

# Common demanding conditions among professional high-level military and sport leaders: a cross-contextual qualitative reflexive thematic analysis

Andreas Bencker<sup>1,2</sup>, Maria Fors Brandebo<sup>2</sup>, Andreas Ivarsson<sup>1</sup> and Urban Johnson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, Sweden, <sup>2</sup>Department of Leadership, and Demand & Control, Swedish Defence University, Sweden.

Corresponding author: Andreas Bencker

E-mail: andreas.bencker@hh.se; andreas.bencker@fhs.se

School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, Sweden.

Swedish Defence University, Sweden.

## Abstract

Military and sport have attracted increased research interest separately as two distinctly demanding performance- and leadership-driven contexts. However, cross-contextual psychological research in leadership is lacking. Such research has potential to expose unique cross-fertilising insights into resemblances in leadership challenges among military and sports leaders, transferable to a broader range of contexts. Thus, the current study simultaneously explored high-level military and sport leaders' real-life experiences of similarities in demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations. Sixteen participants – eight Swedish high-level military leaders and eight Swedish high-level sports leaders, participated in the study. Using a qualitative inductive cross-contextual design enabled in-depth knowledge and transferability. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of sixteen interview transcripts generated four common themes of demanding conditions: (1) Developing organisations: Leading under extensive workload and responsibility, (2) Managing destructive superiors and subordinates: Standing up for oneself, (3) Taking care of the minds and moods of others: Leading deliberated difficult conversations, and (4) Periods of extreme concentration: Leading critical coordination, decisions, and timing. In the findings, own severe stress reactions to dealing with and manoeuvring multiple leadership challenges and the struggle with resources and interaction with individuals are commonly identified responses among the participants. High-level military and sports leaders are tied into a high-stress, high-stakes leader role. Implications are presented.

**Keywords:** *High-level leaders, Military, Sport, Demanding conditions*

There is an increasing emphasis on leader-level-specific research focusing on demanding conditions and high-level leaders' related cognitive, emotive (Yammarino, 2013), and behavioural responses (Hambrick et al., 2005; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001). This contextualised leadership research applies to the military (Wong et al., 2003) and sport (Arnold et al., 2015) as two distinctly demanding performance- and leadership-driven contexts (Peus et al., 2016; Wagstaff, 2019).

Despite these contextual parallels, there is a lack of cross-contextual psychological research in leadership, which, in line with Wagstaff's (2019) reasoning about unities, grasps the opportunity to expose unique cross-fertilising insights into resemblances in leadership challenges among high-level military leaders and high-level sport leaders. Moreover, these insights could be transferable to a broader range of senior leaders operating in performance-driven contexts of business organisations

(Weinberg & McDermott, 2002) and contexts of extremism, crisis, uncertainty and rapid change covered by emergency type/fast-response organisations (Larsson & Hyllengren, 2013; Schakel & Wolbers, 2021) within authorities of the total Defence and the corporate security industry.

Suitable for developing such profound knowledge of the stresses of leaders include information about their associated cognitions and emotions (National Research Council, 2014), altogether constituting the interaction between a humans outer situation and inner mind, fit to explore and illuminate by a cognitive-behavioural approach (Edgerton & Palmer; 2005; Heppner & Krauskopf, 1987). Furthermore, this information can expand the sparse knowledge about high-level leaders in professional sports (Armstrong et al., 2022; Parnell et al., 2019) and the lack of knowledge about "the influence of stressors on military leaders themselves" (Sharma & Pearsall, 2016, p. 863). Altogether, this research gap reflects the call for further

research on demanding conditions, stress, health and performance in the military (Hawkins et al., 2018; Harms & Perrewé, 2018) and in sport (Rumbold & Didymus, 2021). Accordingly, the current study aimed to simultaneously explore high-level military and sport leaders' real-life experiences of similarities in demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations.

More specifically, the underlying reason for this aim was its potential for developing a cross-contextual in-depth understanding of the interface between high-level military and sport leaders demanding conditions, situated minds (psychological manifestations of conditions), and its invocation of leadership direction, transferable to other challenging contexts and leaders who exercise leadership under demanding conditions. Moreover, these insights could serve as a mutual basis for joint leader performance development efforts (Hiller & Peterson, 2019).

Leadership is essential for military and sport organisations' performance (Arthur et al., 2016), wherein high-ranking military leaders (Squires & Peach, 2020) and senior leaders in elite sport (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Frontiera, 2010) play significant roles. The question is what similar demanding conditions these leaders are exposed to and need to manoeuvre to achieve organisational goals.

Contextually, both similarities and differences surround those leaders. On the one hand, military and sport have a lot in common (Goodwin, 2008) by sharing the features of operating in stressful, complex performance- and competition/opponent-oriented environments (Ward et al., 2008). Correspondingly, high-level military leaders (lieutenant colonels) highlight the crossing between military and sport. More specifically, they emphasise similarities in the training and development of high-performing athletes and warriors and how it, together with challenging experiences from both contexts, favour leader performance under demanding conditions (Bolin, 2021).

However, on the other hand, military and sport also differ contextually. For example, the military is characterised by command and control procedures (Alberts & Hayes, 2006; Kylesten & Nählinder, 2011; Liao, 2008; Vogelaar et al., 2010), the use of legal force, combat, and possible fatal losses, and severely wounded people (Drescher, 2013; Gray, 2018). Professional sport, in turn, is, for example, characterised by corporate routines and commerce (Ferkins et al., 2005; Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020; Junghagen, 2018), sponsors, seasons, fans, media, games, and championships (Demir & Söderman, 2015; Scott, 2014).

Altogether, an intense leader role emerges in two distinct demanding contexts promoting the research interest in similarities in high-ranking military officers' and sport executives' experience of demanding conditions. To better understand a leader's experience of demanding conditions and what leadership direction the situated mind invokes, the current study's cognitive-behavioural theoretical framework (Edgerton & Palmer, 2005; Heppner & Krauskopf, 1987) highlights the importance of attention to the leader's interpretation of a particular condition and how this appraisal activates further cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioural reactions.

