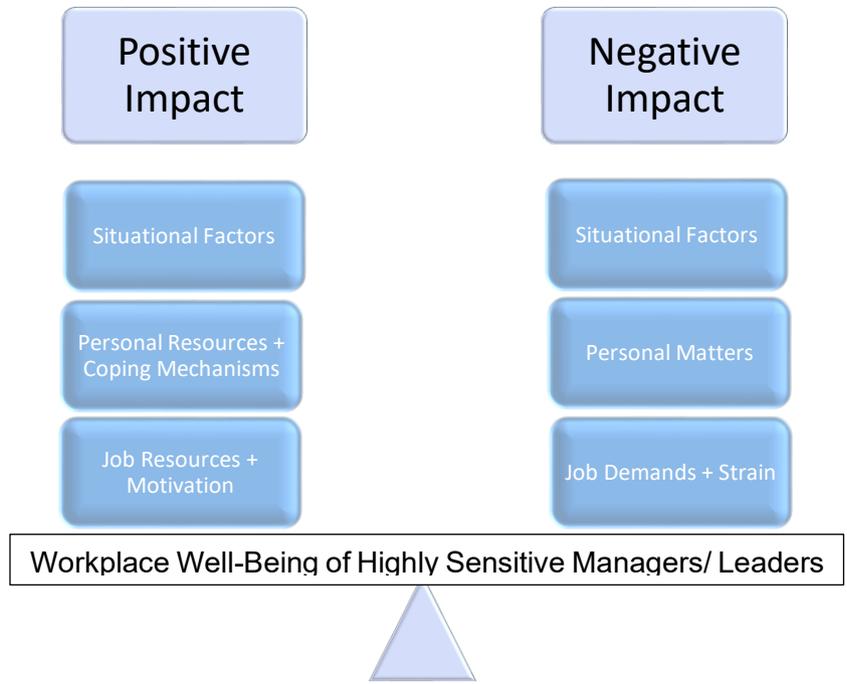


Figure 5. Combining Summary of Research Aims and Theoretical Background

In Figure 5., the matters affecting workplace well-being that have arisen from the literature and theoretical background review are included. These are job resources and motivation, job demands and strain (JD-R Model), and personal resources (JD-R Model and Manka & Manka’s (2016) model of workplace well-being). Matters affecting workplace well-being that have arisen from the research aims/questions included are coping mechanisms, personal matters, and situational factors.

### 3. METHODS

In this section, the methodology of the research is explained and discussed. A summary of the different areas in this section is included below.

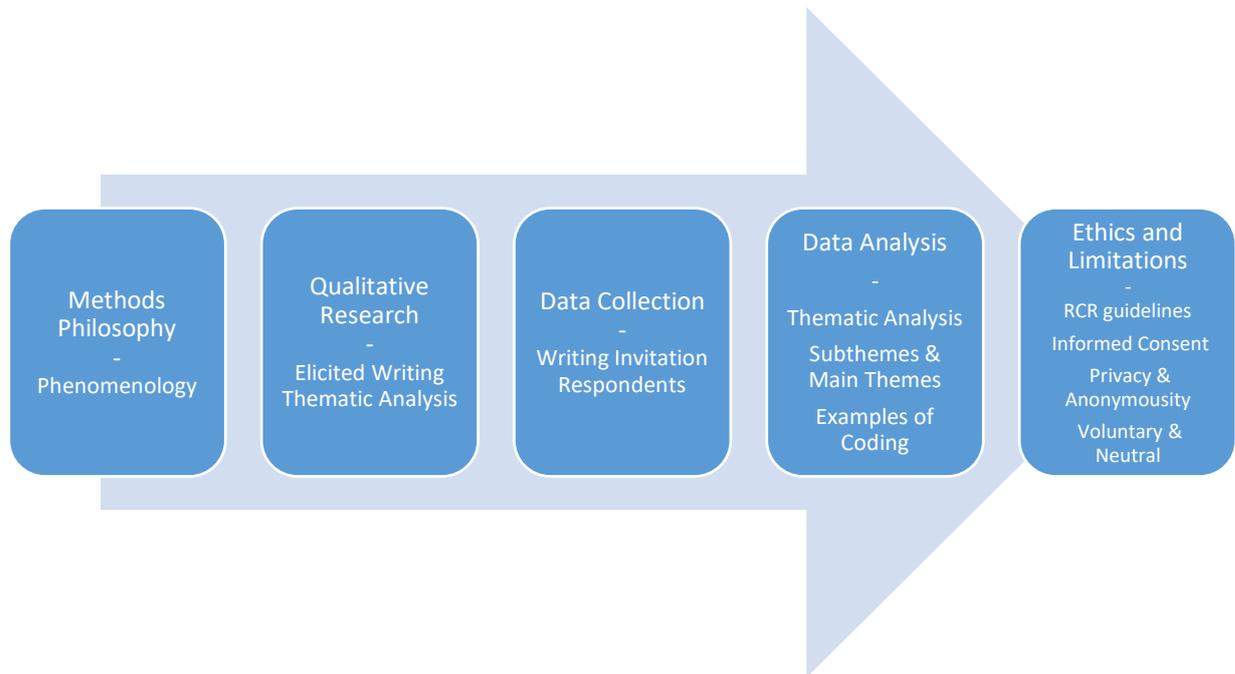


Figure 6. Methods Summary

#### 3.1 Methods Philosophy

Scientific research methodology decisions are always impacted by philosophical assumptions of the nature of existence (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology), according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008). Ontology is concerned with concepts regarding the existence of humans, society, and the world in general, as well as their relationships. Oncology examines the question “What is there in the world?”, whereas epistemology focuses on the questions “What is knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge?” as discussed by Eriksson & Kovalainen. Epistemology has several different sections and commitments, meaning there are multiple ways of approaching these questions. In general, epistemology is concerned with defining the ways in which knowledge can be produced and argued for, and it sets the criteria by which knowing is possible (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In the context of scientific research, defining and establishing what kind of scientific knowledge is available, as well as the limitations for this



knowledge, together with defining the essence of scientific research, is done through epistemology (Tosepu, 2018; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Both oncology and epistemology have views of objectivist and subjectivist nature. Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) discuss these two spheres. According to the researchers, in the oncological assumption that understand the world in a subjective manner, reality is based on the personal experiences and perceptions of individuals, which differ from person to person. In this way, they are bind to context and time. Objective ontology, then, assumes that people and their actions are not a fundamental part of the social world, and instead it exists independent of them, according to the researchers. Hence, social reality exists independent of the knower, such as a researcher. Similarly to ontology, epistemology also has an objectivist and a subjectivist view. According to the objective direction of epistemology, the existence of an entirely external and theory neutral world would be possible, as discussed by the researchers. The subjective direction believes that it is not possible to access the external world outside the scope of our own perceptions, interpretations, and observations. In qualitative research, a subjective approach is commonly taken, whereas in quantitative research methods, objective directions are more prominent (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

This current research follows a subjective philosophical direction, as it is interested in the personal experiences, interpretations, and perceptions of people, which can be context and time bound. The more specific philosophical orientation of this research is phenomenology, as the research aims to investigate the common, as well as individual, experiences of a particular group, in this case HSP in leadership and managerial positions. Phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of people, and how they perceived, felt, and thought about them (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenology is traditionally understood either as a disciplinary field in philosophy, or as a movement in philosophical history (Smith, 2018). For the purposes of this research, we will discuss phenomenology as a disciplinary field in philosophy, as it provides a relevant and holistic background context for phenomenology as a research method.

Phenomenology studies the structure of consciousness, perceived and experienced from the first-person point of view, according to Smith (2018). The intentionality of an experience, it being oriented toward something, is its essential structure since it is an experience of or about some object. In the right enabling conditions, an experience is directed toward an object, by the virtue of its content or meaning, symbolizing the object (Smith, 2018).

Phenomenological research is interested in the essence of an experience and sees human experience of the everyday world as a valid method of interpreting the world, as described by Eddles-Hirsch (2015). Phenomenological researchers do not consider the scientific empirical tradition as the most valid or advanced research method. In phenomenological research, the focus is on extended, holistic, and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon investigated. The researcher is interested in finding out what the participants think of the issue studies, their experiences, feelings, and opinions on it. The key element is that the focus is on the experiences of the participants, not on the number or background of participants, for example (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

To help obtain an objective and open mind when listening or reading the participant's statement, the researcher uses bracketing, meaning they put aside all previously acquired knowledge and thoughts they might have on the issue investigated, according to Eddles-Hirsch (2015). Following bracketing, the researcher employs imaginative variation to enable them to look at the issue studied from varying points of view and understand the essence of the participant's answers. It allows them to decode the structural themes in textural descriptions. Finally, the researcher puts together a statement based on the structural and textural descriptions, capturing the essence of the researched phenomenon (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

Groenewald (2004) and Embree (1997) further discuss phenomenology and its origins. Phenomenology originates from the works of Kant, Hegel and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Husserl was considered the lead contributor to the ideology. Husserl opposed the idea that external world objects existed independently, and that the information about objects was accurate and reliable. He claimed that humans might be certain about how things look or exhibit themselves in their consciousness. Everything outside of present experience must be ignored to reach certainty, and the external world is therefore reduced to the scope of personal consciousness. As a consequence, realities are considered and treated as phenomena, hence the name "phenomenology" (Groenewald, 2004; Embree, 1997).