Consequently, in the current study, according to the author's definition, "demanding conditions are the contextual circumstances and situations a leader experiences as significant problems, challenges, strains, or even dangers that need to be led and which trigger high cognitive, emotional, and physical pressure/stress reactions affecting the direction of leadership and its further specific leader performance behaviours." The essence of the definition is that an in-depth understanding of a leader's

real-life experience of demanding conditions lies in equally considering stated external circumstances and expressed internal personal reactions to understand why a condition is experienced as demanding and why there is a call for leadership in an emerging direction and further comprehensive measures.

High-level leaders, in general, report significant amounts of work-related stress due to different types of demanding conditions. One type is role overload and lack of resources (Ahmad et al., 1985). Another type is exposure to problematic relationships with other organisational members, such as superiors exhibiting destructive leadership (Aasland et al., 2010), which even executives are likely to encounter. The negative consequences of experiencing destructive leadership are, for example, energy drainage, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and thoughts of quitting (Breevart et al., 2014; Fors-Brandebo et al., 2016). Likewise, a problematic organisational culture where people act aggressively, fight for power, and point out failures is causing stress among executives (Pool, 2000). Similarly, being the target for interpersonal criticism is perceived as demanding to handle by executives and causes stark psychological and physiological stress reactions (Garner, 2010). Such people-oriented work events have the most substantial impact on managers' emotions. Pleasant emotions arise if relations are positive, and anger and tiredness arise if relations are negative (Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004). Similarly, frequently reported emotional reactions to work-related stressors among staff, in general, have shown to be anger and frustration, where work-overload and interpersonal conflicts are commonly experienced stressors (Mazzola et al., 2011). Moreover, exceptionally stressed high-level leaders struggle with adverse reactions due to increasingly demanding conditions such as time pressure combined with endless meetings, bureaucracy, staff development, interpersonal relationships, and work-life balance issues (Dubey & Kumar, 1986; Ganesh et al., 2018). Frequent adverse stress reactions are sleep disorders, headaches, irritation, anxiety, lowered energy, and diet problems (Dubey & Kumar, 1986; Ganesh et al., 2018).

Being a high-level leader in the elite sport context is experienced as demanding, like being exposed to stressful events such as work-life balance issues, interaction with mass media, and resource shortages (Arnold et al., 2015). In addition, as a club director or general/sport manager, there is a responsibility to lead the sport organisation towards strategic goals, coordinating the workforce, recruiting and managing players, fans, media, and resources (Lord et al., 2016). This responsibility includes the challenge of retaining and motivating capable staff and players (Taylor et al., 2008) and finding strategies for gaining financial control (Gillett & Tennent, 2018). Recently, research has highlighted high-level sport leaders' challenges of shaping an organisation and culture that promotes a high-performing and successful team (Armstrong et al., 2022). A sport executive's responsibility goes far beyond a team coach's role and can cause extensive psychological strains that may result in positive pressure and severe stress (Crust & Lawrence, 2006). Other demanding conditions are conflicts and power struggles. In particular, high-level female leaders can suffer considerably from such conditions and be hindered in access and career advancement sometimes by adverse reactions from male colleagues (Pfister & Radtke, 2009) and being ignored, discriminated and combated against their organisational change initiatives (Perez-Rivases et al., 2017). As Adriaanse (2019) expresses, in the long run, this

lack of gender equality in leadership can prevent the organization from utilizing its potential to the fullest.

In summary, these empirical findings within the sport context give some understanding concerning high-level leaders' experience of demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations. However, the versatility of these demanding conditions can be deepened. Moreover, the leadership direction invoked from such an experience of demanding conditions could also be included as an empirical subset. Altogether, there is a continued research gap around high-level sport leaders (Armstrong et al., 2022; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Parnell et al., 2019). Therefore, Lee et al. (2022) emphasise further in-depth qualitative research to gain new insights into the strain of high-level sport leaders and their leadership. Furthermore, such qualitative research on female sport leaders' experiences is clearly lacking (Evans & Pfister, 2021), making it crucial to include them in the current study.

In the military context, the challenges for military leaders in general concern various leadership domains in a spectrum of military organisational activities, ranging from deployment and missions in extremely dangerous contexts to peacekeeping missions overseas and garrison-based activities (Morath et al., 2011), as well as domestic operations for homeland security and crisis management (Denny, 2021). On an overall level, resting on Morath's and colleagues' review, challenging leadership domains are, for example, preparing and leading people through danger, safeguarding the staff and their families, and leading organisational processes such as goal alignment, restructuring and cultural development (Morath et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2003). Another challenge is to be personally updated with and integrate technology and tactics in the organisation (Morath et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2003). Challenges around media and public relations are also mentioned (Shamir & Ben-Ari, 2000).

The scope of demanding conditions in terms of contextual circumstances and situations that high-level military leaders may perceive as significant problems, challenges, strains, or even dangers that need to be led, is likely to be found in every corner of these leadership domains and all the spectrum of military organisational activities. To quote Wong et al. (2003), the demands on high-level military leaders are vast; they "must be, know, and do just about everything" (p. 669).

What has been learned empirically by researching demanding conditions is that high-ranking military officers in extreme, stressful, and challenging contexts can experience daily pressure due to high workloads and a lack of resources and responsibility for subordinates (Nazri & Rudi, 2019). The latter can be particularly prominent during challenging operations where officers may worry and anguish about subordinates' well-being and the notion of maintaining their authority as a leader through acting trustworthy, calm, solid, and stoic (Nilsson et al., 2010). Furthermore, researchers have concluded that demanding conditions at higher organisational leader levels in first responder organisations like the military is rather staff-oriented, primarily embedded in the buildup of other demands, which activates different reactions due to how the leader appraises those demands (Nilsson et al., 2015). Also, military staff work at higher leader levels is considered challenging due to high tempo changes and time pressure that require synchronisation, teamwork, fast solutions, and coordinated decision-making to achieve goals (Ohlsson, 2020). Finally, central to the military context are dangerous environments where critical personal injury and death incidents can occur (Campbell et al., 2010; Kark et al., 2016). For example, high-ranking

military officers can experience such incidents as demanding (Fors-Brandebo & Larsson, 2012) as it can activate troublesome thoughts about how to lead and emotional discomfort due to difficulties to "remain on the sidelines without feeling like poor leaders" (p. 16).