Based on the orientation of phenomenology as the philosophical direction of this research, the selected data collection method is elicited writing. Elicited writing allows for the collection of personal, experience-based answers, formulated by the respondents themselves (Pöysä, 2022).

## **3.2 Qualitative Research**

The research methods used in this study are of qualitative nature. Taylor et al. (2015) describe qualitative research as a methodology that produces descriptive data, such as statements, comments, opinions and other written or spoken words by individuals, as well as data on observable behaviour. In qualitative research, emphasis is placed on the individual's own experiences, the meaning they attach to specific areas in their life and how they perceive the world (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). This research focuses on examining the perceptions and experiences that highly sensitive managers and leaders have of their well-being. The descriptive data produced is in written format, as created in the elicited writing process.

Qualitative research is inductive in the sense that the research begins with broad questions and not an entirely defined focus, and the researcher will narrow their perspective and might take away or add new data and aspects to their research as they spend more time in the research setting and their projects evolves (Siegle, 2019). In the context of this research, the writing instructions given to the participants were only thematic and guiding, meaning the participants were able to formulate their own text and the content of it as they wished, following the theme given (their workplace well-being). In addition, in qualitative research, the researcher looks at the situation, setting and individuals holistically, according to Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, (2015). Individuals' past and current situation are considered in the process, and their everyday lives, habits, feelings, and experiences are often of interest in this line of research. The opinions, perspectives, and thoughts of all groups of people are of interest to the qualitative researcher, making it an insightful and broad field of study (Taylor et al., 2015).

### **3.2.1 Purposive/Judgemental Sampling & Snowball Sampling**

The sampling method used in this research has characteristics from both purposive/judgmental sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used in data collection as it allows for the selection of respondents that are more likely to provide useful and appropriate data, and it enables the identification of cases that will use the limited research resources in an optimal way (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was seen as the most convenient way to ensure efficient and valid data collection in the current study since the purpose of this study is such that it examines a particular group of people who

meet specific criteria. Furthermore, since HSP Suomi ry, a union for highly sensitive people in Finland that took part in spreading the writing invitation, is a community, it was likely that people would hear about and send the writing invitation from/to one another, which meant that the data sampling process may include characteristics from snowball/referral sampling. Snowball sampling is especially useful when studying populations that are hard to find, when appropriate participants are difficult to identify in the beginning of the study or when the studied topic is sensitive (Gideon, 2012). Using purposive and snowball/referral sampling approaches assisted me in obtaining data about the particular group of people I wanted to analyze, as well as optimized the process of reaching the right kind of respondents to obtain relevant data.

### **3.2.2 Elicited Writing Method**

Elicited writing is a data production and collection method that focuses on the respondent's personal experiences and perceptions, from their point of view (Pöysä, 2022). Elicited writing is a common and suitable method of research when studying topics such as common experiences regarding a phenomenon, people's experiences of certain cultural or historical events, or living with a specific illness, for example (Pöysä, 2022; Laajalahti, 2014; Helsti, 2005). In elicited writing, the researcher prepares an introductory text with a title, which indicates the theme. Through the introductory text, the researcher provides information on the topic and research, guiding the respondent into the topic. The introductory text can include a few points or questions that guide the respondent or give them ideas to write about or perspective suggestions (Pöysä; Laajalahti, 2014). It is up to the respondent, however, to choose their style of writing, be it a diary or an essay format, as well as what they want to mention, focus on, and what perspective they want to take. The most important aspect of elicited writing is that the focus is kept on the respondent's experiences and views, without limiting interference from the researcher (Helsti, 2005; Laajalahti, 2014).

It is also common to include four to five background questions, such as gender, age, and other matters relevant to the research, in the introductory text. The introductory text, together with the topic and background questions form what is called a writing invitation, according to Pöysä (2022). The researcher spreads this writing invitation through their chosen channels. These include social media platforms, varying organizations' newsletters, and posting in university newspapers and magazines, for example. In the current times, online platforms are a common way of facilitating elicited writing collections (Pöysä, 2022).

As a research method, elicited writing is similar to theme interviews and open interviews in the sense that the researcher gives a theme and narrows it down with guiding questions during the process, but leaves it up to the participants to reflect on, decide the perspective and how they want to respond to these questions (Laajalahti, 2014; Hytönen, 2014). However, the difference is that in elicited writing, the participants answer in written format. This allows for an affordable method of data collection, convenient base for data analysis, and offers the researcher the possibility to see the cognitive correlations and workings of the participant, without themselves having a considerable influence on the answers (Laajalahti, 2014). The participants are able to respond to the questions in peace, without the presence of the interviewer, and in the case of the current research, anonymously. However, the researcher is not able to ask further questions or read body language, as they would be in interview situations. The process is also time-consuming for the respondents, and it can be challenging to motivate them to write long and in-depth answers (Laajalahti, 2014).

In the current research, the perspective to the research questions remains open, and the answers gained will be considered in the analysis, even if they do not directly contribute to the research questions. When having the respondents write from their own perspective with guiding questions, there are opportunities of gaining a more holistic and personal overall picture of the researched phenomenon. When spreading the writing invitation, attention was paid to the most effective ways of reaching the target group. The invitation was shared on HSP Suomi ry's newsletter, Facebook groups for HSP, WhatsApp groups for managers, as well as LinkedIn and other social media profiles (Facebook, Instagram) of my contacts and myself. This helped gain motivated respondents, who wanted to share their experiences and saw value in the research.

Elicited writing collections can be organized online or offline (Pöysä, 2022). The current research employed the services of Penna, an online elicited writing platform hosted by the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (Tietoarkisto). Penna hosts varying elicited writing invitations, and respondents can answer to their chosen invitations on Penna's site, anonymously. In the current research, I spread the link to my writing invitation on Penna to the forementioned social media channels and HSP Suomi ry's newsletter.

### 3.2.2 Thematic Analysis Method

The elicited writing data was analysed using the thematic analysis (TA) method to map out possible common themes amongst the answers and to structure the data in a manner that enables efficient analysis and comparison of the answers. TA is a qualitative analysis method that allows for the identification, organization, analysis, description, and reporting of themes found within a set of data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Due to its straightforward and clear structure, TA is a suitable method for researchers, who are in the beginning of their career or do not have a vast amount of experience (Nowell; Norris; White; & Moules, 2017). Thematic analysis is known for its relative flexibility compared to other qualitative research methods. It allows for flexibility regarding research questions, sample constitution and size, as well as data collection method and meaning generation (Clarke & Braun, 2017). While TA has not yet been used in research to the same extent that other qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory have been, it is a commonly used method in qualitative research that combines the core skills needed in other forms of qualitative methodologies (Nowell et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis is a suitable method for researching different perspectives that participants may have, their similarities and differences, as well as generating unexpected insights. In addition, TA provides the opportunity to efficiently summarize key points in a data set, aiding the researcher to take a well-oriented approach to data treatment and processing (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). TA was chosen as a suitable method of analysis for the current research, as the research questions regard the perspectives and experiences of participants, from their point of view. The commonalities and differences between participants were also a key point of interest, as well as examining the possible unanticipated insights.

The main downside of TA is related to its main advantage, flexibility. With the great degree of flexibility, TA can steer the analysis process in the direction of inconsistency and cause issues of non-coherencies in the development of themes from research data (Nowell et al., 2017). As TA is not as extensively researched as other qualitative research methods, the lack of literature choice can feel restraining to more advanced researchers and make novice researcher unsure on how to conduct a comprehensive analysis following the TA method (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). For the purposes of this master's thesis

research, the TA method is seen as viable, as the study conducted follows a simple protocol, and the literature scope is suitable for covering and discussing the aspects I wish to include in the research. The issue of overt flexibility is avoided by paying special attention to staying consistent when developing themes from the data, and during the whole research process. The themes are double- and cross checked to see any inconsistencies in their development.

Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas (2013) discuss the contents of thematic analysis. The process of data analysis in the thematic analysis process includes the steps of familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and finally, producing the report. When familiarizing with the data, the researcher transcribes, reads, and rereads the data and notes down initial ideas. After this, the researcher begins to generate initial codes by coding features of interest in the data, in a systematic manner, across the full set of data and organizing data relevant for each code. When this is in order, the researcher searches for themes by collating codes into potential themes and gathers all relevant data to each potential theme. The next step is reviewing themes to see if they fit with the coded extracts as well as the entire set of data. After this, a thematic map is produced. The next step is defining and naming themes, by conducting an ongoing analysis for refining the certain characteristics of each theme and the overall story that the analysis tells. This is done to generate clear names and definitions for the themes. Finally, the analysis report is produced. In this last phase, the researcher selects interesting and relevant extract examples, conducts the final analysis of the selected extracts, relates the analysis to the research questions and literature review, and finally, produces the analysis report (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

### **3.3 Data Collection and Description**

This current research was undertaken by first gathering secondary data by reviewing literature to obtain a better understanding of applicable models and concepts, including the main theoretical model of this thesis, the Job Demands-Resources Model, as well as the components of workplace well-being, the concept of High Sensitivity (HSP) and occupational leadership and managerism. After this, primary data was collected by conducting a collection of elicited writing texts, based on personal experiences of workplace well-being, from HSP in leadership and managerial positions.