Despite the extensive leadership literature and research in the military context and the long lists of leadership requirements and musts, often described as challenges due to a rapidly changing environment, the empirically-based knowledge of senior military leaders themselves and their experiences and reactions to demanding demands conditions are limited.

To sum up, in both contexts, sport executives and high-ranking military officers hold a significant leadership role (Armstrong et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2003) within their organisations, and they are called upon a set of tense leadership challenges in two distinctly demanding performance- and leadership-driven contexts (Peus et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2008). However, the scope and the psychological depth of demanding conditions and the invocation of leadership direction experienced by those leaders have not been fully explored. Moreover, cross-contextual psychological research in leadership is lacking.

Hence, there is no complete understanding of unique cross-fertilising insights (Wagstaff, 2019) into resemblances in leadership challenges among military and sport leaders and their minds, transferable to a broader range of contexts. Accordingly, the current study aimed to simultaneously explore high-level military and sport leaders' real-life experiences of similarities in demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations.

## Method

### Design

The study aim was operationalised using an inductive qualitative cross-contextual design. The qualitative approach is an iterative process suitable for a sensitive and improved understanding, which means coming closer to and distinctively better knowing a coherent whole (Aspers & Corte, 2019) of the phenomena of demanding conditions among high-level military and sport leaders. The cross-contextual approach enables trustworthiness by meaningful transferability of results to a broader range of contexts (Cope, 2014; Mason, 2018). The design was framed by the pragmatism-realism paradigm (Chang, 2016), taking an ontological position in that true scientific knowledge statements are empirically established, correspond properly to reality and are also useful. Epistemologically, participants' inquired psychological realities are taken as contextually valid. These realities are then systematically transformed into reports of advanced knowledge close to reality and valuable for future practice (Chang, 2016). Inquiry and systematics in the current study consisted of semi-structured interviews, making it easier to focus the dialogue with each interviewee more clearly on questions essential for the study and support an orderly follow-up of the interviewee's important points of view (Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews were followed by an inductive and experience-focused approach of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), exploring themes of demanding conditions, each with a shared meaning inherent in the participants' unique realities and truths of their contextually situated experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2019; 2022).

**Table 1: Participant information**

Number / Context	Gender	Anonymization code for results	Average Age	Number/Title/Rank	Position	Brand/Sport
4 / Military	Female	FM leader (one - four)	49	2 Lieutenant Colonel 1 Commander (CDR) 1 Colonel	Unit Commander Dept. Unit Commander	Army, Navy, Air Force
4 / Military	Male	MM leader (five - eight)	46,5	4 Lieutenant Colonels	Unit Commander Dept. Unit Commander Contingent Commander	Army, HQ
4 / Sport	Female	FS leader (nine - twelve)	46,25	4 Club Directors	-	Women's soccer first league
4 / Sport	Male	MS leader (thirteen - sixteen)	48,25	1 President 1 Club Director 1 Sport Manager 1 General Manager	-	Men's soccer first league Women's soccer first league Men's hockey first league

## Participants

The qualitative sampling strategy was purposive and strategic to enable cross-contextual leader-level-specific knowledge and transferability and guidance for future research and intervention, also relevant to both genders (Mason, 2018; Shen & Joseph, 2021; Tannenbaum et al., 2016). For rigour, a comprehensive sample was sought (Tracy, 2010) and rendered in a total of 16 participants representative of both contexts and gender - eight Swedish high-ranking military officers (four men and four women) and eight Swedish sport executives (four men and four women) agreed to participate in the study. All sixteen participants (see Table 1) remained through data collection. The first inclusion criteria for the participants were being a high-level leader with experience leading under demanding conditions in their current or recent position. Of sixteen participants, fifteen based their experience on being stationed in Sweden, and one based his/her experience on being stationed overseas. The age of the sixteen participants ranged between 35 and 58 years and the average age was 47.5 years.

The second inclusion criterion was a continued career as a high-level leader with the need for leader development due to the relevance of exploring the leaders' reflections on coaching as a future leader development activity. No less than thirty per cent were represented by female military and sports leaders, respectively, to ensure gender- and cross-contextual relevant results.

All sport executives operated in professional elite team sport organisations, representing ice hockey or soccer/football, with high international impact, which means organisations with performance-capability at national and international top-level (Swann et al., 2015). All high-ranking military officers had university degrees and equivalent systematic training, education, and extensive experience in leadership, for example from both operations

overseas and domestic operations throughout their military career ranging between twenty to thirty years. The sport executives were a more heterogeneous group than the officers' group. Three sport executives had been professional athletes for an estimated ten to twenty years. Most of them had undergone basic to advanced leadership education through their specific sport. All had extensive experience in leadership from sport and other domains, for example, business. Several had academic degrees, and two were experienced military officers.

## Data Collection: Ethics, interview guide, and procedure

The current study underwent approval by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Protocol 2019/02911), and participants were treated according to the authority's norms. In addition, the participants were asked to give feedback on the study to enhance credibility before the research group submitted it (Nowell et al., 2017). The participants' feedback was that they highly recognised themselves in the findings, were excited about the results, and experienced positive personal and organisational changes after the interview. No amendments were proposed.

The Defence Staff Human Resources Department, Section for management and development of higher commanders of the Swedish Armed Forces, helped recruit high-ranking military officers by providing a list of recipients. Sport executives were recruited via the researchers' contact network and knowledge about the elite team sports sphere. The final selection of all participants was primarily due to the leaders' availability within the current study time frame and those leaders' positive responses to research information by mail and telephone calls.