The platform used for the collection of primary data was Penna, owned by the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. The collection period was 09.12.2021-20.02.2022. The writing invitation created included an introduction text with guiding bullet points aimed at giving the participants a general understanding on the research theme. These bullet points were formulated with the aim of finding out about the research objectives, i.e., the current state of perceived workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals in leadership or managerial positions, their coping mechanisms to deal with the tasks and pressures included in their professional position as well as their possible suggestions for future improvements regarding the support that HSP receive at work. The number of guiding bullet points was six, and they were phrased in a manner that encouraged in-depth answers. Special attention was paid to formulate the introduction and bullet points in a way that minimized the risk of the respondents feeling uncomfortable answering them, as the nature of the research topic might appear sensitive to some participants. The language of the writing invitation was Finnish.

HSP Suomi ry took part in spreading the writing invitation by including it in their January 2022 newsletter. In addition to this, I spread the invitation on relevant Facebook groups for HSP, WhatsApp groups for managers, as well as my own personal LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram accounts. Several of my colleagues and contacts also shared the invitation on their personal social media accounts.

As the topic of the current research is of a sensitive nature, I decided that collecting written, elicited texts from the target group would be the most comfortable and convenient way to conduct the research, both for the participants and for myself. By collecting the answers in written, free-style format, I wanted to make sure the participants were able to reflect on and think about their answers in peace, encouraging them to write long, in-depth texts, from their own perspective. This was also in line with the ethical principles of my research, as it helped me to avoid including leading, irrelevant, and categorizing questions.

The participants were able to choose the style of writing themselves. They could write, for example, in diary form, essay form, or in short answers. Most participants wrote one-piece texts of varying lengths. Each participant wrote between 0.5-1.5 pages, and the combined length of all received response texts was around two thousand words. The six bullet points were meant to give ideas, inspiration, and direction on what to write about. The respondents could, however, choose what they wanted to write about in their texts. There were four



background questions, regarding the sex, age, professional position (managerial or leader) and how long they had been in (a) managerial/leadership position(s). The writing invitation produced answers from eight respondents, who identified as HSP and who were in a managerial or leadership position at their work. Seven respondents answered in Finnish and one in English. The Finnish responses were translated to English before starting the data analysis.

There were five female respondents, and three male. Three of the respondents were 35 years old or under (two female, one male), four were between 36 and 55 years old (three female, one male), and one was 56 years or more (male). Four respondents were in leadership positions (two female, two male) and four were in managerial positions (three female, one male). Two participants had been in managerial/leadership role(s) for 1-4 years (one female, one male), two participants 5-8 years (one female, one male) and three participants 9 years or more (two female, one male). Below, Table 1. shows a summary of the respondents.

Table 1. Respondents

Respondent no. (randomly assigned)	Gender	Age (years)	Occupational role	Experience (in years) in the role (or similar roles)
A	Female	35 or under	Leadership	Under one year
B	Male	36-55	Leadership	5-8
C	Female	35 or under	Manager	1-4
D	Male	35 or under	Manager	1-4
E	Female	36-55	Manager	9 or more
F	Female	36-55	Manager	5-8
G	Male	56 or older	Leadership	9 or more
H	Female	36-55	Leadership	9 or more

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

After receiving all the answers from the Penna platform upon the closing of the data collection period (the answering period), I was able to begin my data analysis. As per Penna's custom, I was not able to access the content of the answers before the closing of the data collection period. Penna's representative sent me information about the number of responses every two weeks, and after the collection period was over, they sent me all the replies, together with answers to the provided background questions. I began by organizing the background information of the respondents into a table (provided in Table 1. Respondents) after which I started data analysis process using thematic analysis (TA).

Thematic analysis was seen as a suitable data analysis method for the purposes of the current research, as it was evident from the first round of going through the data that there were themes that occurred frequently in the answers, creating a considerable potential for the use of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The personal nature of the data, being produced by elicited writing, and the aims of the current research also supported the employment of TA, as the aim was to find out about the participants' insights, their commonalities and differences, as well as unanticipated thoughts (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). Through the processes of coding, grouping, and identifying sub- and main themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), TA aids in arranging the data into a form that supports the process of answering and discussing the research questions.

The aim of analysing the research data using TA was to identify the participants', all highly sensitive managers or leaders, perspectives of their workplace well-being, the coping mechanisms that they used in work-related matters, and their suggestions on how their workplace well-being could be supported and potentially improved. The elicited writing texts produced by the respondents were rich in content relevant to the research aims and questions and enabled me to identify themes and subthemes already in the early stages of the analysis process. In thematic analysis, it is common for main themes and subthemes to merge from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). The theoretical background of the current research, established after conducting a literature review in the initial stages of this research, provided me with understanding of the concept and practicalities of workplace well-being, high sensitivity in people as well as occupational leadership and managerism. This understanding was integrated in the overall structure of this thesis, however, as there is

limited literature on this specific topic, no expectations on the direction or nature of the answers was formed. The themes were formed based on the participants' responses and organized and grouped under suitable research questions. The researcher played an important role in identifying reoccurring themes, even though the themes freely emerged from the data during the analysis (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). As per the philosophical framework of the current research, phenomenology, the researcher, myself, aimed to conduct the analysis in the most objective manner possible, consciously screening for and removing any pre-existing thoughts and knowledge that might interfere with the analysis or lead it to a subjective direction (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

I began the thematic analysis process by reading the data material through multiple times. This first step in TA (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) was followed by five rounds of analysis. I divided the first round into three parts, based on the different objectives I was looking for in the data. In the first part, I screened the text for words, sentences and longer parts of the text that included mentions of workplace well-being. After identifying these parts of the text, I coded them using colours, and made written notes to create a basis for the analysis. I assigned each color a meaning, such as well-being at work, or well-being outside of work. Coding means identifying words, sentences, or longer parts of the text that are significant for the purposes of the research and highlighting them with different colours. The purpose of coding in thematic analysis is to arrange the data in a manner that serves the aims and research questions of the study and helps with creating a basis for drawing subthemes and themes from the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In the second part, I repeated the same process, but screened and coded words, sentences and parts of the text that included mentions of coping mechanisms, such as thought patterns, strategies, and intentional habits. In the third part, I repeated this process by screening for and coding words, sentences and parts of the text that included mentions of suggestions on how the workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals can be supported, or improved, such as education or communication.

After completing coding for the first round, the second round of analysis was deeper and focused on double checking for any words, sentences or parts of the text that might have been missed in the first round. In the second round, the data material was coded comprehensively, and subthemes started merging from the text. In the third round, the subthemes and themes formed more clearly. The themes that the subthemes were

categorized under could be drawn straight from my research questions, making the analysis efficient and relevant in terms of how it answered the research questions and aims. In the fourth round, I started to form a holistic understanding of the data, and how it answered to my research questions. I was able to comprehensively identify how the respondents perceived their workplace well-being, what kind of coping mechanisms they used in work-related matters, and how they thought the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders could be supported or improved. In Table 2. Below, the themes and their subthemes are presented.

Table 2. Main themes and subthemes

<p><b>Research question:</b> How do individuals in managerial or leadership positions, who identify as highly sensitive, perceive their workplace well-being?</p> <p><b>Main theme:</b> Highly sensitive managers and leaders' perception of their workplace well-being</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subthemes</b></p>		
Well-being at work	Well-being outside of work	Overall well-being
<p><b>Research question:</b> What coping mechanisms do highly sensitive leaders and managers use in work-related situations and matters?</p> <p><b>Main theme:</b> Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related matters</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subthemes</b></p>		
Coping mechanisms used at work	Coping mechanisms used outside of work	
<p><b>Research question:</b> How can the workplace well-being of highly sensitive leaders and managers be improved?</p> <p><b>Main theme:</b> Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subthemes</b></p>		
Social action	Education	Flexible and fair structures

In the final, fifth round, I reviewed the citations of each theme once more and finalized the analysis report, in which I noted down the process and results of the analysis. The analysis report relates the analysis to the research questions and aims, as well as the literature review. It also guides the reader through the analysis process by providing a written description of

the identified themes, together with citations aiding the reader in receiving a clearer understanding of them (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). My goal was to answer the research questions through a discussion based on the data analysis, theoretical background as well as my own perceptions throughout the research.

In Table 3. below, three examples from the thematic analysis conducted are presented. The main themes formed could be directly related to the research questions in the final stages of the analysis. The identified main themes were Highly sensitive managers and leaders' perception of their workplace well-being, Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related matters, and Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders. These themes were further divided into subthemes that were identified from the data. The sub- and main themes were then connected to the theoretical background of the research. According to Vaismoradi et al (2016), in thematic analysis, it is recommended to identify the themes based on the collected data, and only later link them with theory.

Table 3. Examples of coding in the thematic analysis

<b>Citation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Main theme</b>
<p><i>" I was aware of being overly strained, but being conscientious about the reports and needing a peaceful environment while writing them created a challenge. I was jealous of my colleagues, who could write their travel reports while waiting to board the plane at the airport [...] In my case, the reports had to wait until the next day at the office or until I arrived home in the evening. " (G)</i></p>	<p>Strain Conscientiousness Work environment Peace Challenge</p>	<p>Well-being at work</p>	<p>Highly sensitive managers and leaders' perception of their workplace well-being</p>

<p><i>” At work I focus on what I’m doing and try to create precise, prioritising lists, so that I don’t have to keep many in things in my mind simultaneously. Also preparing and reviewing things in advance has shown to be a good tactic in stress management.” (C)</i></p>	<p>Focus Precision Prioritising Notes Preparation Review Stress management</p>	<p>Coping mechanisms used at work</p>	<p>Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related matters</p>
<p><i>” [...] an important step could be educating the managers about High Sensitivity, because once you are able to recognize yourself you can identify technics that help you see your HS as a positive thing.” (A)</i></p>	<p>Education Recognition Identifying Approach</p>	<p>Education</p>	<p>Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders</p>

### 3.5 Research Ethics

This research follows the guidelines for the responsible conduct of research and for handling allegations of misconduct (the RCR guidelines), which have been published by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK and drafted in co-operation with the Finnish research community. According to the RCR guidelines, research must follow the principles set by the research community. According to these principles, the research and activities involved in it must be performed in honesty, accuracy, and meticulousness. Scientific criteria and sustainable ethicality must be practiced in the methods used in the research. The results must be published in an open, responsible fashion. Other researchers and entities’ work must be cited and credited (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity Tenk, 2021).

It was of crucial importance to ensure that the way the writing invitation was phrased, formulated, and spread made potential respondents feel at ease and did not imply any kind of pre-assumptions, and that the introduction text and guiding bullet points in it were neutral and objective, without prejudgemental or negative tone. Since high sensitivity can be a personal and sensitive topic, it was important to approach it with caution and consideration. The importance of emphasizing the research goal of shedding light on the current workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders in order to recommend changes was critical in order to emphasize that the goal of the research was to enhance the situation of such managers and leaders, not to discover their shortcomings or difficulties as a result of their high sensitivity. The introduction text and bullet points were designed to gain answers to the research questions, not to elicit personal information from the participants.

It was also important to consider the fact that some managers and leaders might feel uncomfortable discussing matters related to their position. It was therefore ensured that the writing invitation was phrased in a way that people could choose what they wanted to and felt comfortable writing about, while also having broad guidelines to help ensure the answers would yield meaningful data in terms of the research questions. The respondents answered the writing invitation anonymously, and no names or specific personal details were collected. The data and writing invitation were not archived in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. I did not personally store the data after conducting this research either, and it was strictly used only for the purposes of this research. I was the only person analysing the data.

The participants had the option to edit their responses or delete them during the data collection period. After submitting their text, the site provided them with a link they could use to access their text to edit or delete it. The introduction included my e-mail address, so they could contact me in case they had any questions. The introduction text included information on informed consent and the voluntary nature of responding to the study. According to Tenk, the purpose of the informed consent is to ensure that the participants understand what they are participating in and what their rights are in the context of the research. The informed consent to participate in research is a key ethical principle in research that includes human participants (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity Tenk, 2021).

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, I will answer to the research questions that form the basis of the research. These questions, as first presented in the Introduction chapter, are the following:

- 1) How do individuals in managerial or leadership positions, who identify as highly sensitive, perceive their workplace well-being?
- 2) What coping mechanisms do highly sensitive leaders and managers use in work-related situations and matters?
- 3) How can the workplace well-being of highly sensitive leaders and managers be improved?

In the thematic analysis conducted, main themes and subthemes were identified based on the data. For research question 1), the labelled main theme was “Highly sensitive managers and leaders’ perception of their workplace well-being”, and its identified subthemes well-being at work, well-being outside of work, and overall well-being. For research question 2), the labelled main theme was “Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related situations and matters”, and subthemes coping mechanisms used at work and coping mechanisms used outside of work. For research question 3), the main theme was “Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders”, with subthemes social action, education, and flexible and fair structures.

In this chapter, each research question is answered through the main theme that it supports. Hence, the chapter is divided into three sections, one for each main theme, and these are then further spread into the relevant subthemes. The discussion begins with Research Question 1), followed by 2) and 3), and ends with a summary and concluding remarks.

### **4.1 Highly Sensitive Managers and Leaders’ Perception of Their Workplace Well-Being**

The level and nature of workplace well-being perceived by an individual are dependent on and impacted by several factors (Mäkikangas et al., 2017). Such factors include external factors, such as organizational culture, development opportunities, and managerial support



(Manka & Manka, 2016), as well as internal factors. These types of internal factors include the individual traits of a person (Biggio & Cortese, 2013). High sensitivity as an individual trait affecting workplace well-being is the focus of this research, and how leaders and managers with this trait perceive their workplace well-being is the key point of interest in research question 1. Next, comments made by such leaders on their workplace well-being are discussed and combined with the theoretical background. In the analysis phase, three subthemes were identified, namely well-being at work, well-being outside of work, and overall well-being.

#### **4.1.1 Well-Being at Work**

In their responses to the elicited writing invitation, several respondents reported their mood and state of mind being affected by other's behaviour, moods, and the general atmosphere at work. This was seen as both a positive and negative thing in the responses, as it was experienced to feed an active and open culture of communication and discussion, but also to strain and create anxiety for the HSP leaders and managers.

*"I became strained, sometimes even anxious, if my "team's" members did not show an honest will to work together or to understand each other. Many of my colleagues or subordinates did not notice the issue at all or did not care about it." (Respondent G)*

*"I feel that my ability to sense my colleagues' moods and the general atmosphere at work is both a good and a bad thing in my position. I feel like I can prevent conflict and negative consequences by having a strong culture of communication in my teams, and by talking about things before they grow into bigger issues. On the other hand, at times I feel that others' moods affect my own, which can sometimes exhaust me, especially if I am already tired." (Respondent B)*

Common traits among highly sensitive individuals are a sensitivity to other people's moods, as well as tendency to be affected by other's moods and presence (Sand, 2016). Hence, HSP are prone to feeling uncomfortable or anxious in situations of conflict or other negative

nature (Sand, 2016). Ollila and Kujala's (2020) findings support the notion of HSP leaders placing importance on having a strong communal sense with their peers and being able to communicate and receive guidance and feedback in their work.

The importance of the impact that a suitable workspace has on workplace well-being was highlighted in the answers.

*” I was aware of being overly strained, but being conscientious about the reports and needing a peaceful environment while writing them created a challenge. I was jealous of my colleagues, who could write their travel reports while waiting to board the plane at the airport [...] In my case, the reports had to wait until the next day at the office or until I arrived home in the evening.”*  
(Respondent G)

Roskams and Haynes (2020) conclude that by decreasing the amount of demands and increasing the amount of resources available for employees in the workspace, workplace well-being and productivity can be enhanced. They also found out that individual differences, preferences and needs regarding workspace design greatly contribute to how an individual experiences their well-being at work (Roskams & Haynes, 2020). This is especially important for highly sensitive individuals, who sense and experience their surrounding environment in a deep manner and are also often significantly impacted by it (Sand, 2016; Lionetti et al., 2018). Heightened sensitivity to emotional, social, physical, and environmental stimuli are traits that can lead to HSP experiencing their surrounding environment in a more intense way than the average person (Aron & Aron, 1997).

#### **4.1.2 Well-Being Outside of Work**

The subjective nature of recovery and well-being outside of work, as well as an elevated need for and the importance of recovery was reflected in several of the responses in the current research. Many commented on the tendency that they have to worry and think about things that happened to them at work and go over them in their head outside of worktime.

*” I feel that work-related matters impact my mood quite a bit also outside of work. Especially now when I am working from home. It is difficult to draw a*

*line between work time and free time, so it often feels like I am at work the whole day. Work things stay in my mind, and I think about them quite a lot also during my free time.” (Respondent D)*

*” I tend to worry about things at night, if I haven’t found the right words or if I feel like I haven’t managed to do the right thing. Similarly, I take my annoying mood out on others, or I might use really strong/ugly words if the situation does not improve fast enough. Becoming annoyed with myself or even others is heavy.” (Respondent H)*

Recovery and well-being outside of work is a highly subjective matter. People differ in their needs and preferences related to how much recovery time and resources they need, as well as how they experience the varying demand levels in their work and how this affects their general well-being in life (Taris et al. 2006). For highly sensitive people, the importance of and need for recovery is often higher and the impact of work-related strain is more significant also in their private lives (Sand, 2016). As managerial and leadership positions tend to involve elevated levels of stress (Munafo` et al., 2016), this adds to the importance of proper recovery periods for HSP leaders.

Participant G, who wrote about their need for a calm and peaceful work environment, which caused them not being able to work at airports during work trips, mentioned how this impacted their private life.

*” Because my workdays, especially traveling days abroad, were busy and full of meetings and appointments, the drafting of reports and memos often had to be done during the evenings and weekends. At the expense of my own sleep, family life and hobbies.” (Respondent G)*

The reported tendency of processing and thinking about work-related matters outside of worktime is in line with Sand’s (2016) comments on how it is common for HSP to think deeply and analyse issues after they have happened and be functionally affected by them. Especially negative experiences can affect HSP for a long time, and they can spend a lot of energy in pondering the issue afterwards. Similarly, the common traits of conscientiousness and need for a peaceful working environment among HSP can lead to extended working

time and deducted free time, like in the case of Respondent G (Sand, 2016). The high-responsibility nature of managerial and leadership roles creates additional pressure that also impacts well-being at home.

In their response, one participant emphasised that they do not take work issues with them when leaving work.

*” [...] I do not bring work home with me. You can always continue the next day. Work won't go anywhere.” (Respondent E)*

The non-uniform take of the respondents in this issue underline Taris et al.'s (2006) concluding findings of the subjectivity of individual's needs and preferences for recovery, the way they perceive demands at their job and how this impacts their general well-being. It is also important to consider the differences in work environment and the work itself, as some jobs offer wider opportunities for leaving work issues at work and not thinking about them outside of working hours.