The semi-structured interview guide, which embodied the study aim, was communicated to the participants by e-mail in preparation for the interview. At the interview, it was preceded by a repetition of research information and confirmation of informed consent. For rich rigour (Tracy, 2010), the interview built its relevance for the current study on a thorough review of research on demanding conditions and psychological reactions from a cognitive-behavioural approach. In line with the interview guide, participants were encouraged to describe themselves and their experiences based on the following themes: Background, demanding conditions, leader performance, psychological skills, mental health, and psychological leadership coaching.

Before the main interviews, a pilot phase was performed, including one high-ranking military officer and one sport executive. The purpose was to develop an appropriate interview guide and method. Lessons learned from the pilot phase were that the interview would focus on the most demanding conditions, not all, to achieve in-depth data within the limited time frame of the interview. The head author conducted all main interviews between May 2019 and January 2020. They lasted from one hour and twenty-eight minutes to two hours and thirty-three minutes. The interviews were conducted at the participant's workplace or the Swedish Defence University. The total number of transcribed pages was ca 510 comprising about 243,000 words.

### Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were analysed inductively and iteratively through the six phases of RTA (see, for example, Braun & Clarke, 2006), complemented with a cognitive-behavioural approach, altogether conducted within the pragmatism-realism paradigm (see, for example, Chang, 2016). The analysis was reflexively exploring and synthesising high-level military and sport leaders' similarities through the generation of common themes of shared meaning characterised by semantic/manifest and latent/implicit aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2021), close to the leaders' realities and contexts.

First out in RTA was the *familiarisation phase* (1), with an in-depth reading of transcripts. Next, relevant keywords and phrases were colour-marked for a reflexive exploration of preliminary patterns of aspects. *The coding phase* (2) sorted central data marked with prefixes, preliminary pre-code labels, and descriptions. Subsequently, pre-codes were revised into primary codes and transferred to sixteen participant profile matrixes. For transparency and credibility, transcripts, profile matrixes, and revision tracks were communicated within the research group (Nowell et al., 2017).

Each profile organised codes for demanding conditions in two categories reflecting each other: personal external situation (PES) and personal internal situation (PIS). PES-codes were organised into demanding aspects, and PIS-codes were organised into cognitive-behavioural aspects. The matrixes were processed within the research group for mutual understanding of the correctness and applicability of the results. Phase 2 ended with a reflexive session within the research group on shared meanings in results and how they could be labelled and organised.

*Phase* (3) consisted of a systematic creation of initial themes. First, all codes of each matrix category were extracted and organised in participant chronological order on separate papers. Then, each code was systematically screened, sometimes revised and replaced, clustered into tentative common themes of demanding conditions with labels and brief descriptions based on reflections of their shared meanings.

In *phase* (4), common themes and codes were reviewed and triangulated by "multiple researchers" (Natow, 2020, p. 162) for further credibility (Nowell et al., 2017) and subsequently compressed and incorporated into four common themes of demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations.

*The fifth phase* (5) of defining and naming the common themes progressed as phase four was completed, and the last *phase* (6) started. Taking credibility and ethics into account (Tracy, 2010), each common theme was transformed into a detailed complex theme with various essential aspects synthesised into a shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021), exemplified by carefully reconciled quotes from all 16 participants (see anonymisation code for results in Table 1).

To ensure the inclusion of essential aspects and systematic establishment of relevant data in the generated common themes, all phases of the RTA examined the transcripts through continuous rereading (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, for credibility in results, the applicability of the four common themes in future education and intervention (Nowell, 2015) was consolidated within the research group and with an external male and a female leadership coach.

## Results

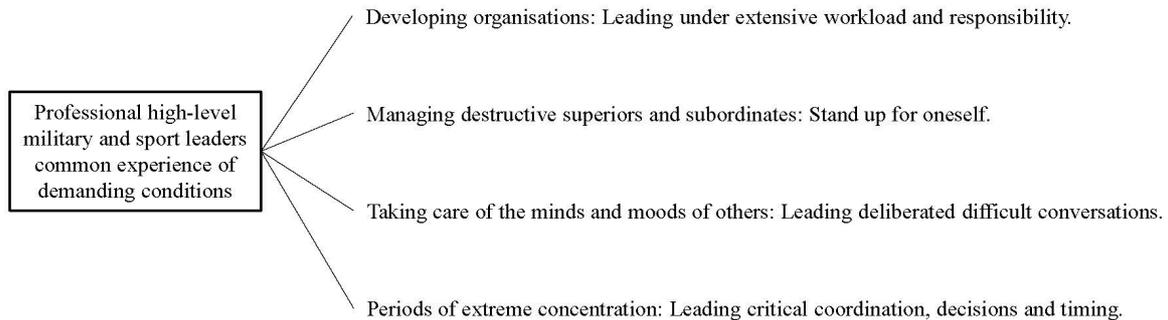
Performing RTA to inductively and simultaneously explore high-level military and sport leaders' real-life experiences of similarities in demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations, four common themes of demanding conditions were created (see Figure 1). The themes were named "Developing organisations: Leading under extensive workload and responsibility", "Managing destructive superiors and subordinates: Standing up for oneself", "Taking care of the minds and moods of others: Leading deliberated difficult conversations", and "Periods of extreme concentration: Leading critical coordination, decisions, and timing".

Each theme is separately presented below by a detailed complex theme with various essential aspects synthesised into a shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

### Developing organisations: Leading under extensive workload and responsibility

The first common theme shows a shared experience of being appointed to a leader role responsible for developing a critical organisational situation, often with insufficient resources. Overall, multiple leadership challenges are pervasive, for example, being accountable for transforming an organisation from deficient to professional with scarce means and still upholding extensive operational and strategic responsibility. Another challenge of leading change is to run an organisation and personally be responsible for transforming an underperforming elite team and each player into a top-level where performance failure puts the organisation and staff's and players' jobs at stake. In addition to the similarities in responsibility for leading change, these exemplified challenges represent an immense workload and responsibility. Consequently, eight participants from both contexts (FM leader 2, 3 & 4; FS leader 9, 11 & 12; MS leader 14; MS leader 16) experience work-life balance problems, mainly because work negatively affects the leader's ability to be present physically and mentally in family life. Participants express difficult decisions and emotions where one is drawn between the professional role and the family member role.