#### **4.1.3 Overall Well-Being**

In the responses to the current research, participants stated varying experiences and perceptions of their workplace well-being. Opinions varied especially on matters related to and caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as working from home. Some participants experienced working from a home office to be a positive and freeing experience, whereas for some, it increased anxiety. As discussed before, workplace well-being and thus overall well-being experienced by an individual are subjective matters, as are the situations and changes that the pandemic have caused in people's lives. This was reflected in the answers.

*” My workplace well-being varies. During corona times, working from home has been exhausting to me. Seeing people at work is important to me, and I feel like I gain strength and peer support from meeting and encountering people. Before corona, I experienced a higher level of workplace well-being.” (Respondent C)*

*” My overall well-being at work is good at the moment. I have learnt to take my own energy resources into consideration, and possibilities for distance work have especially given me energy, as I feel like working from home is a more convenient and less straining way to go about the day’s tasks. At times it is of course nice to go to the office. [...] If it has been a good day/week, work-related matters impact my general mood positively.” (Respondent B)*

For participant C, working remotely has been a negative experience and highlighted the importance of meeting people in person at work, and they underline the significance of peer support, which was also mentioned by Ollila and Kujala (2020) in their conclusions as to what HSP leaders consider important in their work. For participant B, on the other hand, the impact of remote work has been the opposite. They report feeling more energized and less strained when working from home. Sand (2016) discuss the tendency of HSP to become strained easier than non-HSP individuals. As these results demonstrate, workplace well-being and hence overall well-being are highly subjective matters, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded the scope of different experiences, feelings, and perspectives on the matter.

## **4.2 Coping Mechanisms Used by Highly Sensitive Managers and Leaders in Work-Related Matters**

In the context of the current study, the term coping mechanism is used when referring to varying kinds of tools, strategies, actions, internal processes, and other mechanisms that an individual, here HSP managers and leaders, employ to manage, reduce, or eliminate stress. The use of coping mechanisms involves the use emotional, physical, and social resources available to the person to avoid the negative impacts of stress. The goal is to restore balance (French, 2004). In the current research, the key focus of research question 2. was to find out about the coping mechanisms HSP managers and leaders use in work-related matters. The respondents wrote about their coping mechanisms they use as highly sensitive managers and leaders. During the analysis phase, two subthemes emerged: coping mechanisms used at work and coping mechanisms used outside of work.

#### 4.2.1 Coping Mechanisms Used at Work

Several participants reported using humour as a coping mechanism in work-related matters. It was described as a tool to create and maintain good spirit and mood at the workplace, which was mentioned as something the respondents wanted to support and keep up at work.

*” I aim to maintain a positive atmosphere at work and guide others in “good spirit”. It is good to use humour because laughter is good for everyone.”*  
(Respondent E)

*” Humour was a good coping mechanism when taking on unpleasant matters, for example by inventing each employee a suitable password for a computer programme it was possible to create joy and good mood at least momentarily, in this heavy job.”* (Respondent F)

Positivity and mutual consensus have been found to be especially important for highly sensitive people (Ollila & Kujala, 2020; Sand, 2016). As it is not uncommon for HSP to become strained and uncomfortable in situations of conflict, it is natural that they aim to maintain a positive atmosphere at work. Humour can be counted as a personal resource, which together with job resources buffer the negative impact of job demands (Bakker, et al., 2017). Another coping mechanism that was brought up in the responses was preparation and attention to detail. According to Sand (2016), HSP can ease their anxiety and nerves by preparing themselves for the situation in advance.

*” At work I focus on what I’m doing and try to create precise, prioritising lists, so that I don’t have to keep many in things in my mind simultaneously. Also preparing and reviewing things in advance has shown to be a good tactic in stress management.”* (Respondent C)

The nature of managerial and leadership positions often involves high levels of responsibilities and difficulty (Munafò et al., 2016), which highlights the importance of preparation and keeping matters in order to manage stress. As HSP tend to experience

external stimuli in a heightened manner (Aron & Aron, 1997), by lowering the impact of job demands, such as sources of stress, by personal resources, such as preparing in advance and creating lists to free space in one's mind, HSP can impact their stress levels, which can eventually improve their well-being at work.

#### **4.2.2 Coping Mechanisms Used Outside of Work**

Several of the respondents described different coping mechanisms they used outside of work hours to cope with, reduce, or eliminate stress and deal with issues related to work. Common habits included taking their mind off work-related matters by doing something that they like, such as hobbies or other past-time activities.

*“On my own time, I like to empty my head with different kinds of hobbies. For example, yoga, outdoors, meditating, crafts, knitting, reading etc.”*  
(Respondent E)

*“For me, trying to solve or disconnect from the "problem" is the best way of letting go. When I feel this way, I look for ways of distracting myself. For example, I listen to music, get my favorite dessert, go out with friends or simply do something to distract myself.”* (Respondent A)

As mentioned earlier when discussing HSP's well-being outside of work, the importance of time for recovery is heightened for them. As responded E stated, it is good to “empty one's head” over free time to avoid becoming strained. Hobbies and activities that one enjoys offer a possibility to relax, distract oneself, forget about the day's problems or prepare for the next day. Recovery is therefore an important part of a person's life, and coping mechanisms used outside of work support it. It is hence beneficial to identify what makes oneself happy and relaxed, and incorporate such things in one's recovery routine and daily life. Self-reflection and trying out different activities and methods can help with identifying what suits best for oneself. A person in a leadership position can be seen as a role model by their subordinates, which adds to the importance of taking care of oneself in such as position. Respondent E mentioned that they have a saying they remind themselves of when things at work get stressful.

*“[...] if things get stressful, my tip is ” one thing at a time and chaos out of sight and mind.” (Respondent E)*

This is a tip that can be helpful for everyone, HSP or not, when encountering tricky situations. By taking things one at a time, we can help ourselves to prioritise and work our way through. Thinking about the “chaos” can only make matters worse, so it is often helpful to proceed in small portions.

### **4.3 Improving the Workplace Well-Being of Highly Sensitive Managers and Leaders**

After discussing how highly sensitive managers and leaders perceive their workplace well-being, and what kind of coping mechanisms they use to manage work induced stress, the focus will now shift to improvement suggestions that HSP leaders and managers have in regard to the situation. This is the main interest of research question 3. In the elicited writing invitation on Penna, I included a bullet point encouraging the participants to tell about their suggestions for improvements regarding their well-being at work, if they had any. There were several varying suggestions, and during the thematic analysis process, three subthemes emerged, namely education, social action, and flexible and fair structures at work.

#### **4.3.1 Education**

The improvement suggestions related to education could be divided into two groups: education about HSP to enable self-identification and creating awareness, and education about well-being at work and in general.

*” [...] an important step could be educating the managers about High Sensitivity, because once you are able to recognize yourself you can identify technics that help you see your HS as a positive thing.” (Respondent A)*

Different possibilities could involve including an information session of high sensitivity in the managers/leaders’ weekly/monthly meetings at the workplace or arranging a separate



session. A specialist should be invited to talk about these issues, due to the specification and sensitivity of the topic and to ensure everyone feels as comfortable as possible.

Another suggestion brought up by the respondents was education related to workplace well-being in general and especially with own's treatment of oneself.

*“[...] it would be nice, if my workplace had some activities that would help with being empathetic towards oneself, such as trainings or theme days.”*  
(Respondent B)

Cater's (2016) study findings suggest that highly sensitive university students hope for information on HSP to be given to all new students and tutors. They also reported feelings of relief, increased self-acceptance and understandings, and life-changing realisations after being given information about high sensitivity (Cater, 2016). Sand (2016) discusses about the importance of identifying and understanding oneself as a highly sensitive person as a vital part of accepting and caring for oneself. Spreading awareness of high sensitivity at workplaces would help HSP to identify themselves as such, after which they can also look for peer-support, research more on the issue and start paying attention and identifying habits and manners that could be causing negative or positive impacts on their well-being. When employees are more aware of their selves, what works for them and what does not, the whole organization benefits from it. In the case of managers and leaders, the impact on their subordinates can be direct and widespread.

Self-care, acceptance and awareness of one's own self, strengths and weaknesses is a key component in the person's well-being at and outside of work. According to Manka and Manka (2016), supporting the psychological capital of members of an organization is vital to maintain a healthy workplace. By ensuring that each member of the work community is supported and offered training to obtain and keep up a healthy approach to themselves and their work, organizations can advance the overall well-being in their workspaces. As highly sensitive individuals are prone to criticising, judging, and blaming themselves (Sand, 2016), the need for highlighting the importance of self-care and understanding is heightened in their case.

### 4.3.2 Social Action

Social support in the forms of open communication, peer support and easy access to guidance are matters that were highlighted in the answers gained in the research.

*“I’m missing programme that would allow me to freely and confidentially discuss about challenges that I face at work as a HSP.” (Respondent D)*

*” As a HSP I feel that I would get more out of peer support groups than varying trainings of well-being, for example.” (Respondent C)*

*” It would be great if there was some sort of a help number to call and ask advice in difficult situations.” (Respondent H)*

Confidential discussion and sharing of challenges, peer support, and access to help and guidance are all job resources that center around social interaction and communication. These results highlight the importance of investing resources into efficient, reliable, and comfortable communication of varying focuses and types. Similarly, and interconnected, creating a positive work environment, where employees feel safe, is vital, together with optimized access to help and guidance.