**Figure 1: Thematic map**



Overall, developing organisations direct the leadership's searchlight into manoeuvring a series of coincident challenges on all levels (organisation, group, individual) that sometimes, though exciting, can push the leaders' to exhaustion, predominantly female leaders' in both contexts. FS leader (twelve) declared,

Right now, it is extreme./.../I will sign fifty new agreements/.../meet everyone/.../get money/.../ look over the organisation here and restructure who does what and change it /.../care about the staff/.../send out Christmas cards to all our partners and be at the board meeting and be inspiring./.../And when you then no longer sleep./.../it is not right.

Similarities in psychological manifestations of developing organisations consist of sleep disorders activated by massive thinking and analysis. In addition, stomach pain and chest pressure arise when the situation is appraised as severely demanding. Some participants have thoughts of giving up or exiting the job. However, emotionally, pleasant emotions arise from beliefs of being capable and the excitement of being a leader. MS leader (fifteen) clarified, "To be involved in leading and deciding and having responsibility has always been interesting/.../have never been afraid to take on big tasks." In contrast, discomfort arises from beliefs of being insufficient and powerless due to the many tasks interfering with organisational change. For example, FS leader (ten) stated, "The uncertainty, this little stress that I feel inadequate, that I should do more, but I cannot spend as much time as I want." What can reduce such discomfort are uplifts, as some participants mention. For example, FM leader (three) stated, "Now I have my own company commander here, and it is very good to have. That is a great relief."

A nuance in the common theme is that the military leaders often face massive workloads caused by top-down orders for unit development towards higher functional operability. FM leader (four) said,

So it is demanding every day to be a unit commander, because there is far too much work really for what you have time for /.../ it is an extremely heavy responsibility/.../my unit is in a kind of change process/.../we must increase our growth rate/.../and we have received a lot of new tasks /.../a lot is very new./.../we have extensive staff shortages.

Sport executives, on their hand, primarily experience the need to lead in acute situations and crises for rapid change to neutralise the risk of severe consequences. In this case, it may well mean that the direction of leadership steers towards manoeuvring conflicts. MS leader (thirteen) exemplified this,

I have become President with a single mission, and that is to clean up and ensure that the association survives or to wind up the association. It is so bad right now, the finances and so on. There is a noticeable difference between a number of groupings within the association, where some are going in one direction, others in another third direction, and a third are going in a completely third direction. And it is demanding because then I will talk about which of the pathways might be right. My stress, if I call it stomach stress, is the confrontation with these wolves.

In essence, the shared meaning of this common theme of "Developing organisations: Leading under extensive workload and responsibility" is that the direction of leadership towards simultaneously manoeuvring multiple challenges to develop the organisation creates an experience of enormous workload and responsibility. However, the fact that responsibility for developing the organisation is perceived as demanding does not necessarily equal distress. Some participants emphasised that they value it. MS Leader (sixteen) stated:

"Knowing that/.../if we fail/.../there are ten people in the office for instance that overnight will have no job/.../they will have an enormous impact in their life with how we perform/.../that to me is a big responsibility/.../you have control/.../over the outcome for them, so that is something that I carry every day on my shoulders/.../it's inspiring/.../I tend to enjoy that/.../be accountable for, ahm, how things go/.../not wanna let those people down is a big big thing for me/.../you can't slack off.

Although exciting, for several participants, the responsibility for developing the organisation can push them to exhaustion.

### **Managing destructive superiors and subordinates: Standing up for oneself**

The second common theme shows similar experiences of being inadequately treated by both superiors and subordinates, which activates thoughts of powerlessness, loneliness, and vulnerability accompanied by emotional reactions of shock, frustration, and disgust.

Although helpful and progressive thoughts exist, troublesome cognitions dominate the situated mind side by side with emotional discomfort and adverse physiological reactions like somatic tension, sleep deprivation, and weight loss. This situated mind calls for leadership directed towards confrontation and markings as an expression of standing up for one's self-worth, not allowing oneself to be devalued. The shared meaning of this common theme of "Managing destructive superiors and subordinates: Standing up for oneself" is that a threat to the leader's integrity arises when he/she is treated in a harmful way by others. A devaluation of the leader occurs, denying the leader to be who he/she is as a person and professional leader. Consequently, denial blocks the leader's role and creates a need to stand up for oneself. This theme is pervasive among female leaders, and in some cases, also occurs in the face of male leaders. FM leader (one) said,

The person/.../could come up with such expressions that pulled down my pants (infliction of shame) in situations that became very strange. I did not really know how to answer since you have an audience around you/.../I can say, mh, incredibly tough/.../And then I can afterwards/.../have a sitting, "You, I do not understand what you do in this situation, I feel that you pull down the pants on me, and what is it that makes you do as you do?" The thing did not get better because the superior closest to me walked around managing by fear/.../I am honest and stand up for what I think is the difference between right and wrong, but it costs so much because whom do I have then? It takes so much energy.

Another example was MM leader (seven), involved in a critical incident with injured personnel where senior management took over, appraised as executed in an infringing manner rendering in a situated mind dominated by a cognitive-emotive experience of powerlessness. Nevertheless, the experience causes an emerging leadership direction of firmly remaining adherent, thereby marking responsible as an act of self-worth, a signal of still being a leader for oneself and others.

They went in and completely shattered the functional unit, and also thought about what we should do/.../You have full responsibility, but you cannot influence the events/.../ I am the one who trained them/.../I have given the order/.../I am sort of responsible for everything, but now I am completely set aside/.../And that stress you feel when you have a responsibility, but suddenly someone else is involved who will handle the problem, and you think you can handle it better yourself. That powerlessness/.../So what I'm really doing is that I stay on sight but back off.

With an already enormous workload, FS leader (nine) perceived the superior chairman of the board as exceptionally unhelpful and devaluing as if FS leader (nine) was an assistant, not a full-fledged top manager, whereby this appraisal activated a leadership intention of setting boundaries.

The biggest hassle right now is having a chairman who says he/she wants to help and alleviate the situation. But at the same time, he/she throws the issues back to me all the time and expects me to solve them/ ... /For example, before meetings, the

chairman could say, "Can you print the agenda?" "Can you...?" I then answer by saying, "Well [name], you have received it by e-mail." The chairman can then respond with, "I want it on paper." Then I feel to say, "Yes, but what the hell, print the damn paper yourself."

### Taking care of the minds and moods of others: Leading deliberated difficult conversations

The third common theme highlights similar experiences of manoeuvring staff's troubling moods and concerned minds. The shared meaning of this common theme is the burden within the participants of worry and a need to consider how to approach individuals through conversations depending on the difficulties of manoeuvring those individuals' exaggerated reactions to prevailing turbulent organisational circumstances. One example is having conversations with employed professional elite players, eye for an eye, in uncertain financial times, calming the players down, getting them on better thoughts, retaining them on the team, and making them perform to reach organisational goals.

The participant's psychological manifestations of this third common theme of demanding conditions primarily bottoms in a recurring frustration over the lack of human capital and finances. These resource shortages can trigger and underpin the minds and moods of others, which is reflected by further frustration among the leaders. This accumulated frustration is accompanied by cognitive-emotive experiences of inadequacy and loneliness in dealing with the situation around the minds and moods that need to be taken care of and difficult conversations which thus need to be led, and in which various aspects of the turbulent organisational situation need to be addressed. During this demanding condition, physiological responses such as stomach pain occur among the leaders. Elements of tiredness and uncomfortable emotions arise over a complex and harsh situation. In its entirety, the leader's situated mind consists of strong reactions, including an appraisal of this common theme of "Taking care of the minds and moods of others: Leading deliberated difficult conversations" as very stressful and a core leadership problem. This largely steers towards self-leadership that makes oneself stay calm, and towards leadership that deliberately makes others calm and responsive, which is crucial for the difficult conversations at hand. As an example, due to an ethical problem in the organisation, MM leader (five) stated,

I felt I am going crazy/.../this is so damn bad/.../I was so damn bored, I was angry/.../I was sad, I was upset/.../I just felt, how the heck will this go? Some wanted to see blood, so it was, that this will have enormous consequences. And then try to pour a little oil on those waves, this at the same time as I would, "But now you sit down and shut up," that hm, "Okay, I understand, but tag down a little, this will probably be good." And balance that in some way/.../there were so many emotions. That was the big thing, being able to keep calm, focus, work systematically and try to calm down the situation/.../it was enormously vocal.

Another type of difficult conversation is conducting talks with a decimated workforce on carrying out a military mission and its standards regardless of circumstances. Cognitively, thoughts arise about the difficulties of simultaneously being a result-oriented, competitive, and caring leader when approaching conversations with a decimated workforce. Again, there is a burden of being

forced to put additional pressure on staff in an already stressful situation. FM leader (two) explained,

It was just that to push them to deliver even though they might have it tough at home, and they had to leave/.../there were some vacancies, so they had to work a lot once they were out on their mission. So I thought it was a leadership challenge to make them still feel happy to go to work and continue to deliver despite these tough conditions/.../It is not a good feeling when you, as a commander, give such a message.

Psychologically, participants similarly experience those difficult conversations as energy-consuming, and they devote much thought to the leadership direction, often ambivalent. In the words of FS Leader (eleven),

It's about clarity, and that is what is difficult sometimes. As a leader, I can sometimes feel that I am quite vague, and that is something I need to work on. But sometimes, I can be vague because I don't want to take that conflict right there and then because I would need to have a little more on my feet before I get into it. Then I can be quite vague. And it's never really good/.../So you get completely drained of energy afterwards when you have had many (difficult conversations).

#### **Periods of extreme concentration: Leading critical coordination, decisions, and timing**

The fourth common theme represents similar experiences of extreme pressure on alertness and concentration during continuous work with a specific task within a limited time frame or intervals of time frames. MM leader (six) emphasised, "One needs to be in a state of higher mental acuity to deliver what is required, and one must be able to do so over a longer period or in impulses." Examples of leadership challenges whose inherent stresses radiate together into this theme are leading one's sport organisation through transfer windows, being a project manager for joint operations, or a commander in an operation centre. MM leader (eight) declared,

That is probably what is demanding in my current position; I would like to say, i.e., the time window when I must hurry to convey information and also feel the information from the team that I am set to coordinate as a project manager.

Moreover, what contributes to the pressure of maintaining an extreme concentration within a limited time is the pressure to achieve success involving decision-making with excessive responsibilities and consequences. MM leader (six),

The mental strain lies in assuming the burden of responsibility, to have ensured that everything is fulfilled, such as legal statutes and right considerations for any lives that may be lost as a result of a decision. So that whole process becomes pretty exhausting.

Furthermore, complexity characterises the task process. Leadership is about vigilantly orchestrating planning, control, and coordination of information, teamwork, critical decisions, and timing, sometimes in split seconds. The margins for missing and making mistakes are small. Altogether, an accumulation of strain creates a clear psychological load. MS leader (fourteen) indicated that

manoeuvring a transfer window can be highly demanding due to multiple stresses,

A whole carousel of external factors come together/.../It's probably the worst I have ever been through/.../If you get everything at the same time, a lot of pressure is created/.../When there is so damn much to do/ ... /it is like it is just bad on bad on bad.

Psychologically, self-pressure to achieve the best results, the burden of responsibility, critical decisions, cognitive load, and rumination make it hard to relax. MS leader (fourteen) stated, "Cannot drop it." Physiological responses to the psychological pressure are fatigue, slower thoughts, hissing ears, lowered immunity, impaired appetite, and sleep disorders. Essentially, the shared meaning of the common theme of "Periods of extreme concentration: Leading critical coordination, decisions, and timing" is that the situation as a high-level leader consists of periods placing exceptionally high demands on concentration which can create mental exhaustion and physical problems, mainly if the leader deals with unforeseen events within the same timeframe. Therefore, steady recovery and an ability to temporarily shut down one's thought processes are essential.