Work community and the level of open communication and interpersonal skills that its members have impacts the experienced workplace well-being at the organization (Manka & Manka, 2016). Social support is a job resource that buffers against job demands such as negative work atmosphere, conflict, and miscommunication (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Communication, discussion, peer support and guidance from colleagues and supervisors have been found out to be important for highly sensitive leaders (Ollila & Kujala, 2020).

In managerial and leadership positions, work intensity is common (Stenman, et al., 2020) , and the job tasks commonly involve a high degree of responsibility and professional skill. The Job Demands-Resources model argues that the higher the job demands, the heavier the impact of job resources on motivation and work-engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). By providing managers and leaders a positive work environment and the tools that each individual manager and leader needs to thrive in their position,

organizations can positively influence not only the well-being at the workplace, but also the overall success of the company. When people feel motivated towards their job, they are more likely to stay in the organization for a longer time.

Guglielmo and Palsule (2016) discuss the social aspect of modern leadership. According to the authors, in today's professional landscape, community is a central element, tied together by communication and social information. Reflected in the responses to the current research, due to their traits of heightened skills in empathy, ability to sense other's moods and be affected by them, as well as sensitivity to changes and feedback, highly sensitive individuals are inclined to have a natural set of prerequisites to benefit and succeed in this type of a communal and open environment. However, as the pace of change grows, information flows faster, and the amount of social demands increases, also the risk of job strain grows. This highlights the need for updating the well-being practices at workplaces to the same level as other functions and keeping in mind the varying types of people working there.

#### **4.3.3 Flexible and Fair Structures**

Participants in the current research mentioned matters related to flexible and functional structures in their improvement suggestions for their workplace well-being. Matters such as flexible working time, possibility for remote work, fair distribution of responsibility and proper planning of days off were mentioned.

*"I believe as a way of improving the well-being workplaces should be more flexible in the arrival and departure times. Sometimes when these situations happen, I would like to take a break and distract myself. Or simply have the opportunity to go and work from home since tears could come and I do not wish my coworkers to see me in this state." (Respondent A)*

*"So, my suggestions would be for example days off back-to-back and enough employees. So that responsibilities could be divided equally. And so that employees would have enough energy to take care of themselves during their free time." (Respondent E)*

These responses reflect the values that many HSP hold for recovery and time and space for themselves (Sand, 2016). In positions where a person is responsible for people working for

them, it is commonly expected that they are available to help and guide their subordinates. This can at times cause problems if the manager or leader has no personal space at work, where they can go and regain their energy and calm down, or if they are not provided with proper holidays, days off and free time in general for recovery. As has been discussed at several points in this thesis, the whole organization benefits from the well-being of its managers and leaders.

In their model of Workplace Well-Being, Manka and Manka (2016) discuss the concept of structural capital as one of the three key areas of workplace well-being. Flexible structures at the organization and functional work environment are part of the notion of structural capital (Manka & Manka, 2016). As the modern era is bringing new demands for leaders and managers, such as digitalization and increased internationalization (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016), having a functional, flexible workplace is important. It allows for more efficient, smoother, and healthier change processes and supports the well-being of workers. Workplaces vary in the job demands they cause their employees, and hence what job resources would be necessary for each employee working there. In this current research, one of my aims was to find out what kind of improvement suggestions highly sensitive managers and leaders, no matter their field of profession, have for the consideration of their workplace well-being. The three subthemes that emerged from the data, namely education, social action, and flexible and fair structures, are all inter-connected, and form the basis for a healthy work experience.

## 4.4 Summary of Results and Discussion

Table 4. below presents a summary of the discussion of results.

Table 4. Summary of Results and Discussion

<b>Main themes</b>		
Highly sensitive managers and leaders' perception of their workplace well-being	Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related matters	Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders
<b>Subthemes</b>		
<b>Well-Being at Work</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mood and state of mind affected by the atmosphere at work, colleagues' moods and behaviour ⇒ Feeds an open and active culture of communication but also strains and creates anxiety for HSP managers and leaders</li> <li>• Importance of strong communal sense and being able to receive feedback and guidance from colleagues and supervisors</li> <li>• Suitable workspace and peaceful work environment important for HSP</li> </ul>	<b>Coping Mechanisms Used at Work</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating and maintaining a positive and light atmosphere at work</li> <li>• Humour a common coping mechanism</li> <li>• Preparation in advance</li> <li>• Keeping track of things by noting them down, freeing mental space</li> </ul>	<b>Education</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informing managers and leaders (and preferably the whole organization) about high sensitivity, for example through an info-session during meetings related to workplace well-being</li> <li>• The earlier, the better: HSP as a concept should be introduced to students already in educational institutions</li> <li>• Education and training on workplace well-being related matters and empathy towards oneself</li> </ul>
<b>Well-Being Outside of Work</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tendency to worry about work-related matters during free time and be affected</li> </ul>	<b>Coping Mechanisms Used Outside of Work</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distancing oneself from work, distracting oneself</li> </ul>	<b>Social Action</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free communication, discussion</li> <li>• Open community</li> <li>• Possibilities to discuss challenges related to being a</li> </ul>

<p>by negative issues at work ⇒ increased need for recovery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended worktime due to needing a calm work environment, which is not always possible during workhours</li> <li>• Emphasis on the subjectivity of the matter: work-related well-being is highly personal, and several factors affect it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hobbies, things that bring one joy</li> <li>• Taking things one at a time</li> <li>• Prioritising recovery when needed</li> </ul>	<p>HSP in a managerial/leadership position</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support, for example in organized groups</li> <li>• Convenient and reliable access to help</li> </ul>
<p>Overall Well-Being</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Varying experiences, emphasis on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on work-related well-being.</li> <li>• Differing experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding remote work. Some participants experienced it as a positive thing, some felt it created anxiety and had a negative impact on their well-being. Highlights the role that situational and personal factors play in work-related wellbeing.</li> </ul>		<p>Flexible and Fair Structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible work time, including arrival and departure times, where suitable</li> <li>• Possibility to work from home, where suitable</li> <li>• Enough employees (of all levels) so existing ones do not get burned out</li> <li>• Proper holidays and days off back-to-back</li> <li>• Fair division of responsibilities</li> <li>• Not draining employees (of all levels) to the point where they have no energy to care for themselves.</li> </ul>

## 4.5 Concluding Remarks

In this section, I will conclude the discussion of results and recap the discussed topics.

During the thematic analysis process, three main themes were labelled, one for each research question. The main themes are closely related to the essence and main point of the research questions. The labelled main themes are “Highly sensitive managers and leaders’ perception of their workplace well-being”, “Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related matters”, and “Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders”. These main themes were further divided into subthemes that were identified within the data. Next, the discussion of results will be concluded by recapping each main theme and their subthemes and drawing potential connections between them.

The participants, who worked in managerial or leadership positions and identified as highly sensitive, perceived their workplace well-being in varying ways. Common remarks were related to the importance of communal sense, consensual and open communication and operations, which was generally seen as positively affecting the participants’ well-being, but for some, it was straining. Similarly, the tendency of HSP to sense and affected by the moods of other people was perceived as an empowering trait for some, but others experienced it as tiring. The subjectivity of experienced and perceived workplace well-being was hence emphasized in the results.

Regarding the perceived workplace well-being outside of work, the emphasis on the subjectivity of the matter further continued. However, the common experience was that work-related matters bothered the participants during their free time, and it was difficult for them to let go of them. One participant mentioned that they do not bring work-related matters home, which highlights the influence that the position and nature of work have on the person being able to switch off from the work mode. Being heavily influenced by work matters during free time disturbs recovery and can lead to further exhaustion, which then leads extended recovery times, or even burnout. These primary data findings support the notions from the theoretical background, according to which highly sensitive individuals tend to require longer recovery times than non-HSP individuals.

One participant also wrote about their need for a calm and peaceful environment when working, which was not always possible during work trips abroad. This led to them having to work during evenings and weekends writing reports, at the expense of their hobbies, sleep, and family time. This negatively impacted their over-all well-being. This single example, supported by findings mentioned in the literature review, demonstrates the need for a more holistic and personalized evaluation of individuals' workplace well-being at organizations and companies.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was highlighted in the responses related to overall well-being. The participants varied in their experiences caused by the pandemic, especially regarding remote work, which divided opinions. Some experienced it as a positive, energizing experience, whereas some saw it as negative and anxiety-causing. The influence that situational and personal factors, such as family life, have on a person's workplace well-being, were accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic. These influences can have a long-lasting impact, which can manifest itself still months or years after returning to relatively normal work circumstances. This adds to the need to monitor the well-being more carefully at work, both in the case of HSP individuals and non-HSP individuals.

Hence, **the first conclusion** of this research is that individuals working in managerial and leadership positions, who identify themselves as highly sensitive, perceive their workplace well-being in varying ways, due to the subjectivity of the matter. Impactful factors include an open and supportive work community with a high level of communication, suitable work environment and the general atmosphere at work, including others' moods. When working in a position with a high level of responsibility and managing several aspects at the workplace, such as flow of information and ensuring a suitable work environment, these matters are especially important for HSP managers and leaders. Similarly, work-related matters often impact such leaders outside of working hours negatively, which increases the need for and length of recovery, on top of the stressful nature of the work. The COVID-19 pandemic had differing influences on HSP managers and leader's work-related well-being, and it highlighted the role of situational and personal factors facilitating work.

The coping mechanisms that the respondents reported using centered around humour and creating a light and positive work atmosphere. This seems like an evident mechanism when considering that HSP individuals commonly prefer open, positive, and non-conflicting environments. Other common mechanisms were preparation in advance and writing things



down to free space from mind. These tactics are in line with the propensity of HSP to experience emotions in a heightened way, which can cause anxiety, stress, and nervousness, but also excitement, joy, and ecstasy-like emotions. Outside of work, the respondents reported using various coping mechanisms that caused them joy, such as hobbies. Distancing oneself from work or distracting oneself from a work-related problem were also mentioned as tactics, as well as focusing on one thing at a time and prioritizing recovery when needed. These tactics are focused on creating and re-establishing balance, and consciously aiming to recover. Being conscientious is one of the common key traits of high sensitivity, which can manifest itself in several ways. Being overtly aware of one's own self and surroundings can hinder the chances for recovery, but it can also help one to focus on what they want to achieve through it.

Hence, **the second conclusion** of this research is that individuals in managerial and leadership positions, who identify as highly sensitive, use coping mechanisms to create positivity, free mental space by keeping a clear track of things, and restore balance and recovery in work-related matters both at work and outside of working hours. At work, common mechanisms center around creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere, often through humour, and preparation in advance, as well as keeping track of things by noting them down. In managerial and leadership positions, where the responsibility and demand levels are high, positivity and a clear system of keeping things in order are necessary. Coping mechanisms used outside of work focus on taking distance from work issues, and focusing on things that bring the person joy, such as hobbies. This also supports recovery.

When asked about improvement suggestions for the consideration of their well-being at work, the respondents provided several insightful answers. Education was identified as one of the subthemes, as there were multiple improvements related to it, from varying angles. Educating managers and leaders about high sensitivity was mentioned, which would constitute the basis for a HSP individual's journey of being more aware of this trait in themselves and understanding themselves better. In literature, it was highlighted that already in tertiary education, students and tutors should be informed about HSP. As high sensitivity can show itself in a person in several ways, and as it can be a fundamental part of their personality, being provided information about HSP as early as possible can have a significant impact on a person's development, self-acceptance and understanding of themselves. Additionally, participants included suggestions for trainings and information

about self-empathy and how to treat themselves in a more positive way. These skills have a direct impact on a person's well-being, both inside and outside of work. Especially for HSP, who can be critical and judgemental towards themselves, such trainings could provide essential knowledge. In a leadership position, being aware of one's traits as HSP and having understood what works for oneself and what does not, as well as being educated about ways to practice self-care, are essential to maintain a positive approach to one's own work, which affects the whole organization.

The second subtheme identified was social action. Participants highlighted the need for an open community, free and active discussion, and possibilities to talk about the challenges they face as a HSP in their position with someone. Peer support and easy access for help and guidance were also mentioned as important aspects needing improvement. These findings are similar to what the respondents mentioned when discussing about what positively impacts their workplace well-being, and they are also related to the coping mechanisms used. This demonstrated that they are aware of what needs improvement in how their well-being as managers and leaders is considered, and what impact this has, which is a vital part of any change process. By enhancing the social resources at the organization, the well-being of HSP managers and leaders can be significantly improved, and vice versa, as managers and leaders often have direct connections to many functions in an organization.

The third and final subtheme identified was flexible and fair structures. Flexibility in departure and arrival times, as well as the mode of work, when possible, were brought up in the answers. These matters are associated with the nature of the work, but they were found to have an impact on the well-being of HSP managers and leaders. To avoid the risk of burning out employees, including managers and leaders, the suggestion for hiring enough employees so everything can get done without exhaustion was mentioned, together with the requirement for proper holidays and time off. Besides this, fair division of responsibilities was brought up. These points can seem self-explanatory, but based on the responses, the unfortunate reality is that they do not exist in all workplaces. This can have an especially heavy impact on the well-being of highly sensitive individuals.

Hence, **the third and final conclusion** of this research is that individuals working in managerial and leadership positions, who identify themselves as highly sensitive, have identified the needs they have at work and are aware of what needs to be improved in order to enhance their workplace well-being. Education about HSP is a key issue and should be

provided widely within organizations and educational institutions to increase awareness. Being aware of HSP as a concept is necessary for a person to acknowledge it in themselves. Education and trainings on self-empathy and positive treatment of oneself is another key factor. For individuals in managerial and leadership positions, a healthy awareness of one's own traits and understanding of self-care forms an important part of supporting a healthy environment and culture for others at work. Social actions such as open work communities, encouragement for discussion, peer support and easy access to help are other matters requiring improvement. This contributes to the coping mechanisms HSP managers and leaders use in work-related matters. In addition, flexibility regarding work schedules and work mode is a matter that needs attention, as are ensuring a fair division of responsibilities, having enough employees so they do not get burned out, and proper holidays and days off back-to-back to support recovery.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 The Workplace Well-Being of Highly Sensitive Individuals in Managerial and Leadership Positions**

The main aim of this research was to create an understanding of how highly sensitive people in managerial and leadership positions perceive their workplace well-being and to map out possible needs for improvement in how such managers and leaders are recognized and supported in their roles at work. It was also intended that this study would yield ideas for future research, as this topic has only been examined narrowly in existing literature. The interest for this topic formed as I learned about HSP and started to wonder how managers and leaders identifying as HSP perceived their well-being and coping at work. I wanted to bring a new perspective to the field of research around workplace well-being. After identifying a research gap around the topic, the following research questions were formulated to approach and support the research aim:

- 1. How do individuals in managerial or leadership positions, who identify as highly sensitive, perceive their workplace well-being?*
- 2. What coping mechanisms do highly sensitive leaders and managers use in work-related situations and matters?*

3. *How can the workplace well-being of highly sensitive leaders and managers be improved?*

The research began with a literature and theory review to gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of workplace well-being, high sensitivity in humans, and occupational managerism and leadership. The concepts of sensory processing sensitivity and HSP were discussed and linked to workplace well-being and leadership research. The focus on the leadership side was on social leadership in the modern day. This was considered a relevant approach to leadership as the occupation landscape is constantly changing, and due to digitalisation, globalisation, and changes in hierarchical structures, the emphasis is frequently on the social environment of workplaces (Guglielmo & Palsule, 2016). For the theoretical framework, the Job Demands-Resources model was chosen, as it created a suitable framework for the research and captured the key ideas regarding the research aim: what constitutes workplace well-being, and how it can be impacted.

Phenomenology was chosen as the philosophical framework of this research, as the studied issue, workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals in managerial and leadership positions, can be seen as a phenomenon. It is a lived experience by a group of people with something in common, and the interest is in understanding their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about it. The research is of qualitative nature, and the data was collected in two phases: first, secondary data was collected by conducting a literature review, after which primary data was collected through elicited writing. The writing invitation was published on Penna, a research data collection platform hosted by Finnish Social Science Data Archive. The writing invitation was spread on varying groups and accounts on social media, as well as in the January 2022 newsletter of HSP Suomi ry. Altogether eight respondents took part in the elicited writing invitation, all of them responding anonymously.

Each of the three research questions were answered based on the responses to the elicited writing invitation combined with the theoretical background. A thematic analysis was conducted on the primary data to arrange the data and to identify themes and subthemes that would help in answering the research questions. The three main themes were Highly sensitive managers and leaders' perception of their workplace well-being, Coping mechanisms used by highly sensitive managers and leaders in work-related matters, and Improving the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders. These main themes directly supported the answering of each research question.

Three main conclusions were drawn, one regarding each research question. The first conclusion, answering Research Question 1., was that the workplace well-being of HSP managers and leaders is a highly subjective matter, and factors affecting it include a supportive work community with open communication culture, a suitable work environment as well as the perceived atmosphere at work, including others' moods. HSP leaders tend to be affected by work-related matters during free time negatively, leading to a heightened need and length of recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the role of situational and personal factors in the perception and experience of workplace well-being among HSP managers and leaders.

The second conclusion, answering Research Question 2., was that HSP managers and leaders use varying coping mechanisms to create and maintain positivity, free mental space, and restore balance and recovery in work-related matters both at work and during free time. Common coping mechanisms at work were focused on a positive atmosphere, both creating and maintaining it, often using humour. Preparation in advance and reducing mind clutter by noting things down, were also seen as key coping mechanisms. Outside of work, HSP managers and leaders kept the focus on taking distance from work issues and put their energy on things that brought their joy, such as hobbies.

The third conclusion, answering Research Question 3., was that highly sensitive managers and leaders have identified their work-related needs and aware of what improvements need to be made to enhance their well-being at work. Three key improvement areas emerged, namely education, social action, and flexible and free structures. Education about high sensitivity in people should be provided to all members of the organization, as well as education institutions to support early detection and awareness of HSP. Trainings on self-empathy and one's treatment of oneself was another key educational area that emerged from the results. Social action as an area for improvement covered matters such as open communication and work communities, peer support and convenient access to help. These matters are related to the coping mechanisms HSP managers and leaders were found to employ in work-related issues. Finally, flexibility in work schedules and the mode of work, such as remote versus in person presence, and a fair division of responsibilities, a sufficient number of employees at work and ensuring proper holidays and days off back-to-back in order to support recovery are issues that require improvement.