#### **Discussion**

The current study aimed to simultaneously explore high-level military and sports leaders' real-life experiences of similarities in demanding conditions and their psychological manifestations. The following discussion will first advance the study's findings to unique cross-fertilising insights into leadership challenges among those military and sport leaders. Then these insights aim to give rise to implications and, by so, be transferred to a broader spectrum of contexts and leaders who exercise leadership under demanding conditions.

First, beyond previous context-oriented research, the results added four new cross-fertilising common themes of demanding conditions among high-level leaders in the military and sport: developing organisations, managing destructive superiors and subordinates, taking care of the minds and moods of others, and periods of extreme concentration. All four common themes were psychologically manifested mainly by troublesome cognitions, emotional discomfort, and somatic tension.

The perceived consequences of not dealing with these demanding conditions and their inherent leadership challenges, and the more that is considered at stake, seem to contribute to a more pressing leader role with increased emotional distress and somatic strain.

As an improved understanding, the current study findings give a closer and distinct insight into (Aspers & Corte, 2019) demanding conditions among high-level leaders. First, the findings of each of the four common themes show a more pervasive comprehensiveness. This means that a demanding condition consists of, not just one, but a gathering of smaller and larger leadership challenges which grow into a complex leadership situation with a central core comprised of what is perceived as most demanding as a leader. In addition to this coherent whole of the leaders' external situation of leadership challenges, the findings extend the comprehensiveness also to include insights about the manifestation of the outer situation inside the leader into a situated mind of excessive stress reactions. Moreover, the findings of these stress reactions add to improved cognitive-behavioural understandings of

how conditions appear demanding among high-level military and sport leaders. Furthermore, the findings also enhance another improved understanding by showing how the leader's situated mind sheds light on where leadership is heading.

More specifically, regarding theme one, as an addition to previous research and beyond lists of challenges and requirements, the empirical findings bring forth the multifaceted work of developing organisations' as a demanding condition, especially as a common theme among high-level leaders in military and sport. The multifaceted developmental work is a complex leadership challenge, causing the leadership direction to move into the simultaneous manoeuvring of mutually coherent challenges of organisational aspects, group issues, and interactions with individuals. Consequently, several participants mentioned an extreme workload, a demanding aspect corresponding with previous research by Nazri and Rudi (2019). An essential prerequisite for organisational development among the participants seems to be resources. The scarce means among the coherent challenges seem to increase the workload and responsibility, which seriously strains the participants. A lack of finances was evident mainly among the female leaders in sport. These findings mean that female leaders in women's sport can be particularly exposed to extreme stress, making it extra challenging to continue as leaders and develop their organisations. Altogether, the findings of theme one emphasise the critical point of providing leaders with manageable expectations, responsibility, and resources, balancing the mission of organisational development and thereby maintaining the leaders' functionality and sustainability. Nevertheless, in line with Crust and Lawrence (2006), positive pressure like excitement does exist. Therefore, one speculation is that it would be unlikely that leaders undertake critical organisational development missions without believing in their ability to change a bad starting point for the better and deal with challenges ahead. As a reflection of Wong et al. (2003), the demands on high-level military and sport leaders are vast. Still, even if the personal capacity seems to be very high among the participants, a supportive environment is needed.

The findings of the common theme two give a new unique understanding of the situated mind and its invocation of leadership direction among the participants by their similar emphasis on the necessity of standing up for oneself and maintaining one's self-worth to remain intact as a leader towards destructive superiors and subordinates in an already stressful situation. Although this theme affects male leaders, the fact that it is pervasive among female leaders, as also found by previous research (Pfister & Radtke, 2009), here seen in both contexts, is worrying, especially due to perceived loneliness, vulnerability, shock reactions, lack of sleep, and weight loss. Similar to earlier research (Perez-Rivases et al., 2017), these reactions seem to be worsened by the experience of being blocked and diminished in the leader role. Being exposed to bad work relations as a leader coupled with tense organisational situations is a severe stress problem, or not to say, a mental health issue. Standing up for oneself and asserting one's leader role seems a vital but energy-consuming approach. Forms of leadership support are suggested, especially for women and their ability to deal with destructive co-workers and associated distress. Following previous research (Adriaanse, 2019), which shows concerns about the lack of gender equality in leadership, the current study findings lead to the proposed necessity of pre-work and post-work on equality and trust by top

management. However, this is probably profoundly challenging, as top management in the current findings turns out to be part of the problem. Therefore, support from higher administrative bodies is likely to be required, which should be easy and quick to access for those who need it.

As for the findings of the third common theme, they are a new addition to previous research concerning the participants' similar contextually situated reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2019; 2022) by raising the demanding condition of taking care of the minds and moods of others in turbulent times. This condition appears to be such a core leadership problem requiring the leader's calmness and well-thought-out face-to-face conversations. Leaders in both contexts experience upset and frustrated staff and players as burdensome. Like Taylor et al. (2008), the findings in the current study showed that what is at stake in elite team sport organisation can be to retain valuable players in the team. The risk of losing players due to their frustration over bad assets makes conversations essential and difficult. The military leaders who care about the attitude and performance of their personnel at risk during missions or care about the staff's upset feelings, for example, due to social problems, do, like sport leaders, worry about how the situation may evolve depending on how people feel. Hence, as a suggestion, one of the most critical functions of leadership is to deal with own and others' emotions to regulate behaviours. A high conversational ability seems to be a crucial leadership tool.

The fourth common theme and the last distinctively better knowing of demanding conditions among high-level military and sport leaders is the similar psychologically oriented strain of exceptionally high demands on concentration to manoeuvre multiple stresses under time pressure and achieve success. Cognitive-behaviorally, a suggestion is that the underlying cause of high stress is the appraisal of a real threat of not succeeding within the limited time frame. This threat of failure means essential things are at stake. For example, in sport, it is a crucial reality for top elite team sport organisations to reach new acquisitions of valuable players during a transfer window to achieve success and organisational goals. From a military point of view, human lives and military goals can be at stake depending on the success of time-pressured operations planning and decisions. This strain is similar to Ohlsson's (2020) previous findings of high-tempo and coordination in military staff work. Finally, a unique finding is that some participants, both military and sport leaders, emphasise a steady recovery and an ability to temporarily shut down one's thought processes because of the high demands on concentration to manoeuvre parallel stresses within and outside a specific mission within a time window. Thus, leadership under demanding conditions also seems to include a desirable ability for self-leadership as a force for regulating the situated mind.

### Methodological considerations

One of the strengths of the method in the current study is the homogeneous and well-balanced population consisting of an equal proportion of women and men of high-ranking military officers in the Swedish Armed Forces and executives in the Swedish elite team sport organisations. More specifically, the selected population is proposed to be a strength that enables the findings to be applied to the specific level of leaders and contexts and both genders (Mason, 2018; Shen & Joseph, 2021; Tannenbaum et al., 2016).

However, methodological considerations and challenges are to be found. One concern is that if the current study had included a slightly different sample, contexts, or countries, the results might have shown a

richer variation of common themes and thematic nuances, producing additional and alternative transferable conclusions to other contexts and other relevant results for both genders. Hence, future mutual leadership research should consider a broader range of high-level military and sport leaders.

Moreover, although there are benefits to semi-structured interviews, as in the current study, like bringing focus to the dialogue (Brinkmann, 2015), it is also important to reflect on how topics were introduced during the interview and how the conversation was conducted by the researcher together with the interviewee (Roulston, 2016). In the introduction of questions, for example, regarding the concept of demanding conditions, the interview data may have been affected differently if the researcher helped elaborate on the concept for the interviewee or if the interviewee was allowed to put into words what the concept meant to him/her. The researcher's approach was the latter to the greatest extent possible. If there were difficulties with the interviewee answering questions, the researcher's focus was to repeat and clarify any main questions and follow-up questions and give the interviewee time to think and respond. However, balancing time for reflection and maintaining speed to cover the entire interview during the given timeframe is challenging. The researcher's experience is that some stops for feedback on the interview during the conversation and at the end can be important for reflection, pace and qualitative and trustworthy data generation.

Considering trustworthiness, efforts to increase it consisted of the cross-contextual design and the transfer of findings to other contexts in addition to military and sport (Cope, 2014; Mason, 2018) and the pursuit of credibility by encouraging all participants to provide feedback on the current study (Nowell et al., 2017) before submission. Moreover, trustworthiness was sought through maintained reflexivity throughout all RTA phases and further into the results-discussion, and reflections were subsequently transparently communicated within the research group. For example, as appointed by Braun and Clarke (2021), reflexivity revolved around affirming the chosen pragmatism-realism paradigm and staying close to the participants' situated true realities and usefulness of knowledge statements. The researchers also tuned this reflexivity of affirmation and closeness with the two external leadership coaches. Furthermore, as a critical consciousness, introspective reflexivity concerned the researchers' (Trainor & Bundon, 2021) own pre-understanding of leadership, military and sport, and its permeability in the written word (Badu et al., 2019).

### Implications for leadership

Based on the findings, several implications can be identified for high-level military and sport leaders. Furthermore, beyond military and sport, these implications may also apply to other leaders who exercise leadership under demanding conditions, for example, in performance-driven contexts of business organisations (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002) as well as contexts of extremis, crisis, uncertainty and rapid change covered by fast-response organisations (Schakel & Wolbers, 2021) within authorities of the total Defence and the corporate security industry.

A first implication is about the opportunity for leaders to look ahead and, in an early stage, act preventively by clarifying their leader role by its responsibilities and resources when facing demanding conditions, not least to prevent the situation from escalating to an unreasonably high workload that may lead to exhaustion and quitting. Subsequently, leaders are suggested to adopt a cognitive-behavioural approach to

manoeuvre the situation and own stress levels gradually. It involves acting in the situation, as described above, to continue to be the functional leader the organisation needed in the first place.

Furthermore, acting by adapting the organisation to benefit the organisational development is essential. Therefore, starting with these changes in the external personal situation may cause positive changes in the situated mind, for example, lower levels of troublesome cognitions.

Moreover, the cognitive-behavioural approach includes the alternative to start making adjustments in own situated mind, for example, altering the appraisal of responsibilities or encouraging own actions to handle the external situation better. Therefore, leaders are encouraged to reflect on the situated mind and examine the reciprocity between appraisal, stress reactions, and leadership direction. Finally, a suggestion is that organisations and their top management would benefit from reviewing their policy documents and instruments on resources and responsibilities to support their executives better and keep them functional and healthy.

A second implication originates from the findings that especially female leaders face destructive superiors and subordinates that cause severe distress. Therefore, organisations and their top management would benefit from prioritising the development of interpersonal aspects such as respect for each other's roles and equality ethics. Thus, trust can hopefully be enhanced to prevent unnecessary, destructive work relations.

A third implication derives from the findings that leaders are called upon what they see as the supreme leadership task but the most challenging - the shared similarities of taking care of the minds and moods of staff and players when the situation is burdensome through deliberate difficult conversations. Consequently, leaders are suggested to be person-centred in turbulent times, sensitive to emotional tones and outbursts and problematic reasoning, and what personal needs are rooted in these moods and minds. Moreover, if needed, it is essential to support leaders in developing their ability to regulate their situated mind to stay calm and their face-to-face conversational skills.

A fourth implication is that a high capacity for self-leadership as a force to regulate the situated mind can positively affect the management of stress reactions such as sleep disorders and the ability to concentrate on multiple stresses under time pressure. By encouraging leaders to develop self-leadership for stress management and mental performance under demanding conditions, organisations are likely to instil the necessary power in their leaders to achieve success.

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### Ethical approval

The participants were treated according to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority norms. The board's ethical vetting of the research project: Protocol 2019/02911.

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