## **5.2 The Scientific Contribution of The Research**

This thesis research produced new insights into the workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders. After conducting the literature review, a research gap was identified regarding the topic. Workplace well-being has been studied extensively in past research, using for example The Job Demands-Resources Model, or Manka & Manka's model of workplace well-being (Manka & Manka, 2016). The workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals, especially those working in managerial or leadership positions, has not been covered in depth in past research. In one previous study on the perceived workplace well-being of HSP business managers and leaders, findings related to the values that they consider important at work were discovered (Ollila & Kujala, 2020). This thesis research did not limit the scope of respondents to any specific field and hence managers and leaders from all industries and fields were welcome to answer. The findings support the values found in Ollila and Kujala's (2020) study, such as guidance from supervisors and peer support, and the current study complements the existing, limited research in the area. The main contribution of this research is that it maps out a picture of how HSP managers and leaders perceive their well-being at work, and what they do to cope with work-related issues. It also produced direct suggestions for how the consideration and supporting of such leaders can be improved in the future. Hence, this research contributes to building a foundation for filling the existing research gap, and even though it is a small-scale study, and the results cannot be vastly generalized, it gives indication of the current state of workplace well-being amongst HSP managers and leaders. It also provides direction and ideas for future research in multiple directions.

There are several ways in which scientific contribution of research can be assessed. Brinberg and McGrath (1985, see Ladik & Stewart, 2008) introduce three areas of contribution, namely conceptual domain, methodological domain, and contextual domain. The conceptual domain, as per its name, focuses on explaining the matter of interest, whereas the methodological domain refers to methodological contributions, such as a new method of researching a phenomenon. The contextual domain centers around the range of the studied matter. Research papers in general make a contribution in one or two of these domains (Ladik & Stewart, 2008).

The current research has its main contribution in the contextual domain. The context of the research consists of individuals working in manager or leadership positions, who identify themselves as highly sensitive. The research data, both primary and secondary, show that there is a lack of research in this topic and indicate that to gain a more holistic and generalizable understanding of such a subjective issue, more extensive research needs to be conducted. Due to the high level of subjectivity and small sample size, the research results are indicative, however, as this topic is not widely researched, the current study provides feasible suggestions on where future studies could focus regarding the current state of perceived workplace well-being among highly sensitive managers and leaders. Common coping mechanisms and suggestions for improvement discussed in the results also indicate key focus areas for future research.

### **5.3 Managerial Implications**

This research has implications for business management regarding workplace well-being and the recognition and facilitation of varying kinds of personas at the workplace. The research results function as a reminder that there are several types of managers and leaders, and they have varying needs and preferences at work, as well as varying leading styles. The findings provide indication to what matters workplaces should pay attention to if they aim to enhance the workplace well-being at the workplace for everyone, or if they want to educate their employees about HSP.

Education is the most important step in creating awareness of HSP at workplaces. Once a person identifies themselves as HSP, it enables them to evaluate their situation and understand themselves, their strengths, weaknesses, and needs, better (Sand, 2016). The coping mechanisms mentioned in the answers can be of help for HSP managers and leaders, as well as other employees alike. Once workplaces are aware of HSP, they will be able to consider them better in the practices supporting workplace well-being. The improvement suggestions discussed in the results can be of guidance to workplaces implementing more inclusive well-being practices. However, due to the subjectivity of the matter, a situation-based approach is recommended.

## 5.4 Research Credibility and Limitations

This research, being of qualitative nature, can be assessed for trustworthiness by employing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, consisting of four areas: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Cope, 2014; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). These criteria are commonly applied to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Cope, 2014).

*Credibility* as a trustworthiness criterion refers to the accuracy of the data and participants perspectives, as well as the truthfulness of the researcher's interpretation and representation of them (Cope, 2014). In the current research, the credibility was ensured by carefully reporting the procedures of the research and ensuring that the practicalities during data collection and reporting supported credible outcomes. The reporting of the study was done in a transparent way and each step was described in detail, which increases credibility (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Knowledge and understanding of the theoretical and empirical aspects are another factor contributing to credibility (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Understanding of the theoretical background was demonstrated through carefully describing the main theoretical concepts of HSP and the nature of managerial and leadership positions and discussing and applying the JD-R model of workplace well-being to the elicited writing data. Empirical understanding was demonstrated through the versatility and relevance of the gained research data.

The participants took part in the study voluntary, and the timeframe for participation was long enough for participants to be able to think about, reflect and resubmit or cancel their answers if necessary. This decreases the risk of hasty or pressured responses. The responses were submitted anonymously, which encourages truthful responding and adds to the credibility. In addition, the respondents answered to the elicited writing invitation in a manner that can be expected of elicited writing responses: most responses based their answers on the topic ideas provided, while also writing about issues that were not asked about but provided relevant insight to the research. The lengths of the gained responses were also similar. In reporting, direct examples of the thematic analysis were provided, together with direct quotations from the answers.

The second trustworthiness criteria, *confirmability*, implies that the researcher is able to show that the collected data is representable of the participants' views and not biased by researcher viewpoints or perspectives (Cope, 2014). Confirmability was demonstrated by



providing direct, rich quotes from the participants' responses and by systematically connecting these responses to the discussion and final conclusions. The third criteria of trustworthiness, *dependability*, refers to following general guidelines for conducting research, supported by a careful, systematic, and transparent documenting of the research process (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018; Cope, 2014). In the current research, the choice of topic and its definition, chosen theoretical background, used data collection and analysis methods, research philosophy, and conclusions have been presented and justified in an in-depth manner.

The fourth criteria contributing to trustworthiness of the research is *transferability*, referring to the transferability of the findings to different groups or settings, according to Cope (2014). Cope states that in qualitative research, a study can be considered transferable if its findings are meaningful to individuals who were not part of the study, and if readers can find associations between the results and their own experiences. In the case of the current research, the studied phenomenon is specific to the extent where it can only be transferrable under certain conditions. The target group is a defining factor: highly sensitive individuals who are working in managerial or leadership positions. It is important that the researcher clearly describes the context of the study and participants to help the readers assess if the findings are transferrable and if they can relate to them (Cope, 2014). In the current research, the respondents' field of work was not defined, which supports the transferability of the findings across industries.

In 1944, Lincoln and Guba added a fifth criterion of trustworthiness in qualitative research. This criterion is *authenticity*, and it refers to the extend and skills of the researcher to report the participants' sentiments and perspectives in a truthful and faithful manner (Cope, 2014). In the current research, this was demonstrated by including direct quotations from the participants' responses in the discussion of results.

In every research, there are always limitations that must be acknowledged when assessing the credibility of the research. In the current research, one of the main limitations is that due to the small number of respondents, the study results cannot be generalized on a large scale. Rather, they provide indication of the current situation in the perceived workplace well-being of highly sensitive managers and leaders. As a master's thesis research, this study was not financially funded, and therefore had limited resources in terms of how broadly and effectively the writing invitation could be spread, for example. In addition, as the study was

conducted using solely qualitative methods, the generalizability of the results should be critically assessed. The respondents covered the six bullet points included in the introduction of the writing invitation relatively equally, however it would have been desirable if the impact of being in a managerial or leadership position on workplace well-being would have been covered more in depth. This is something that future research could pay attention to, as discussed later. The researcher, myself, interpreted the results. As interpretations in qualitative research are always subjective, even when aiming to be as objective as possible, there is a possibility that the researcher's own opinions and worldview affected the results, and the conclusions could have been different if another researcher conducted the study.

## **5. 5 Suggestions for Future Research**

As concluded in the research, the workplace well-being of highly sensitive individuals in managerial and leadership positions has received only very limited attention in research. Therefore, the possibilities for future research are broad. Based on the findings of this study, research suggestions regarding the perceived workplace well-being of HSP managers and leaders, their coping mechanisms in work-related matters, and their suggestions for improvement in how their well-being is considered at work can be explored.

Wider, in-depth research with a higher participant count could be conducted to create a more generalizable, prominent understanding of how such leaders experience their well-being at work. Differences between age groups, genders, industries, sectors, roles, experience levels, geographical locations, and backgrounds, could be studied further. In addition, work-related well-being at the workplace and during working hours and work-related well-being outside of working hours could be further explored and compared. The impact of being in a managerial or leadership position on workplace well-being could also be explored on a wider scale.

Similarly, a larger study with more participants could help to map out more coping mechanisms that HSP managers and leaders use, and differences between varying factors, such as age, geographical location, gender, experience and so on, could be further investigated. If enough data and examples can be gathered, an interesting idea would be to eventually create an indicational guide for HSP people in managerial and leadership

positions with ideas and suggestions on coping mechanisms that others in their position have found out to work. Again, a division and comparison could be made between coping mechanisms used at work and coping mechanisms used outside of work to deal with work-related stress.

Regarding suggestions for improvements, the respondents in the current study provided interesting insights for how the consideration of HSP managers and leaders' well-being at work should be improved. A large-scale study focusing on finding out about this issue could provide important understanding that could lead to the implementation of in-demand practices, speed up the process of creating a more pleasant and suitable work environment also for HSP people, and to facilitate necessary changes. Research in this area could also help in establishing a general understanding of the characteristics that a workplace practicing inclusive well-being has.

Additional research ideas include investigating the relative effectiveness of different coping mechanisms in reducing or eliminating stress in HSP managers and leaders and researching how varying background and socio-demographic factors, such as age or home country, impact the suggestions that such leaders have for future improvements in the consideration of their workplace well-being.

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## **APPENDIX**

The writing invitation posted on Penna is included as an appendix on the following page.

